

Bernd Ribbeck  
By Bob Nickas

The modest format of Bernd Ribbeck's paintings is in marked contrast to a sense of expansiveness that registers by way of the pulse of color, heat, and light they generate. He references architectural history, the structures of both modern and Gothic churches, particularly interior spaces that have great height and volume and are meant to convey wonder and awe. He describes the paintings as "concentrated ... related to iconic painting from the East, where the thing you pray to is directly in front of you." \* In this respect they recall Tantric art, images imbued with mysticism and magic. The paintings, which are close to head size and hung low, engage the viewer one-on-one. Ribbeck's color is gossamer, lending a transparency to forms that are layered and intersecting and seem to be in a state of flux -- there a flow of matter and energy. Coats of varnish and lacquer are sometimes applied, giving the color a luminosity that recalls the way light passes through stained glass, or refracts from the facets of a gemstone. "I like the tension between materials, between the brushstroke, the ball point pen, and," he adds, "the window." He has installed paintings on walls painted black, highlighting their ethereal glow: they appear illuminated from within, their source of light immanent.

For Ribbeck, who says that he doesn't believe in "higher powers telling you what to paint," one touchstone is the work of visionary artist Forrest Bess, who insisted that he could close his eyes, see a painting, and then make the work exactly as it had been visualized. Ribbeck's paintings also bring to mind Kandinsky and the idea of moving Towards the Spiritual in Art. His work is driven by the tension between the rational and the irrational, between modernist and visionary.

While Ribbeck's paintings may be reminiscent of those historical works from which they descend, from Constructivism, Symbolism, and the story of geometric abstraction, they have to be seen -- like those of Varda Caivano, Katy Moran, and Peter Peri -- as inhabiting their own space of time. The work of these artists is not a "throwback," but freely partakes of visual languages that are familiar to us and at the same time made strange. What does it mean for a painter to engage with utopian, ideal geometry as Ribbeck does? What are his motives? How does he translate that language to speak it today in a voice of his own? To look at the object itself, to examine the image and the plane on which it is carried, only amplifies these questions. Working on MDF panels, Ribbeck sands the surface to unify all the elements, and in the process takes away some of the lines. But when he says, "I like that it looks older than it is," his aim is not to create an illusion or to fool the viewer. He explains, "I am not interested in paying homage to pure formalism, or in putting the triangle, the square or the circle as such on parade. Instead, I want to give these shapes a special kind of expression. I am referring to the classic modern and the 1920s, and hence, to something resembling more the positions of outsiders, with which we are not so familiar today; to visual worlds caught in a spiritual

or esoteric body of thought, a metaphysical world view, and out of that [they] developed forms of abstraction that were entirely their own." Here one understands that the real connective tissue, as it were, to earlier bodies of work is to be found in the transcendent pictures of artists such as Bess, Hilma af Klimt and Emma Kunz. Ribbeck's interest in early science, in nature's geometry -- the prismatic structures of snowflakes, for example -- and how microscopes reveal hidden worlds is also evident in his work. In the convergence of sacred geometry, the order and chaos found in nature, and the sense of heightened vision transmitted by these rediscovered figures from the past, Ribbeck offers us a jewel-like cathedral painted today and meant for all time.

\* Meeting with the artist, Galerie Kamm, Berlin, Mar. 8, 2008.

\*\* In an interview on German radio, Aug. 24, 2007, quoted by Stefanie Heraeus in Neuer Konstruktivismus, Kerber edition young art, Kerber Verlag, Bielefeld/Leipzig, 2007, p. 7.

Bernd Ribbeck was born in 1974 in Cologne. He graduated from the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and currently lives and works in Berlin. In 2009, Ribbeck had a solo exhibition at Kunstverein Oldenberg and participated in Cave Paintings, curated by Bob Nickas, at PSM, Berlin; Slow Paintings, Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen; and The Long Dark, curated by Michelle Cotton as part of The International 3, Manchester. His work has been exhibited in Manifesta, Trentino, Bonner Kunstverein, Bielefelder Kunstverein and the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. This is his first solo show in the US.

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