

Wieland Schmied "The World of White"

About Raimund Girke, 2000

In Winter 1996, Ulrich Bischoff issued an invitation to Raimund Girke to come to the Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister in Dresden, where his paintings were being hosted beside those of the 19th Century Masters. However, as Ulrich Bischoff in his wonderful foreword to the catalogue underscores, Girke was actually Caspar David Friedrich's guest. Whenever Raimund Girke, who hailed from Silesia, was in Dresden he always went to see the works of Caspar David Friedrich there. Now Friedrich was receiving him at his place. And as a welcoming gesture, Ulrich Bischoff had hung a twelfth painting along with the eleven by Girke; a work from the Dresden collection by Friedrich of which Raimund Girke was particularly fond: *Gebüsch im Schnee* (Shrubs in Snow), 1827/28 (entitled *Bäume und Sträucher im Schnee* in the catalogue raisonné by Helmut Börsch-Supan and dated around 1828). This is a small, often overlooked painting measuring 31 x 25.5 cm, but it was important to Girke, and has in fact always drawn more attention than many a larger work. I would like to take this juxtaposition to a Snow painting by Caspar David Friedrich in Dresden as my starting point for some brief thoughts on Raimund Girke's painting.

There were few motifs which Friedrich loved as much as snow, fog and clouds. We spontaneously think of the moon, the sea and the mood of evening, and of sailing boats heading for the harbour as night falls. Friedrich often observed the clouds moving and the fog rising over water or from mountain valleys, and repeatedly he painted landscapes in the snow, his whole life long in fact. We need only think of the *Hünengrab im Schnee*, 1807, and *Winter (Mönch im Schnee)*, 1808, which was destroyed by fire in the Munich Glaspalast in 1931, or paintings like *Friedhof im Schnee*, *Verschneite Hütte* and *Fichtendickicht im Walde*, all of which were painted around the same time as the Dresden *Gebüsch im Schnee*, including the *Eichbaum im Schnee*, 1829, in Berlin and the *Turmeigang im Winter*, 1833. Börsch-Supan lists a total of 24 snow paintings in Friedrich's oeuvre.

Friedrich loved winter time. For him, snow, fog and clouds had a significance of their very own and from early on, and even more intensively later, he tried to read nature's ciphers and grasp their meaning. Snow and fog lovingly veil, cover, shelter and envelop. They protect the sleep of things. Nature is not dead, but is only resting and will reawaken; there will be a resurrection. Snow and fog deprive us of the details of the visible. The visible is thus put at a slight remove from us, thereby becoming an object of intuition and growing in our imagination. What is concealed begins to preoccupy us more intensively than that which is there unquestioned before our very eyes. Snow and fog not only make the world more peaceful, they also make it larger. The calm they connote makes us more receptive to what nature is capable of communicating to us. At the same time Friedrich succeeds in obliterating all superficial symbolism. In his snow paintings in particular everything is shifted into the realm of the inconspicuous, as if shrubs and grasses wanted to cower close to the ground and creep into the earth. What remains is something mysterious, but it is very quiet and scarcely perceptible. Snow conceals and augments the significance it generates.

Raimund Girke was able to start at this point. From the beginning, Girke's work was not just a response to the visual over-stimulation we are constantly exposed to – a reaction that

drove him to radical asceticism – it was always also a thorough contemplation of nature, only we did not recognise that immediately. And it was an engagement with individual works from art history, artists' paintings and the views of nature they reflect and from which they abstract. Here the landscapes of Paul Cézanne played an important role – how could it be otherwise – but the image of nature handed down to us by Caspar David Friedrich was also of considerable importance to Raimund Girke, as he repeatedly emphasised in conversation. For him, Friedrich's snow was not water under the bridge, even though he would certainly have rejected any hastily forged link between Friedrich's snow and his own white. Girke's white does not designate anything that is objectively tangible. The range of his grey tones stands for itself and points to nothing beyond it. All Girke's colour hues, which are always very delicate and contain just a hint of colour, are from the visible world. Yet they refer only to themselves, their existence as colour in the concealed harmony of all colours. This point must be regarded as self-evident if we now wish to go a step further in our interpretation of Girke's paintings.

Something stirs and moves, refusing to be suppressed under Girke's white, pushing to the light, up to the surface. In the different phases of Girke's development this "something" was more or less strongly pronounced. At times it seemed to remain silent, only to reappear again and break forth inexorably.

How might this "something" be called? To me it seems to be a dark ground which carries Girke's paintings along, being both more, and something other than, the usually white primer coat on a canvas, a first form of superimposed brush-writing used prior to the paintings of the late 1970s and early 80s, a brush-writing which does not yet mean the actual emergence of the painting, but prepares for this, creating the ground for it. For Girke this pictorial ground is just as important as painting itself manifest in powerful brushwork, a kind of painting that contends each time for the triumph of white.

A dark ground. Is it the earth that is being signalled here in these shades of brown, ochre, umbra, sienna? Or is it the darkness of space? A hint of this latter may be made by a deep subterranean blue, an intangible shimmering black, as in the work *Schwindendes Licht* (Disappearing light), 1992. We would stumble through this darkness without orientation were it not for that white brush-writing superimposed on the restless ground – sometimes just in rudimentary strokes, as if at the end of their tether. Yet in spite of its fragmentary nature, that brush-writing still strives to achieve an all-over. What the paintings of Raimund Girke seem to me to be saying is that the world, whether it appears as earth or cosmic space, is only complete with this white script laid over it by human hand. Having long since ceased to be a possessive gesture, it is more the trace of a gaze striving for understanding, a gaze we direct towards the dark ground of the world and the boundlessness of cosmic space. Neither the one nor the other dimension will ever become totally accessible to us. Yet, however frayed, permeable and inadequate the protective covering of this white brush script may be, it is indispensable. Without it, something would be missing. Without it, the world would not be complete. It testifies of the presence of man.

Raimund Girke's paintings are multifaceted. Their various layers merge and combine, so that in many places it is difficult to distinguish what is dark ground, what is a winter light, what is the Other of the world and what we ourselves are. And sometimes there is a third layer of which it is hard to say where it originates. It consists of traces of something – that indefi-

nable “something” once again – imprints left by something that passed over it, traces of the wind perhaps, of a breath of air rippling through the blades of grass, or are they the traces of a living being? If we look at a work like *Residua*, 1987, we think they could be footprints.

Girke comes from Silesia and Friedrich was drawn to Silesia. The hike through the Riesengebirge Friedrich went on in July 1819 together with his painter-friend Georg Friedrich Kersting was one of his most profound experiences and one he drew on his whole life long. In 1837 he did a watercolour, *Die Schneegruben im Riesengebirge*, from memory and using sketches. One year after their Silesia hike, Kersting painted Friedrich in his studio. It is one of those paintings in which the man and his surroundings, the figure and the interior, mutually interpret each other. Friedrich is standing in his studio in front of an easel. The canvas is turned away from our gaze; the artist is brooding over his picture. The window is shaded except for the incursion of the sky (*verkunkelt bis auf den Einbruch ...?*) The outside world is excluded. The room has been totally cleared out; it is bare, empty, freed of everything. When I see such pictures I always skip over one and a half centuries in my mind and think that all the prerequisites are given here for a work like *Die Welt des Weiß* by Raimund Girke to be painted at that easel.