

Since he first appeared on the scene almost ten years ago, Nick Oberthaler has developed a refined artistic language, technically and expressively reworking space, light, and colour - the fundamental building blocks of creative practice. He juxtaposes a wide variety of materials (canvas, paper, paint, ink, wood, plastic, textiles, and photocopies) and techniques (painting, drawing, and photography) to create artworks that live between the spheres of painting, sculpture, and graphic design; at times he renders the works into three dimensions, which gives them a distinctly spatial character. His creations rarely contain any traces of the representational. Instead, they use a sober, ascetic geometric iconography with echoes of the avant-garde from *Cercle et Carré* to *Abstraction-Création*, and from the concrete abstraction of the post-war period to minimal art. He declares these references explicitly or reiterates them literally as quotes, rather than merely evoking them through the vague, intangible thread of virtual discourse. Oberthaler assembles his work with regard to history, while maintaining an egalitarian attitude without submission to his interlocutor, which is the past and its interpreters. He respects the past, but he's not afraid of it. He treats it casually, like a friend he sees now and again, and not as a stranger he's encountering for the first time. Oberthaler thereby sets into motion an original dialectic that unconsciously leads him to redefine the unwritten laws handed down by the cultural nomadism that began in the 1980's and which has continued to reinvent itself, arriving under a new guise on the shores of the new millennium. Oberthaler interprets these rules with the somewhat arrogant nonchalance typical of his generation, heedless of the limits set by tradition and indifferent to the results of these conventions. He faces them with the serenity and slight unawareness of his own personal and cultural context, which makes him very emblematic of his time. This attitude allows him to travel through creative and intellectual episodes that belong to different seasons and environments, no matter how close or far from one another in time. Whether from the beginning or the end of the 20th century, from historic or neo-avant-garde movements, or from the precursors or followers of 20th century visual culture, Oberthaler comes into contact with them all. In an act of perpetual motion, he sometimes faces them head on and at other times walks right by them; sometimes he admires them and sometimes he attacks them; sometimes he takes a fancy to them and sometimes he just brushes them off; sometimes he merely samples them, and at other times he embraces them fully, never ceasing in the process. He does, however, pause at random intervals to reflect on his own experiences. With the trust he places in his own artistic means, he develops and renders them into pictorial, sculptural, graphic, and spatial solutions that vary depending on the personal notions he forms about such systems. The results are compositions rife with iconographic and iconological echoes, literal and faithful, free and also interpretive. This repertory, although specific and heterogeneous, is also harmonious, due to Oberthaler's ability to absorb and metabolize all these elements, which he then synthesizes into new life forms and re-presents to viewers in a new, contemporary guise. We can see this abundantly in the project he designed in Rome. Oberthaler drew his inspiration from several essential aspects of the life and work of Hendrik Christian Andersen, to create an installation extending from the ground floor to the first floor of Andersen's museum, Villa Hélène.

At ground level, in what was formerly the artist's studio, he masked the windows with large reflective surfaces of silver vinyl that refracted the natural light descending from the skylight over the works installed in the room. This created an interplay of multiplication and subtraction of images and light without any clear pattern of continuity. By reflecting the architectural structures and the sculptures they house in such a distorted manner, these surfaces change our physical and semantic perception of the place. They provide us with an entirely new, highly dynamic image of it. To highlight the somatic ambiguity of the figures sculpted by Andersen and their disturbed sense of eroticism, all reflections of their author's deep-seated anxieties, Oberthaler positioned three overhead projectors to project human figures reworked from advertising photographs onto the room's walls and plaster casts. Oberthaler's faces, like those sculpted by Andersen, are sexless and ageless. They remain suspended in time and space, ready to take the viewers by the hand and lead them into the most obscure corners of the subconscious. Oberthaler has very conscientiously used this as a way to grasp Andersen fully as an artistic and historic figure. By emphasizing certain peculiar attributes of the surrounding space, he provides us with a way to understand this character, of whom the villa and the works are its ultimate expression.

Oberthaler brings this same line of thinking to the first floor, Andersen's former private quarters, with an irregular distribution of a series of works that create a circular rather than a static impression of the installation. Although they do not belong to the categories of painting and sculpture in the strictest sense, they leverage the basic values that underlie both these disciplines. We could say that they become their contemporary spokespersons by translating them into a mixed grammar system facilitated by our current "linguistic Babel".

Even though they do not use the same syntax, they share the same semantic blood; they offer themselves to us as a completely reworked version of the universally recognized concepts of painting and sculpture. As an example, we may consider the parataxis of panels arranged in a syncopated rhythm along the apartment's walls. Their wispy, antique pink colour recalls a similar tone obsessively repeated in the frescoes and stuccos adorning these domestic spaces, once again evoking the figure of Andersen and his personal tastes. At the same time, by modulating their tonality, they shift the debate to an exquisitely aesthetic level by calling our attention to the intrinsic values of the various colour samplings. Another example lies in the sequence of drapes covering the windows on the first floor. The rectangular canvases absorb, redistribute, and filter the external light through chromatic and graphic patterns, generated using a latex-print technique. They belong to a rather eclectic iconographic and iconological universe, ranging from marine landscapes to passages from Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, from a man's face to that of a woman covered by the magic square in Dürer's *Melencolia*, from geometric compositions to a state of total colourlessness.

As a final example, we have the series of vitrine tables placed at irregular intervals throughout the main sitting room at the centre of the house. These four works ideally sum up the entire exhibit, both through the elements we find on their surfaces – cut paper, strips of fabric, a reflective film – and their arrangement. They open themselves up to a variety of interpretations, simultaneously invoking perspective and geometry, painting and sculpture, graphics and materials, ornament and concept. In sum, the tables, like the drapes, the panels, the projections, and the reflective surfaces, are the means by which Oberthaler has created a dual affirmation, as both author and individual. In the former instance, he gives rise to a creative gesture that, however specific, is very characteristic of his journey as an artist, and which develops and adds new layers of nuance to it. In the latter sense, he has done so in close harmony with his predecessor, though on merely a theoretical and intellectual level; even if he doesn't share the same attitudes, he's affectionately understanding of them. By balancing between these two rails, Oberthaler has proven his artistic maturity, as the Roman project clearly testifies to.

(Text by Pier Paolo Pancotto from the accompanying catalogue *Calculated Reserve*, Rome 2014)