

The Dialectic of Nature

Nicola Schrudde has summarised the central aim of her work as follows: to grasp “the very essence of nature in art”.

Yet the artistic engagement with nature – particularly with a ‘primordial’ nature – is difficult and fraught with risk precisely because our contemporary concept of nature itself is artificial and constructed.

For many centuries, nature played a role for humans only insofar as it could be made usable and fertile. Everything else (for example, the mountains, the deserts) was ignored because it offered no resources for humans or was simply hostile to them.

Historically speaking – at least in Europe – the shift towards a concept of nature similar to our own today can be traced back to an event on 26 April 1336. On that day, Petrarch climbed Mont Ventoux for no other reason than to enjoy the view from the summit. (Quote: “I have today climbed the highest mountain in this region, which is not without reason called Ventosus, the Windy One, inspired solely by the urge to see this extraordinarily high place.”) No one had done this before, because it simply made no sense to climb a mountain. What Petrarch achieved with his ascent was nothing less than the transformation of nature into an aesthetic image. Since then, what we so readily refer to as nature is essentially always landscape: nature already aestheticised into an image.

In 1975, the philosopher Ernst Bloch explained that one can only speak of landscape when a person turns to it “without any practical purpose, in a free and contemplative manner, in order to be at one with nature as themselves”.

So if, like Nicola Schrudde, one is interested in engaging artistically with nature in such a fundamental way, one would do well not to invoke the myth of a pure, untouched ideal nature, but rather to adopt a dialectical stance towards the dialectical concept of nature.

And this is precisely what the artist has been doing for several decades now, in a manner that is both abstract and yet always poetic, in a way that is both subtle and intense.

The main elements of her patient and nuanced exploration of natural phenomena are, on the one hand, her handcrafted, painted sculptures made of unfired clay, terracotta or ceramics, and the use of artificial and natural light. These are complemented by copper and aluminium, projectors and projections, various composite panel materials, projection surfaces and architectural elements.

It is a world in which the organic and the natural constantly encounter the man-made, the constructed and the technological; a world that does not dream itself into an ideal natural paradise, but instead always takes the interplay between the artificial and the natural as its inescapable starting point.

In Ratingen, Nicola Schrudde has now realised one of her large-scale spatial installations, which encapsulates key aspects of her work.

What we see before us is a field of around 100 copper circuit boards, upon which a total of 34 sculptures in unfired clay and five terracotta forms in silver bronze have been arranged in a dramaturgic rhythm. Everything in this work operates through dialectical pairs of opposites. The sculptures resemble boulders, yet also evoke the shape of the Earth or, more generally, planets; they radiate a floral quality whilst simultaneously conveying a profound sense of inner stillness, just as they serve as 'playballs' for the artist, with which she can continually reconfigure and redesign her spaces in a modular fashion.

Yet they are always themselves hybrids between an expression of nature and a designed form that emphasises their artificiality.

The terracotta forms coated in silver paint appear at first glance to be metallic, cool and technical, yet they are hand-formed and also evoke memories of the sea glistening in the sunlight.

The lavender/ violet clay sculptures, for their part, allude directly to the earth through their unfired materiality, transforming this pure earthiness back into an artistic, highly fragile image through intricate sculptural design and a delicate application of pigment.

The copper plates, for their part, represent a technical material, but can also be read as a metaphor for energy flows, for a fundamental conductivity (cf. Beuys); and with their warm

reddish hue, they add a further colour accent that makes it clear that Schrudde's spatial installations are always to be understood as an extension of spatial painting. In this respect, Nicola Schrudde is a classical sculptor: she creates three-dimensional coloured images using sculptural material. Her love of colours such as the lavender or silver that predominate here still reveals the influence of her first teacher at the Düsseldorf Academy, Bernd Minnich.

This installation, which balances between painting and sculpture, is fundamentally shaped by the choice of colours and materials based on their ability to reflect, emit or absorb light. In this respect, light is the true protagonist in this space.

The light comes from the skylight, from a projector casting a sheet onto a silvery surface, from another projector displaying abstract waves of the colour spectrum, and from a light bulb concealed by a mirror, emitting a reddish hue reminiscent of copper. It also streams in through several windows of the Ratingen Museum. Nicola Schrudde also works dialectically in her nuanced use of light: artificial and natural light complement one another and elicit very different lighting moods from the various surfaces—ranging from glowing to glaringly bright, from matt to glossy, from floating and ephemeral to almost material. One must therefore definitely visit this exhibition several times to have truly seen this work.

...*Maris Violacei*... is the title the artist has given to her work, which roughly translates as 'the violet of the sea'. The three dots before and after the title serve, in line with what has been said above, to emphasise precisely that this is not about something fixed and definitive, but rather, so to speak, an ongoing process, a fragment of a larger whole that can only be experienced as a process.

This is one of the reasons why Nicola Schrudde has placed benches at various points around the room, allowing us, as visitors, to experience the ever-changing impressions of this space, which is imbued with colour and light. In doing so, the artist attaches great importance to preserving the pictorial quality of the experience. In this vein, she once explained that her aim is to translate a sensory perception of nature into a model-like situation.

The model she presents to us here is, in a sense, that of a landscape that is both near and far, playing on the dialectic of Heidegger's 'de-distancing', which, in his view, would be the removal of distance – that is, proximity.

In this respect, Nicola Schrudde is not so far removed from the construction of Caspar David Friedrich's landscapes: there, too, Friedrich's famous figures seen from behind stand before vast, and generally synthetically constructed, landscapes that they can only see but not enter.

And even Friedrich's famous *The Sea of Ice* (1823/24) is reflected to some extent in the loosely layered copper plates, reminding us of how fragile the poetic evocation of a nature that is itself fragile has been – not just today. However, Nicola Schrudde is not concerned with a 'paradise lost' – that is, with the evocation of nature in the knowledge that it is already lost – but rather with sensitising us to the experience of a fleeting (quasi-impressionistic) natural beauty formed from light, colour and form.

Opening speech at the exhibition
Nicola Schrudde [... maris violaci ...]
Museum Ratingen
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