Mary Mary

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Illusion and Revelation

Artist's books, illusionist wall paintings, sun-bleached paper works, posters. *Joanna Fiduccia* on the work of New York-based Austrian artist Ernst Caramelle, which has consistently aesthetically combined conceptualism and painting for over forty years.

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bout the reproduction
The colored illustrations are shown in their original size.
All the other illustrations are reduced in size.
Perception of the piece depends on contemplation of the various levels in relation to each other.
The catalogue should be looked at several times so that the intention becomes evident.
If it doesn't, I request that the catalogue be read through again, that the exhibition be seen several times with the poster and invitation card in one's head, and a private discussion would, perhaps, help …
Ernst Caramelle, 1982, *Gagarin*,
volume 4, Waasmunster 2004

On a poster for Ernst Caramelle's 1982 exhibition at Galerie Nächst St. Stephan in Vienna, two strangers walk past a painting propped up for view in an atrium. A thick-waisted fellow in shirt sleeves strides by, either willfully ignoring or unaware of the artwork, while a woman in sunglasses and a dress inclines to inspect the painting, the top edge of which is carefully labeled »Ernst Caramelle«. This image, like many of the Austrian artist's posters and invitation cards, is a diversionary tactic. It slyly focuses attention on the painting. Is it scandalous? Titillating? In the photograph, only the back of the canvas is visible, and we can scarcely guess at what its surface holds. As with the poster for a 1986 joint exhibition with Suzan Frecon at the Kunsthalle Bern – which rather than featuring the artists' work, appropriated Balthasar Burkhard'sa photograph of then Kunsthalle director, Ulrich Loock – first impressions aremisleading. Perhaps, these posters suggest, Ernst Caramelle's exhibitions were to be viewed askance. Perhaps they were in »disguise«. Today, Ernst Caramelle is best known for geometricwall frescoes and sun-fadedmotifs on colored paper, but leaving it at that would be like surmising that the Kunsthalle Bern exhibition featured photography. In the course of his nearly forty-year career, Caramelle has carried off his work with remarkable consistency (collector Guy Schraenen noted in their catalogue project for the artist's exhibition at the Museu Serralves, »There is no rupture and almost no evolution in Ernst Caramelle's oeuvre«).Yet its surface simplicity and aesthetic constancy dissemble a vast corpus of printed matter, media interventions, and artist's books that complicate the vision of Caramelle as a dark horse of geometric abstraction.

Born in Tyrol in 1952,Caramelle studied at the College University of Applied Arts in Vienna before moving to Cambridge in 1974 as a Research Fellow at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT where he realized his first video works – the unnerving *Video Ping-Pong,* in which monitors double the rallies of real players, and works such as *Video-Landschaft (Video-Raum)* and *Video-Landschaft (Flowerpot),* where shots of a tree trunk and flowerpot respectively were screened on TV-sets placed in front of plants, making them appear to sprout fantastically from themonitors. These cheeky and transparent doublings would reappear in his 1979 artist's book *Forty Found Fakes.* Nearly a cult classic for its irreverent take on the strategies of his contemporaries and predecessors, the book consists of found images resembling the work of other artists like Buren, Panamarenko, Hanson, Christo, Burden, Palermo, Boltanski, Muntandas, Haacke, Rinke, Broodthaers, etc, tersely captioned with the artists' names. »Fake fakes«, as curator Markus Brüderlin called them, are neither plagiary (the cooption of another artist's work as Caramelle's own) nor fakes (the serious attribution of the found motif or object to another artist's oeuvre), but images whose negation or unreality is just what secures their authenticity as »Caramelles«.
Caramelle produced his last video work in 1979, and no subsequent book of his would address the axes of conceptualism so directly, but his work continues to draw from the seamlessness of virtual space and real

space, the »aesthetic contexts« and lived environments, that these projects cultivated. Caramelle's wall paintings are produced through layered washes of watercolor and pigment. The first of these murals, *Vino Dramatico* (1982–1984), in which wine was used to color (or discolor) the wall with faint arabesques, laid the field for the bolder geometric forms to follow.Although they initially resemble abstractions – color field painting, fresco-style, Hans-Hofmann-meets-Giotto – these murals are always painted around particular architectural features, producing trompe-l'oeil effects: darker planes recede, abutting colors evoke gallery partitions, and the diaphanous paint washes suggest a gossamerthin aura vibrating off the walls. Caramelle's murals are »dramatic« in the literal sense; like proscenia, they stage smaller rectangles which suggest modest monochrome paintings. The resulting illusion is a modernist dream, or else, a modernist nightmare: a twentiethcentury rendition of a trompe-l'oeil masterwork, disguised by the seemingly pure and ineluctable flatness of the color field painting. Yet the notion of disguise creates a narrative about an experience that in reality is never so clearly sundered into illusion and revelation. Rather, Caramelle's murals are simultaneously abstractions and illusions, flatness and depth, modernist dreams and modernist farces. They are moreover all of these things, but never for long; they are washed off or painted over at the close of almost every exhibition. Caramelle documents Pinevery work, however, and they appear sooner or later in one of the artist's books (indeed, the title of his1982 exhibition at Galerie Nächst St. Stephan, *Blätter* [Leaves], seemed to acknowledge the eventual resting place for Caramelle's work – in the leaves of his books). The brief, intensive interval of Caramelle's work during the exhibition bleeds into the extended, extensive duration of these books.

Ostensibly, the artist's *Light Pieces* (similarly begun in the 80s) are an exception to this rule. Caramelle creates his *Light Pieces* (also titled, more directly, *Sonne auf Papier* [Sun on Paper]) by partially exposing sheets of colored paper to sunlight over a period of several months or years so that the uncovered portions fade into different tones and hues. Unlike the murals, they are lasting records, the »long durée« component of an oeuvre that otherwise seems to be existmainly in books. Some of the resulting patterns, various embedded rectangles of different colors and tones, suggest »exhibition views« of Caramelle's wall paintings, while others display a common motif – a zigzag cutout suggesting a comic book sound effect. Yet Caramelle's *Light Pieces* do not simply record past time like so many keepsakes and old letters, bleached or yellowed with age. Like his murals, they are doomed to be washed away in time; there is no way to halt the effects of the sun (short of never exhibiting them). Their inclusion alongside documentation of the murals in Caramelle's artist's books is a reminder that even those works that continue to exist materially never preserve their form, leaving us with but an image of an image in a book somewhere.

Yet the *Light Pieces* are not all pathos.Consummately »light« gestures (the artist barely lifts a hand!), they are also a lower-than-low-tech answer to the neon »light piece« – a reminder of thewit behind *Forty Found Fakes.* They encapsulate Caramelle's capacity to offset elegance with drollery, which is one way in which his work, despite its constancy over the years, seems to still be so contemporary. The interdependence of abstract painting inCaramelle'swork with other media, and his adulteration of geometric abstraction with figuration and illusionism, resonate with a number of painters from a younger generation.

Furthermore, the roots of his career in conceptualism seemto bait the subtle distrust also directed at certain painters today – thosewho might have been called »conceptual painters« a few years ago. That odious term seems to have slipped out of usage, but has left in its wake the notion that abstract painting today is not really (just) painting, but rather an alibi for other activities, tactical and intellectual in nature. The presence of humor and indirectness in contemporary painting, moreover, seems to indicate other (tactical, intellectual) motives, »disguised« by the use of canvas and paint. Caramelle's deadpan commentary from 1982, which serves as the epigraph for this text, could be a response to these suspicions: to perceive his paintings, one must consider all the various levels – architecture, surface, and illusion, catalogues, memories, and even mental images, as well as fakes, farces, and »authentic« gestures. Seen in that sense, »disguise« might not be the best notion for this kind of painting and still-living legacy. Instead, you might call it »dispersed« – a word that captures something of Caramelle's fleet and expansive work, as contemporary as ever, and as difficult to pin down.

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