

Galerie NEU, Philippstr. 13, 10115 Berlin-Mitte

Exhibition: Birgit Megerle

Duration: 19th of september until 28th of october

Opening: Saturday, the 16th of september 6 pm

Dead Life

The color “gray” counts among the non-colors, and usually announces conceptuality. For instead of the medium of “painting,” traditionally defined by the use of color, of contrasting colors, differences in hue, etc., the much more decisive question that arises is *how* this medium was employed. Numerous painters since the war—ranging from Gerhard Richter to Albert Oehlen—have either programmatically produced gray paintings or gone through phases of monochrome gray painting, whose conceptual appearance, interestingly, permitted precisely an *increase* in gestural application and “smearing” of paint. Yet “gray” also preserves the semantics of photography’s gray graininess. Thus, Birgit Megerle’s new paintings, dominated by shades of gray, signal that they are based on photographic originals. Yet the latter were not transferred one-to-one but transformed into pictorial arrangements that come across as extremely artificial, being composed of various movable pieces (figures, urban spaces, architectonic fragments). They are distantly reminiscent of the stark spatial divisions in de Chirico’s paintings, just as the figures, as though stenciled, communicate with the aesthetics of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Yet the dull, cool, seemingly foggy and opaque color application and the shades of gray also create the impression that all life, all vitality has been positively drained from these paintings—an impression reinforced by the figures’ inflexible postures and the insertion of grid-like structures in the form of architectonic fragments (concrete walls, stone staircases). The atmosphere in these paintings could be rendered with the formula of “artificial, rigid, stage-like,” were not the vestments painted with such care, even affection, and plasticity. It is through these painterly areas that “life” re-enters.

Megerle’s paintings are dead and alive at the same time. Just as life has been drained from them in various ways (the shades of gray, and the collage-like grouping of different elements), they mostly show female figures who, with their dynamic and brash poses, symbolize determination and a readiness to act—that is, a turning toward life. At times they assume roles that were traditionally ascribed to men—thus, for instance, the female filmmaker (who is still an exception) or the Amazon-like woman with a bow, in the pose of a (male) Cupid. However artificial and frozen these poses may seem, they always point to a chain of events *outside* the paintings; not least by virtue of the regimes of axes of seeing that guide the viewer’s eye, often to the outside of the paintings. As though these figures were ready at any moment to take life, which has in any case already entered the paintings, upon themselves, with its possibilities and compulsions. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the figures represented are often close friends of Megerle’s; the reference to life remains latent to the degree to which it is inhibited by the ostensive artificiality of these arrangements. The paintings seem lifeless and are at the same time infused with life.

It is this double movement that distinguishes, in my view, Megerle’s approach: on the one hand, her production defies the present-day bio-economic imperative, which demands that the artist disclose his life, but also demonstrate sociability and be present, incessantly making new contacts and communicating. Instead of acting like an “operator,” Megerle in this respect opts for a certain degree of reclusiveness.

That is not to say, of course, that she is not equipped with an international network of artist friends with whom she regularly cooperates and has group shows. At the same time, she stakes her production on paintings that, at first glance, cannot be brought in immediate connection with her life or her person. At closer observation, however, this production of images has much to do with the position she holds in a certain socio-economic and urban context. Friends make appearances, and the limitations and hardships entailed by life in an urban environment are addressed metaphorically (as a world of concrete that feels claustrophobic, or walls one constantly comes up against). Beyond a sort of wall of silence that these paintings erect simply because they do not, despite their figurative character, present a narration we could immediately comprehend, it is the social compulsions and possibilities surrounding us that are negotiated in these paintings.

Isabelle Graw