

# Barbara Tavella *Ein Flügelschlag entpuppt meine Körper*

26.08.  
10.10.23  
Ortisei

English

With the exhibition title that translates to “A wingflash uncovers my bodies”, Barbara Tavella unfolds a new way of reading her paintings. The mostly stretcherless and delicately painted canvases are distributed flowing and freely hanging in the exhibition space. They invite us to interact with them and to pass between them. In order to understand what the statement in the title is all about, the artist has to take us closer to her painting process. The beat of the wings measures the time it takes for the caterpillar’s body to turn into a butterfly, like the blink of an eye. Without necessarily painting butterflies from now on, this association brings about a new basic knowledge of how to read her images. For what is hidden in them is not what they hide from us, but rather what they want to show us from now on. The metamorphosis in the painting process, which includes all the layers of painting and their figures, testifies to their understanding that everything human, plant and animal can be seen in one. Because we breathe the same air as we drink the same water. The cosmic memory of the earth, which we encounter daily in the cycle of life and which redounds us to metamorphose, is united in all of our bodies. Only with this basic understanding of being one in everything and at all times do the images begin to open up to us when we look at them.

“The face”, says the artist, “is the starting point of the composition and perhaps thus also the seed of the image, in which everything cosmic in our humanity is absorbed. The portrait is the

beginning of the pursuit. It is the figure that tells itself so that the transformation begins. In this context, a quote by Emanuele Coccia from the book *Metamorfosi* has become essential for me: Every time we attribute a plant or animal quality to the human body, we realise that there is something non-human in us, and vice versa, that the plant and the animal are inscribed in the human being. According to Coccia, the face in the picture stands for all unifying, living organisms. The face is born as a germ in the picture and, with its metamorphosis, decides on the picture itself.”

Just as plants, people and animals are connected in a simultaneity for Tavella, any gender classifications and distinctions are also invalid for the artist. The simultaneity of the body translates into a permeability of the image. For the artist, this permeability does not mean a defencelessness that goes back to an injury, but rather an immersive power that is capable of absorbing the world as a cosmos. The layers of paint become the counterpart of the permeability, the metamorphosis in the pictorial space and also make the picture possible in the first place, just as the face described above decides the pictorial space with its interaction with the artist. In this way, the painting space becomes a stage on which the artist acts with the self-creating figure in order to absorb all the materiality of the cosmos as a given presence. The layers of paint thus not only describe this search and traces for this self-determined protagonist in the painting, but also the dialogue between the painter and the self-birthing face.

“At the same time, I assume a materiality of the body that is everything at the same time: plant, organic, animal and human. When I say my paintings have become more vegetal, I mean the plant as the principle of absolute plasticity. To have a body no longer means to exist in a certain shape, but to possess the ability to transfer any shape into another. The body of the painting is therefore my body, but at the same time the body of the other, which manifests itself in its permeability in the pictorial space. In painting, this is a permeation of the real and the imaginary. That is why, for me, painting penetrates spheres and bodies, and thus acquires a cosmic expansion in its immersion. In this process, the outline that circumscribes the figure in the pictorial space is not a boundary, but the moment of transition. It is not a form-giving motif, but the translation of permeability into its simultaneity. The outline, captured as an engraving in the pictorial space, is the catalyst of metamorphosis. And that’s why the face, as the starting point of painting, is also the catalyst for finding the image in the painting space.”

For Tavella, the plasticity of her paintings translates into a fluid whole. “The other,” the artist continues, “is precisely what is already inside me, which I then penetrate myself in order to release the metamorphosis of the image. That is why the image desires me, because it is able to expose the desire of my unknown self. The painting thus enters into the dialogue of the Other that I set out to seek at the beginning of painting. The other is the animal, the plant, as well as everything past and future. I not only carry the DNA of my parents and ancestors within me, but also the matter of the plants, the animals, the minerals, which constitute themselves into the cosmos through me. Or rather, a memory of the earth is formed in us with the sediment of the earth. That is why the infinity of our being is also reproduced in the desire of the image. The other is not to be understood as an exclusion mechanism of the foreign. I once used a sentence by Jean-Luc Nancy on a painting: “In order to be one’s own, the body must be foreign to itself.” Because only in this way can I recognise the body in its strangeness, because the other is constantly in motion and thus constantly reinventing itself. A metamorphosis happens in the image. That is why the painting is only finished when it is completely foreign to me, when I can no longer compare it with anything I know. It must be compressed in such a way that another space is born. Only in this way can I then let the picture go.”

This text is based on a conversation between Barbara Tavella and Karin Pernegger, early August 2023.

We thank Karin Pernegger, Mariano Pichler, Martin Demetz.