

Review: “Ernst Wilhelm Nay: Late Paintings” at Aurel Scheibler, Berlin

BY WILLIAM KHERBEK | JUNE 04, 2019



Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Rot - Weiß - Schwarz II, 1967. Oil on canvas, 162 x 150 cm.
© E. Nay-Scheibler, Cologne, VG Bild Kunst, Bonn 2019. Courtesy Aurel Scheibler, Berlin)

The late canvases of the German artist Ernst Wilhelm Nay, exhibited at Aurel Scheibler through June 29, embrace the expansive capacities of abstraction. Nay's titles insist on a kind of chromatic interpretation. Translated from the German the following are representative: “Yellow-Blue-Yellow,” “Red-White-Black,” “Ultramarine,” “White Figuration 2.” Nay's life was shadowed and disfigured by two World Wars and the politics that created them. His father was killed in the First World War; Nay himself served, apparently rather unenthusiastically, in the Second. In the intervening years, the promising young artist was declared an official “Degenerate” by the National Socialist regime and banned from exhibiting. With such a rich field of biographical material to draw from, one might suspect Nay would perhaps have embraced the kind of openly political positioning of someone like Georg Grosz in his work.

Although Nay had as legitimate a claim as anyone to make politicized art, his painterly life is instead characterized by an increasingly abstract trajectory. Earlier phases of his works hinted at figuration, indeed these were the works that drew the ire of the Nazis; later he found inspiration in music. The titular colors of these paintings offer a certain narrative, but as the exhibition's press materials suggest, Nay's abstraction was not entirely untethered from the world of objects. The text's author, the German art critic, Siegfried Gohr, writes, “Whereas the artist once used parallels to music as inspiration, now he seems to be exploring laws inherent in all natural phenomena.” The striations and lozenges that appear on Nay's late canvases do indeed have the air of the quasi-biological. Seeing them, I couldn't keep the images of the German photographer and artist Karl Blossfeldt from the corners of my mind. Nay is never “representing” the underlying laws or phenomena of nature, but he is evoking them in works like “Segmente” (1966), a tetra-chrome canvas consisting of arcs of yellow and black that frame sections of white and nudge a large field of blue in which an irreducible figure is framed against the white of the canvas. This emergent image is, if one seeks biological metaphors, part eye, part plant stem, part clubbed end of a squid tentacle. Ultimately, of course, it is none of the above.

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Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Segmente, 1966. Oil on canvas 162 x 150 cm. © E. Nay-Scheibler, Cologne, VG Bild Kunst, Bonn 2019
Courtesy Aurel Scheibler, Berlin.

Such generative images as those found in "Segmente" and "Schwingform," which was painted the same year, are neither representational nor symbolic, but they cannot be separated entirely from the world of objects and beings. At first, the neologism "disymbolism" sprung to mind as a way to characterize these elements of Nay's late work, in so far as it conveys a kind of decoupling of a symbol from that to which it refers. After some consideration, it seems as though Nay was consciously seeking to draw connections between his images and the world, but to do so in ways that maximized possible interpretations rather than narrowing them. Perhaps "re symbolism" is a more apropos term, suggesting a determination to rebuild the networks of contact that war severs and sunders.

Inevitably, attempts to classify these works fall flat, and the viewer is better served letting the dialogue of colors speak for itself. The enveloping "Diaphanie in Gelb" (translated literally as "Diaphany in Yellow" or less portentously as "Light-Play in Yellow") is truly an exultation. The viewer can follow the curves, lines and densities of color as they meld and recede to a genuinely ecstatic place. "Rotfiguration," or "Red Figuration," was one of the works that I found myself returning to as I made my way through the exhibition. There was something centering in this canvas, a strange theatrical quality as the red of the title vies for space and attention with a section of gold, yellow and white. These contending regions are separated by four stripes of color. Moving from left to right the colors are green, purple, yellow, and blue. For me, these strips of pigment evoked the presence of a flag delineating a kind of border between two different chromatic ways of life. A flag, too, is only a particular arrangement of colors. Though politics may not be the subject of Nay's late works, politics is also infused with the dynamics color. In the best of these late works, Nay finds ways to reclaim color as a kind of commonwealth — as a province of the entire biosphere.

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Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Diaphanie in Gelb, 1966. Oil on canvas 162 x 150 cm. © E. Nay-Scheibler, Cologne, VG Bild Kunst, Bonn 2019. Courtesy Aurel Scheibler, Berlin.