

## The quiet provocateur

In forty years Helmut Federle has created a work that deals with basic questions of painting across all fashions. The Kunstmuseum Basel dedicates an impressive exhibition to him.  
Gerhard Mack 05.07.2019



Juggling with social meaning and artistic form: Helmut Federle's painting "Asian Sign", 1980.

Does it have to be that way? In the new building of the Kunstmuseum Basel, a large picture with a swastika on the wall hangs immediately on the ground floor. In view of the blossoming right-wing radicalism in Europe, the murders of the National Socialist underground, the incitement against strangers and the booming parades of the legal skirt, one would rather not see a swastika in the museum.

That was very similar in 1982. At that time, director Christian Geelhaar bought the painting for the Kunstmuseum Basel and received a violent protest. Helmut Federle (\* 1944) painted it in 1980 during a stay in New York for several years and called it the "Asian Sign". There, in far-off Asia, the sign is usually considered a symbol of luck; the painter marked the

distance to the national significance, as the bent arms of the cross point to the left, unlike the Nazis.

In the current exhibition, the picture is one of six large formats that Federle has painted over the years. And this context makes it clear what the Swiss painter, now living in Vienna and Italy, is capable of: he conceives of the picture as a dynamic conflict of various impulses that should be brought into balance as far as possible - then arises in the Asian worldviews something like luck. There the worldly meaning with the pictorial figure, the clear geometrical form with the painterly treatment, the peinture, the pictorial surface as a whole with its structuring into compartments, and last but not least the gray with the yellow.

At that time, geometric painting was experiencing a boom. Other Swiss painters such as John Armleder and Olivier Mosset grappled with the social significance of the abstract gestural tradition. Federle still strives to combine the constructive and gestural power of painting. Works on paper, photographs and also precious Asian tea cups, which the artist collects, place this search for balance in Basel in a broad spiritual context.

The presentation does not relieve the museums of the task of a retrospective. But in its density and scope, it shows how important this work is. You can hardly present this more convincing. Gerhard Mack

*Helmut Federle: 19 E. 21st St., Six Large Paintings.* Kunstmuseum Basel, until 15.9. Catalogue: Verlag für moderne Kunst.