

Dark Icebergs

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The narration of the animated film *Dark Crystals* (1982) composes itself around the presence of an imposing crystal. Its “sculptural” appearance evokes a genealogy of different mysterious polyhedrons: that of Albrecht Dürer’s *Melancolia*, Constantin’s Brancusi’s *Endless Columns*, while also evoking the history of Minimal Art – just to mention *Die*, Tony Smith’s large black cube or John Mc Cracken’s *Slab* and its cinematographic echo in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). From one monolith to another, a type of silence manifests itself, linked to an obvious absence of meaning or function at first sight. Thus, the dark crystal of the animated film, because it has been damaged, finds itself deprived of the powers that had made it the scintillating and magnetic wellspring of a harmonious society. Like one of the negative facets of Tillman Kaiser’s crystalline paintings, these somber and angular sculptures, kind of like icebergs that are as blurred as they are symmetrical, which he has been producing since 2005, seem to share a similar fate (as in *Für Kinder unde Kenner*, 2011, or *Petrus Thron*, 2010). In fact, they present themselves as inverted rereadings of the luminist regime of the kinetic utopia of the 1960s – one thinks of Heinz Mack, Christian Megert as well as Julio Le Parc and Francisco Sobrino starting at the end of 1950s. But also and primarily because we are mainly dealing with a history of painting to which he is linking himself anew, his paintings offer a mystical counterpoint to the kaleidoscopic diffraction of light and color led in the first quarter of the 20th century by Robert Delauney, Lyonel Feininger, Bruno Taut, and Johannes Molzahn. One could even say that the material form of a sculpture, in Tillman Kaiser’s work, responds to an inverse dramatic tension: it combines, on the one hand, a type of luminous extinction, and, on the other, a petrified radiation of spikes, akin to the peaks of an underwater mine. “Black is *de rigueur*“ as one says with regards to funeral dress codes. Thus, with a few exceptions, the sculptures are covered in a matte medium, almost tar-like, which enables their surface to absorb rather than reflect light. Let us note that, according to the artist, such a property is a precise echo of a form of Sufi introspection which consists in avoiding one’s reflection in a mirror for forty days. Thus, his symmetrical sculptures, like certain elusive planes, absorb light and direct the gaze towards their blind center by their inward-folded angles and their matte surface, pushing visual perception to its entrenchments. True vortices or black holes, their sharp and dynamic forms in fact only direct the gaze towards their center so as to better entrap it, and, in the process, these hermetic objects seem to look at us, as if they had eyes (*Happy Survivor*, 2008; *Funked up*, 2013). It is once again a question of inverted polarity: the work does not let itself be readily seized by the gaze, and, in addition, it seems to have its own gaze.

This principle is also evident in numerous paintings, like *This* (2008), whose two dark discs – in fact, screen-transfer prints of the same lamp, probably by Poul Henningsen – seem pointed at the viewer, or also *Rhythmisches Sehen* (2012), without forgetting to mention paintings, like *Shrinking Growth* (2008), which integrate faces or only their eyes into their diffracted compositions, the eyes seeming to gaze at us through a diamond-shaped slit. These characters are none other than Afro-American jazz musicians, interpreters of the only music that the artist listens to – it is impossible here not to make a link to Piet Mondrian, whose passion for this musical genre appears in the last paintings he made while living in New York. Let us also note that certain sculptures in the same series have in fact been endowed with a head at their summit, a head issued from another type of transfer, this time not of an image but of a relic object placed under a bell (*Walgehirn*, 2009 or *Let the answer be yes*, 2008). The link to religious cult objects is recurrent – one finds for example a sculpture representing the silhouette of a church (*Innenblick Kirche*, 2011). Aside from this reference, Tillman Kaiser's mode of abstraction, if it recuperates kinetic codes, nevertheless recuses participative exteriority in favor of a meditative interiority, a “hermetic melancholia”, to quote from one of his recurrent titles. Thus, his practice is far from effects of the void or of *Ganzfeld* (full field) as can be seen in Anish Kapoor's *Void*: monochrome reliefs and sculptures (started in 1991) in which the gaze founders: the innumerable accidents, which occur during its manual production, offering multiple holds for the gaze thus disrupting the work's equilibrium and symmetry. A 2005 sculpture by Tillman Kaiser, in fact the first he ever produced, is thus formed by placing two metal boxes above and below a “skirt” – unless it's actually a rotor? The circular horizontality of this element seems to have been produced by a rotation – another nod to Sufism and the trances of the whirling Dervishes. For there is always a principle of symmetry in his work, be it central, circular, or axial. In other words, there is always a stability, one which is reached by the constant dynamic of a rhythmic demultiplication, a diffraction of volumes and planes.

The work of Tillman Kaiser constantly reveals several semantic levels. It is the result of the hybridization between sources and systems that have traditionally been distinguished from one another in art history. Painting and sculpture, symmetry and entropy, regularity and gesturalità, abstraction and imagery, rhythm and stasis interbreed in a quasi-biological sense. His paintings, sculptures in the round, reliefs and wallpapers, arise from a complex process that allies painting, assemblage, readymades, silk-screening, collage, or proto-photographic techniques, which he then filters through a series of different fragmentations, transfers, and duplications. This is also the case with a system that has been marginalized by the history of modernity: the polyptich. Let us first clarify that we are not speaking of a simple arrangement or sequential hanging of different paintings from the same series. The word has to be understood in terms of its medieval usage, i.e. an altarpiece (portable or for a church altar) whose painted panels are linked and articulated by hinges.

Their contour, most often shaped and non-orthogonal, is also that of numerous shaped canvases by Tillman Kaiser. These can also be linked to a series of recent works, such as those of Carmelo Arden Quin from Madi or even Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica in the Brazilian Neoconcretism, as well as the American painter Frank Stella of course. Tillman Kaiser's double system, which associates polyptich and shaped canvas, can be found everywhere in his work, for example in certain painted screens, made of vertical panels, equipped with hinges and set on the ground so as to unfold in the space and offer both of their sides to the viewer's gaze (*Begin at the Begin*, 2009, or *Orgel*, 2011). In these panels made by the artist, the painting is either partitioned (as in stained glass windows or enamel jewelry), or absent, in openwork panels which allow for the gaze to wander through the object. The composition of the whole, however, answers to a central symmetry that is circular and radiating (*Life Hurts the Living*, 2012 or *Hear the Bells Ring*, 2012). For the artist is concerned as much with composing, by adding and juxtaposing, as he is with revealing or baring the structural elements that make the painting what it is, i.e. a true object, a tangible material sculpture as opposed to an illusory image. As a result, the wood stretchers of Tillman Kaiser's relief paintings are often shaped and bared, as can also be seen in the work of Blair Thurman and John Tremblay. In this case, the skeleton is no longer the support of the painted motif, it becomes a motif in and of itself, while also revealing the wall on which the work is hung. As in an extension of the dialogue with the space in which the work is shown, in the same way as a stretched canvas, the wall itself can become a support for the work. It is thus a logical extension for the artist to produce wallpapers, with enlarged photographs as in *Habitación retorcida* (2009), or the significant mural remake, in a triangular form, of a psychedelic photograph of Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*, here bathed in the solar halo of polychromatic rays (2009). From a painting to a sculpture, passing by singular reliefs, there is a sustained dialogue between fullness and emptiness, geometry and life, mechanical and organic. In this respect, the painting titled *Muscles* (2012) imposes itself as a key work for understanding other works that combine the logic of the shaped canvas with that of the polyptich: it shows muscles and tendons, set into a multiplicity of pink triangles veined with white and linked at their extremities. The painting thus definitely recuses the world of images and rejoins that of the bio-mechanical body.

It's a truism to say that Tillman Kaiser is Viennese and that the logic of the Wiener Werkstätte is thus inevitably familiar to him: that's probably also the case for numerous other artists from the same city. Nevertheless, what is important is that he bases his entire body of work on the impure (in the positive sense of the word) interpenetration of the fine arts, architecture, design, and ornament, similar to how Josef Hoffman and Koloman Moser had conceived of it before him, thus prefiguring the pedagogical system of the Bauhaus. In other words, Tillman Kaiser thinks his forms and constructs his singular work by relying on a sharp awareness of forgotten sections of art history.

One can thus, in an innumerable number of paintings, see him return to artistic nebula of early abstraction, which already associates mysticism and crystalline visions – as, for example, when Paul Sérusier makes pyramidal forms emerge from a landscape (*Les origines*, c. 1910), when Hilma af Klint makes her *Altar Paintings* and *The Swan* painting (1914-15) or when Emma Kunz traces her abstract diagrams, without forgetting to mention the deviation of decorative patterns by Giacomo Balla for *Compenetrazioni Iridescenti* (1912-13), made long before the postwar pictorial inventions, from Victor Vasarely to Bridget Riley.

By means of the composition of paintings that recall stained glass windows, but also by the disquieting presence of his sculptures, it is perhaps the mystic face, sometimes haunted, of the modernist utopia that Tillman Kaiser allows us to appreciate. It is a singular practice, born of interbreedings that many would consider detrimental to the purity – often fantasmatic – of abstract art. If H.P. Lovecraft had known the simultaneously sublime and monstrous abstractions at the beginning of the 21st century, let us bet that it would have retained his attention.