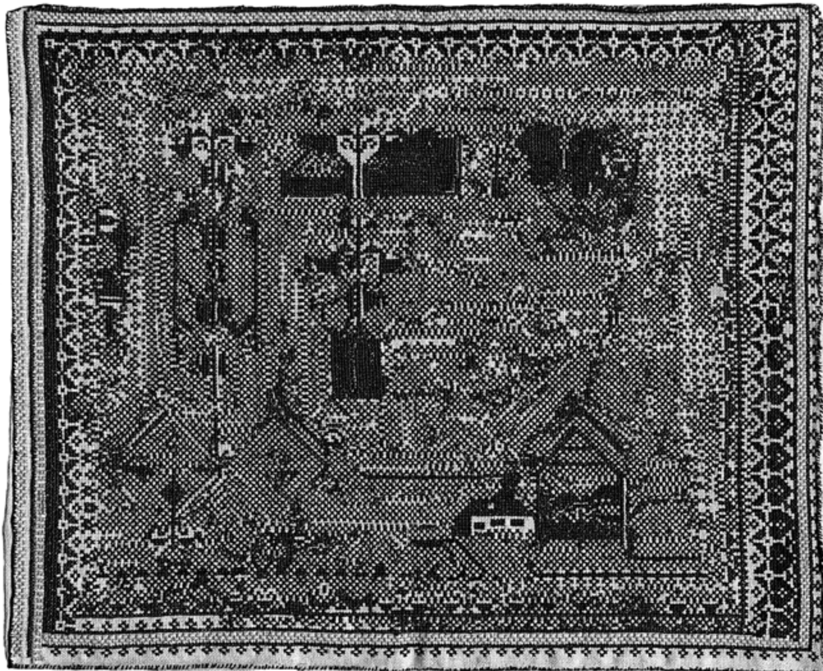

KÄTHE VIEGELAHN
Ohne Titel, 1991
Garn auf Leinen / Yarn on linen
22 × 37 cm / 8.7 × 14.6 in.

Johanna Tiedtke: Potential Depictabilities

OLIVER ZYBOK

Johanna Tiedtke is a painter. She is, though, one of a younger generation of artists for whom it is self-evident, even within painting, not to restrict oneself—in the traditional sense—to brush, paint, and canvas, but to incorporate numerous other techniques into this medium. Thus, alongside the traditional canvas, she uses wood, zinc, and glass, which serve as supports, and treats these materials with a variety of printing techniques. The basis of her work is research material consisting of photographs, which she either takes herself, or finds, for example, in catalogues and the Internet. In addition, she creates installations with her paintings, as in the work *Von neuerwachten Welten* (*Of Newly Awakened Worlds,* 2012, see ills. pp. 38–39). Here we have a large painting (85.4 by 118 inches) hung precisely opposite a large black sheet of glass of the same size. The floor is modeled on that of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, whose frescoes were painted by Giotto di Bondone (1266–1337)—a geometrically ornamental formation as an art-historical reference. The painting uses a mixed technique. To start with, collaged photographic motifs are scanned creating a digital file and then transferred to the wood surface using the UV-printing technique; this is supplemented with painted additions depicting floral patterns and shapes reminiscent of celestial bodies. The painting is dominated by a geological formation, the whole being covered over by printed cracks, recalling old, weathered frescoes, which fascinate the artist greatly. When the viewer turns around, they see this surreal landscape schematically doubled in the black mirror. "The light situation of the painting recalls morning," says Tiedtke, "the promise of a new beginning, which at the came time is called into question. It tells of the beginning and end of all time, when a new world is created."[1] The yearning addressed here, which is never quenched and in which one can lose one's bearings, is ambivalent—a bright dream that loses its clarity when darkly reflected. In the form of a painting, then, she reveals herself by an orientation to the figural that seems to dissolve into abstract processes. What's going on here?

Human beings have an inclination to reproduce the natural world in pictures with a figural orientation. To give things figural names is probably as old as human language itself. Following the developments in "gestural painting" that we saw in Tachisme and Abstract Expressionism, in the late nineteen-fifties numerous art historians and theoreticians took an interest in the integration of the abstract structures of natural situations in figural depictions. Even in the Stone Age, individual cave paintings incorporated structures of the surface of the cave wall. In 1957, Jurgis Baltrušaitis (1903–1988) published his essay on pictures in stone, "Pierres imagées," while Ernst Gombrich's (1909–2001) treatise on cloud figures appeared three years later in his book *Art and Illusion.* At about the same time Horst W. Janson (1913–1982) wrote three articles on "chance images." In the essay of this title, he defined them as "meaningful visual figurations perceived in materials—most often rocks, clouds, or blots—that have not been, or cannot be, consciously shaped by men."[2] Each of the authors makes it clear in his analysis that all abstraction arises from an orientation to the figural, and, conversely, a real situation can be reduced to a minimum in different stages of abstraction. They thus illustrate an interaction between figuration and abstraction.

Janson shows that the chance images he describes represent an anthropological constant: they turn up in classical antiquity and in the Middle Ages, and received great attention in the art theory during the Italian Renaissance. At the start of his treatise *De statua* (written circa 1440), Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) presumes that sculpture was invented when people discovered something figural in vegetable and geological rudiments. By adding or removing substance, this "pristine" artist then sought to achieve an even more perfect image.[3] Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) speaks in *Trattato della pittura* of "a new invention" for inspiration. An artist, he said, should look carefully at "masonry dirtied with stains or made of a mixture of different kinds of stone." "If you have to invent some scenes, you will be able to discover them there in diverse forms, in diverse landscapes, adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, extensive plains, valleys, and hills. You can even see different battle scenes and movements made up of unusual figures, faces with strange expressions, and myriad things which you can transform into a complete and proper form."[4] Finally Leonardo even considered the possibility of creating the stains on the wall himself by throwing a paint-drenched sponge at it—chance with depiction potential.

The entirety of Tiedtke's painterly oeuvre is characterized by this kind of random impulse alongside the planned process of structuring the painting. In this sense, her work fits in to a long painting tradition. Even though she does not employ the sponge as an aid, she intervenes in numerous other ways. In the two works *Das weisse Haus / Das graue Haus (The White House / The Gray House)* (both 2013, see ills. pp. 49–50) the foundation is formed by photographs she took herself of the landscape along the Schlei, a long inlet in Schleswig-Holstein where she grew up. The paintings depict a summer and a winter scene, and their pixel size gives them a precisely calculated degree of fuzziness. Once again they are printed on a wood surface using the UV technique, or else, literally burnt into the wood by heating the ink during the printing process. The artist has partly sanded the surface so that the grain of the wood permeates the photographic motif and becomes—as if self-evident—a component of the landscape. Tiedtke emphasizes the fuzziness by using paint to make the pixels more precise, which brings out the digital raster. For Tiedtke, every single point in the painting is the smallest indication of something real, the sign of an abstraction

process. While the pixels are consciously positioned, her coloration is more in the way of an intuitive decision. This aspect of chance corresponds to Leonardo's detail of a stain on a wall or the structures created by throwing a sponge, whose color varies according to the force applied to the throw. Above all a pixel makes it clear that every form of abstraction is oriented to the figural, even when a precise identification is no longer possible because of the working of chance. Tiedtke demonstrates this phenomenon in numerous variations of motif (see ills. pp. 52–55), starting with the painting *The White House.* She has resized a floral motif from the bottom edge of the picture into four untitled small-format works (5.9 by 3.9 inches), once again using UV-print, but this time on glass. While unambiguous floral elements can still be recognized in the first, which is clearly made up of pixels, these increasingly dissolve in the other three works on glass, until finally only a single pixel can be seen, as a prominent feature. Tiedtke takes this abstraction process to its extreme conclusion by transferring this final reduction to a large zinc plate and enlarging it once more. Here, an originally clearly recognizable phenomenon is subjected to cross-media transformation, through various stages of abstraction—fuzziness of the photography through pixellation, sanding of the wood surface, emphasis of the fuzziness by painting the pixel—to a minimum of representability, in the form of a single pixel.

There are numerous possibilities in which such abstraction processes can develop through the incorporation of chance. The diptych *Käthe* (2015, see ills. pp. 92–93), from the series of the same name, shows a pattern that seems to be interrupted time and again. The two panels hang not closely together, but with a certain distance between them, so that the total motif is divided. This division did not take place exactly in the middle of the motif; rather, the viewer will see on closer inspection that the right-hand edge of the left-hand picture is identical with the left-hand edge of the right-hand picture. This repetition emphasizes once again the fragmentary nature of the source, a piece of embroidery. The left-hand picture is in dark tones, the right-hand picture in bright ones, a color metaphor for dream and reality. The technique is once again UV-print, and here too individual pixels are emphasized by the use of paint. The motif, enlarged to the point of fuzziness, is derived from a scan of a small, embroidered tablecloth worked by Tiedtke's great-aunt Käthe, who devoted much of her life to embroidery. This small work, her last, displays curious flaws, ornaments are interrupted, figures and houses are started but not finished. The incomplete individual motifs give rise to pixel-like formations—fuzziness. Here an inner world, full of detail, seems to reveal itself in fragments. The inner world was characterized by dementia. Great-aunt Käthe embroidered this tablecloth one day, then, on the next, forgot what she had been working on the day before. This explains the fragmentary character, which displays abstraction processes resulting from the unconscious, here triggered by memory loss.

"Sometime or other," writes Tiedtke, "it occurred to me that gaps appeared in the embroidery because Käthe simply forgot one motif in a row of repeating motifs. Or else 'mistakes' appeared in the ornaments. In repeating patterns, there were curious changes. 'Something is happening with me,' wrote Käthe to her sister as her memory failed her ever more often. She had intense dreams and hallucinations. Reality and dream were interwoven."[5] The embroidery of great-aunt Käthe shows how there emerge, from the unconscious, abstraction processes that ultimately can no longer be followed by the viewer, but nonetheless provide a clue to something real. Chance reveals once again its depiction potential. Johanna Tiedtke has revealed

the abstraction process of embroidery in a video projection showing transformed patterns previously drawn with a steel needle on a wall with a smoothed surface painted with a special paint (video paint) to bring out the details of the projection. Here we have a further dissolution process, a renewed reduction to a minimum. The patterns, which are based on the ornamental structures of the embroidery, resemble trails that can no longer be unambiguously traced back to their source. The moving story of great-aunt Käthe lends depth to the general idea of dream and reality, and the associated abstraction processes of real materiality, as described by Christa Wolf in her novel *Patterns of Childhood* (1976): "Half-conscious, I shall experience the beautiful waking image drifting ever deeper into the dream, into ever new shapes no longer accessible to words, shapes which I believe I recognize. Sure of finding myself once again in the world of solid bodies upon awakening, I shall abandon myself to the experience of dreaming. I shall not revolt against the limits of the expressible."[6] What remains is an indescribable silence.

1 Johanna Tiedtke, in *Johanna Tiedtke: Von neuerwachten Welten* (Hamburg, 2012), p. 53.
2 Horst W. Janson, "Chance Images," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas,* vol. 1, part 4: *Abstraction in the Formation of Concepts to Design Argument,* ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York, 1973), p. 340.
3 See Leon Battista Alberti, *Das Standbild, Die Malkunst, Grundlagen der Malerei,* Oskar Bätschmann and Christoph Schäublin eds. (Darmstadt 2000), pp. 31, 143. See also Horst W. Janson, "The 'Image Made by Chance' in Renaissance Thought," *De artibus opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky,* vol. 1, ed. Millard Meiss (New York, 1961), pp. 254–256.
4 Jean Paul Richter, ed., *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci* (London, 1939), vol. 1, pp. 311ff.
5 The artist in an e-mail to the author, dated September 15, 2015.
6 Christa Wolf, *Patterns of Childhood* [formerly a Model Childhood], trans. Ursule Molinaro and Hedwig Rappolt (New York, 1984), p. 407.