

The history of interpreting art over the past century has been moving between the alternate considerations of form and content. Whereas the academic view of the nineteenth century focussed strictly on the iconography of a picture, the beginning of the modern age brought a fundamental shift in emphasis from content to form issues. The centre of attention was thus no longer the content represented in a picture, but rather the work's manner of representation, formal composition, and style. For some time, the victory of form was celebrated by postulating its autonomy and value for its own sake, liberated at last from the chains of content.

Yet content returned. Linguists, ethnologists, and soon even art theorists recognised that form cannot be interpreted entirely detached from content, as both realms inherently overlap, interlock and necessitate each other. Consequently, form and content are considered not only inseparable but identical. The form is the content, the content is the form.

The principle of structuralism is also the point of departure for Felix Malnig. Malnig paints pictures in which the presented content naturally correlates with the form of presentation. One sees ordinary objects- in every respect: with regard to subject matter as well as medium. Malnig captures everyday scenes (people sleeping, couples kissing) or spatial situations (interiors) and presents them on plastic bubble sheet. Plastic- moreover a material that represents the twentieth century probably like no other and accompanies us in a multitude of ways, day in, day out.

The artist is not concerned with pushing the technical conditions of his work into the background, nor with hiding them altogether. By the same token, the objective is not to diminish the represented subjects by sacrificing an image's content to the physical presence of its material. Rather, the artist aims at allowing both aspects to exist simultaneously and equally. Malnig's work may be viewed as open to interpretation in many directions, with a sense of irony that updates the traditional concept of realism. Maurice Denis' oft-quoted statement- that a picture, before it becomes a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours- gains an additional dimension with the transparent bubble sheet. Though the depicted figures and objects are still recognisable as such, the viewer can concurrently see the picture's frame, the wood and metal bracing, the fastening of the sheet on the frame, and logically the wall behind on which the painting is mounted, too.

By thus conceiving his paintings on several cognitive levels simultaneously, Malnig compels the collision of established art-historical principles. The tactile evidence of the frame, for instance, subverts the optical illusion of a figural representation. Furthermore the linear character of many of Malnig's frequently monochrome images is persistently challenged by the visible air bubbles, which diffuse the overall pictorial quality. And the flatness of the picture plane reveals itself as a deception upon first glance- especially since the transparency of the plastic surface immediately exposes a true physical depth to the painting.

An artistic approach that so assertively yet playfully suspends traditional patterns of thought as well as structural criteria undoubtedly expresses more than just formal diversion. It touches, after all, upon a theme that has already been the subject of unconventional thinking. Of particular relevance here is a work by Roland Barthes, titled *Mythologies*, which traces the role that everyday objects play in our society. One chapter in this book is devoted entirely to plastic. Barthes notes that plastic „is the first magical substance that consents to be prosaic...for the first time, artifice aims at something common, not rare,“ and „more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation... This is because the quick-change artistry of plastic is absolute: it can become buckets as well as jewels.“ Or as one may be tempted to add in light of some works by Felix Malnig: Plastic can embody buckets as jewels.

Georg Vasold, 1999