

## Galerie Gisela Clement

Michelle Grabner

### **Marmalade Sky**

29 March – 04. June 2019

Gisela Clement is pleased to make Michelle Grabner's work accessible to the German public for the first time within the exhibition "Marmalade Sky" and to present selected works from the picture series "Circle Paintings", "Gingham" and "White Paintings". New works from the series "Lids" will also be shown.

The repertoire of Michelle Grabner's paintings is clearly visible to the viewer. Strict check patterns, heroic brushstrokes, psychedelic punched card ornaments, irritatingly pulsating circles - everything appears clear and regular. These are pictures that at first make us think of nothing other than what they show, pictures that repeat a pattern without any habituation effect. Grabner's conceptual constructivism is not simply devoted to existing things, but to the way in which something appears pictorial. What we see are not only patterns, but paintings of patterns, not authentic gestures, but images of such gestures - flat and detached from their original materiality. Is it the reproduction of a checked fabric pattern or the quotation of an abstract painting? One may rightly feel reminded of the vocabulary of Minimal Art in the 1960s or of feminist forms of expression in the 1980s. This is where the artist herself sees her role models. What is decisive for Michelle Grabner's conceptual painting, however, is less her context than the consistency with which her work interweaves the levels.

Under the term Vichy pattern (Gingham in English) different woven textile patterns can be summarized. Typically, these colour stripes alternate with equally wide spaces and can also be superimposed crosswise. The fabric is created on the loom by alternating warp and weft stripes of the same width. As a simple, minimalist and contrasting design, it was originally used for bed linen, pyjamas or tea towels. Detached from domestic use, the Vichy pattern experiences its apotheosis into the realm of pop culture through Brigitte Bardot's wedding dress, Dorothy Gale's dress (played by Judy Garland) in *The Wizard of Oz*, or at the latest through Manchester United F.C.'s jerseys in the 2012 season.

In her pictures *ebene*, Michelle Grabner examines those signifiers of the domestic, supposedly feminine, with reference to Minimal Art, which introduced industrial manufacturing processes into art. It can often be observed that domestic motifs from the fields of clothing, kitchen and handicrafts play a decisive role in the artist's work. Grabner's paintings are interspersed with references, references always also to art. Domestic work and its aesthetic codes on the one hand and allusions to the functioning of contemporary media technology on the other are short-circuited in Grabner's work with surprising suddenness and led to mutual insight.

The superimposed stripes of the patterns in Michelle Grabner's paintings are a reference to the female connoted arts and crafts. Weaving, for example, is a craft of great versatility. In addition to surface qualities such as rough and smooth, matt and shiny, hard and soft, these activities also include colour and, as a result of the construction, texture as the dominant element. The word *text* comes from the Latin *texere*, which means "weaving". Thus, the production of textiles can be considered a basic writing technique. These are similar processes: the writing process combines letters, forms them into lines and these in turn into text pages, but also merges strands from many different places into an interwoven net. Texture

## Galerie Gisela Clement

and weaving, narration, sewing and knitting are techniques that combine certain materials, processes and forms of thought into a structure - this is how a material is created, but also a mental rhythm. The stories of the mythical figures of Arachne and Athena, Penelope, Kalypso or Philomela, testify to this. Even in antiquity, the creation of textile fabrics was a metaphor for the emergence of thought structures, of a story, of a world design. The linguistic witnesses of this connection are countless here: Word carpet, text fabric and sailor's yarn, stories are woven, words linked. If we understand weaving as a basic writing technique, we can understand the original roots of modern hypertext by imagining a different form of textile production: the production of hypertextile. Just as Penelope, in the darkness of night, separated what she had woven by day to avoid ever having to complete her weaving and remarry, pixel patterns constantly weave and unweave on our forgetful digital screens - only that day and night follow each other at such speed that we see nothing more than a barely perceptible flicker. The screen fabrics are connected to other screen fabrics in a three-dimensional network, in which huge quantities of images - whose pixel patterns can be multiplied infinitely - are entangled and unravelled from one moment to the next. Like all textiles, the new software has no essence, no authenticity. Just as woven works and their patterns can be reproduced without diminishing the value of the first work, digital images complicate the questions of origin and originality, authorship and authority around which the Western notion of art revolves. While the value of the image itself is rooted in originality, the depiction of knitting patterns is characterized by the fact that it leads to copying and emulation. Michelle Grabner's "knitted" or "woven" picture arrangements with their patterns provide the image of a society of copying, industrial reproduction and the substitutability of everything. Visual communication through the media is no longer denied with the icon, but with the pattern. Through the masks of the image, through the signs, through the clothes and dishtowels, through the fabrics and textures, we see in Grabner's (apparently) knitted or woven all-overs the activity of manipulation and ideology. Like the pattern or the logo through mass repetition, mass production is taken ad absurdum by the unique. But instead of indulging in the nostalgic memory of remnants of a lost, more authentic time or simply fulfilling the longing for the preservation of artistic or craft practices, it is Michelle Grabner's goal to use them as living techniques.

In general, working with textiles in many cultures is practiced by women. In recent years, traditional female handicrafts such as weaving, sewing and spinning have gained new appreciation in contemporary art as feminist practices. Making fabrics, forming patterns and joining threads is associated with feminist qualities such as empowerment through organisation and collectivism. Gathering around a collaborative work becomes a means of expressing oneself and being creative, supporting each other, making oneself visible and sharing knowledge.

Michelle Grabner develops the formal language of her painting through the expressive repertoire of classical abstraction, more precisely that of Informel, Abstract Expressionism, Concrete Art and Op-Art. When viewing her paintings, therefore, an indeterminate impression of familiarity often resonates, an irritating feeling of déjà-vus. These are familiar gestures and a painterly vocabulary that is strangely distant in Grabner's works, like an afterimage before our eyes. One sees the pictures and at the same time looks through them onto patterns of certain traditional lines of abstract painting, without creating an impression of quotation, of appropriation. With deconstructive refinement, the artist calls to mind images from the 1950s and 1960s, while at the same time keeping this reference sufficiently open. For her works cannot be assigned to specific works and only rarely to specific artists\*. There is a method to the specifically unspecific approach. Michelle Grabner is interested in the pictorial vocabulary

## Galerie Gisela Clement

of the time as a bearer of a certain salary. This connection is also a reflexive aspect of her painting, which is why she is occasionally interpreted as a conceptual artist. However, one should not overlook the fact that Grabner actually pursues her pictorial discovery from painting, i.e. from the process of painting, and does not primarily work on the creation of contexts. The use of a certain language of form - and in Michelle Grabner's case, use always means appropriation, reinterpretation - is the catalyst for the picture's discovery and does not remain external to it. It is not the reference to ornamentation that interests the artist, but the structural question of the image in the pattern, the shift from image content to image carrier, without having to lose the beauty of the regular structure.

Michelle Grabner (\*1962 in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, USA, lives and works in Wisconsin, USA) studied painting, drawing and art history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in the 1980s and art practice and art theory at Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois. Since 1997 she has been Crown Family Professor of Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and guest professorships at Yale and elsewhere complement her academic activities. As an art critic she writes regularly for the Artforum and x-tra, among others. Together with her husband, the artist Brad Killam, she curates the project spaces "The Suburban" and "The Poor Farm". In 2014 she was co-curator of the Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Grabner was the first artistic director of FRONT International, a triennial exhibition held in Cleveland, OH and the surrounding area from July to September 2018.