

ARTFORUM



Helmut Federle, *Untitled (No Bild) (No Picture)*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 8' 9 1/8" × 12' 5 5/8".

Helmut Federle

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A sense of balance pervades Helmut Federle's painting: a masterful push and pull of opposing pictorial means that demands our attention from the outset without ever fully gratifying it. The artist's large canvases are marked by the precision of objective geometrical forms that he infuses with the subjectivity of his tender gestural brushstroke and the absorptive quality of his diluted and mixed color. Take, for instance, *Untitled (No Bild) (No Picture)*, 1986, in which the hard edges of six black rectangles on a yellow-green ground contrast with the gentle, washed quality of the paint. The ostensible clarity of the composition is undone by the yellow-green of the ground filtering through the grayish-black forms. Similarly, but with inverted colors, *Untitled*, 1980, features two yellow rectangular forms pushed to the edges of the canvas by a grayish-black field. Here, the geometry is supported by the contrast of the smooth, dark gray background and the dull yellow of the rectangles, whose ragged edges themselves subvert their clarity and pull them back into the pictorial field.

Balance is achieved not only through pictorial means, but also with respect to the symbolic meanings of the depicted forms. *Asian Sign*, 1980, for example—a key piece in the show—depicts a

swastika. The work sparked outrage when it was displayed in 1985 at the Kunstmuseum Basel in a solo exhibition of Federle's work. Yet here, Federle sought to rein in provocative connotations, positioning the sign counterclockwise and hence differentiating it from Nazi symbolism. For his critics, this was, of course, insufficient, and the artist has recently observed that he wouldn't be able to paint this work today.

Titled "19 E. 21st St. Six Large Paintings" and curated by Josef Helfenstein, this show encompassed work made over thirty-eight years. In addition to the paintings announced in the exhibition's subtitle and smaller works shown in several display cabinets were two curious objects that Federle used to have in his studio: a Japanese raku *chawan* and a Persian ceramic bowl. While the title made reference to the address of a New York studio where Federle worked from 1979 to 1984, only two of the works in the show were actually painted there. And neither the exhibition nor the catalogue really attempted to establish connections between Federle and the New York art scene of the 1970s and 1980s, the social and societal ramifications of being a Swiss artist working in Manhattan, or his actual artistic development during his sojourn in the US. Richard Shiff points out in his catalogue essay that "Federle's studio methods are neither complicated nor mysterious." Yet while his process might be straightforward enough, the studio certainly became an arcanum, even as it functioned as an abstract trope that implicitly placed Federle in a New York School lineage. In the exhibition catalogue, a photograph of the artist in his Manhattan studio shows him posing in front of the previously mentioned *Untitled* work of 1980. The photograph frames the painting tightly, leaving no room for additional or accidental information: no painting supplies, no hints of furnishings, just the painter in front of his work. We are not presented with a place of living and working, but with a mythological place of transcendental conception.

By such means, the exhibition managed to bring out the essentially spiritual aspiration of Federle's art. "All in all, through the precision of the symbol," he once said, "I wanted to reach a formal concentration that neutralizes its political or subjective dimension." This is where the sense of balance that animates his painting suspends history to suggest a deeper meaning beyond it. The universality implicit in timelessness impregnates his paintings with a metaphysical depth. It is in that sense that they appear egregiously simple and at the same time immensely complex and intangible. The exhibition succeeded in immersing the viewer in the "formal concentration" of Federle's art without denying that its price is historical obfuscation.

— *David Misteli*