

ULRIKE MÜLLER ON HUMILIATION, REPETITION, AND PAINTING WITH ENAMEL

Ulrike Müller interviewed by Stell Stilman
Art in America, pp. 82–91
November 2019

It is sometimes said, by distracted twenty-first-century viewers, that Ulrike Müller’s work is about gender or political issues or modernist abstraction—as if artwork of any substance could possibly fit under just one umbrella. While all those characterizations may be accurate, they become fully true only if we add to them dozens of others: concerns like architecture, art history, contradiction, craft, domesticity, humor, materiality, ambiguity, multiplicity, and scale. Too often, people have pigeon-holed Müller because of her political and social activism, particularly her engagement with lesbian and feminist issues, and this perception has limited the understanding of her oeuvre.

Since the early 2000s, Müller has worked in a range of mediums, from audio, video, and performance to a spectrum of painting-related practices. The latter include drawing, vitreous enameling, wall painting, and rug-making, in addition to painting on paper and canvas. She employs a similarly wide range of motifs: linear abstraction; precise arrangements of flat, suggestive shapes; figurative images of cats and flowers. Müller produces her art in batches—drawings, paintings, rugs, and so forth—sometimes seasonally. All these bodies of work are ongoing, and when examples are installed together, often enveloped by a site-specific wall drawing, the materially diverse elements play off one another. About ten years ago, Müller’s work changed radically, moving away from performance toward painting. The development of her practice since then has been nonlinear and recursive. If you had to describe its interrelations, you might—besides offering up the lists of subjects, mediums, and formal approaches above—try using a cluster diagram with arrows going back and forth every which way.

Müller was born in Brixlegg, Austria, in 1971. She studied journalism in Vienna before switching to the Academy of Fine Arts there, receiving her degree in textile arts in 1996. Except for a six-month residency in LA, researching the history of the Judy Chicago–founded Feminist Art Program, Müller remained in Vienna, working as a translator until 2002. She then moved to New York to attend the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program, and has lived there ever since. In 2002, in New York, she became involved with LTTR, a queer feminist collective that produced numerous performances and events throughout the aughts. Collaboration remains important for Müller. Arguably her best-known group project was “Herstory Inventory,” for which she invited one hundred artists to make small two-dimensional works based on one hundred written descriptions of T-shirts in the collection of the Brooklyn-based Lesbian Herstory Archive. In 2012 “Herstory Inventory” was exhibited at the Kunsthaus Bregenz in Austria and then the Brooklyn Museum in New York, where it was shown alongside works from the museum’s collection.

Müller, who teaches painting at Bard College, has had fifteen solo shows since 2004. Notable among them are: “Fever 103, Franza, and Quilts” at the Cairo Biennial (2010), where she represented Austria; “WEATHER” (2014) and “And Then Some” (2016), at Callicoon Fine Arts, New York; “The old expressions are with us always and there are always others” (2015) at the Museum Moderner Kunst (mumok), in Vienna; and “Container” (2018), at the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen in Düsseldorf. Standouts among her more than fifty group shows include the 2017 Whitney Biennial in New York, the 2018 Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, and the current Venice Biennale. “Or Both,” a dual exhibition with solo and group components, can presently be seen at Moore College in Philadelphia; it will be followed by the artist’s third Callicoon solo, in 2020.

This conversation began last winter and continued in June in Müller’s Brooklyn studio, where we sat at a small table in front of a row of north-facing windows.

Stell Stilman: *Many of your art projects in the early 2000s were performance- or language-based. For instance, in the audio piece One of Us (Freakish Moments) [2005], using the second person, you address listeners one at a time through headphones, telling them about their day, which has been filled with endless humiliation . . .*

Ulrike Müller: From sweating to slipping on a banana peel to shitting one’s pants on a subway train and worse. *One of Us* was made for a group show at the Mutter Museum, in Philadelphia.

I wanted to disturb the comfort of the viewer's assumed normalcy vis-à-vis the "freakish" medical specimens on display. The text was a montage of incidents I'd experienced or heard about.

SS: *Then, in 2005, in the aftermath of Abu Ghraib, you wrote, performed, and video-recorded LOVE/TORTURE. In it, you stand on a stage with your back to the audience, lit by a single bright light that casts your shadow on the back wall. You then engage in an implied dialogue—your interlocutor is neither seen nor heard—in which you are both torturer and sadomasochistic dominant. The text is superimposed on the images.*

UM: Suspending the question of the implied other's consent, the text offers short bursts of direct address that hover ambiguously between torture and sexual role playing. I timed myself so that each passage of text was followed by an equivalent period of silence. That silence, during which the audience had to sit with what they'd just heard, constituted the piece.

SS: *The shadow seems to imply the absent other.*

UM: Or a doubly absent other, because with my back turned, I too am both there and not there. At that time, I was thinking a lot about how to use the first person without necessarily speaking about myself.

SS: *Soon after that you started working on what became the "Curiosity Drawings." Is it true that they began as research for a video?*

UM: Those works emerged out of experiments that mirrored, on a visual level, what I'd been doing with text. For instance, when editing the LOVE/TORTURE video, I used a split screen to document the use of silence in the performance. Around that same time, I began taking sheets of letter-size paper and dividing them vertically with a pencil line. I then traced simple shapes, circles, and curves from objects that I had on my desk, like a water glass or rolls of tape. I was interested in handmade symmetries, and the line doubled as an axis and a spine. From there, the drawings developed organically, almost making themselves, each one giving me more than one possibility for how to continue.

SS: *In the end, there came to be fifty-one "Curiosity Drawings," all but two titled with a line from the early feminist Mina Loy's poem Lunar Baedeker [1923].*

UM: Titling the “Curiosity” images was important to me; without them, the drawings wouldn’t have been finished. In her travel guide to the moon, Loy evokes particular otherworldly qualities of light, temperature, and scenery. And on a sonic level, she uses alliteration and internal rhyming, and pays special attention to the sounds of vowels. I found my visual strategies reflected in her language.

SS: *In hindsight the “Curiosity Drawings” were the pivot point between your text-based work and the primarily visual work of the years since. How did the enamel paintings get started?*

UM: It took me several years to get there. For a while, I continued working on paper, but I found the results too quiet and the material too vulnerable. I wanted the works to be more explicit, and sturdier. I tried painting on canvas and metal before making the connection with enamel through signage. Not many signs are enameled any more, but on a residency at Artpace San Antonio, I was introduced to Sherry Fotopoulos, a jewelry maker, who taught me the technique. In pursuing the sign-like quality of enamel, I hadn’t realized that I’d have to go through the jewelry world.

SS: *There are constraints when working in enamel: there’s a limited palette of frit—the powdered glass that is fused onto metal when fired—and the colors can’t be mixed; and the motifs can’t be drawn by hand but must be translated from working drawings into stencils.*

UM: Plus, I’d never worked with metal before, and it didn’t feel natural to use a kiln and handle red-hot stuff. But I liked the limitations of the process. Picking colors from a preformulated palette introduces a culturally shared element—a language with built-in ideas and assumptions, like the six or eight colors that kids are given in a box of crayons. They’re supposed to be enough to depict the world.

SS: *The enamel paintings in the first groups, “Fever 103” and “Franza,” relate back to the “Curiosity Drawings.” From then on, the motifs and colors become more complex.*

UM: In retrospect, there is something methodical to how I introduced colors one by one as I went along. After the first enamels, which were all only black-and-white, I then added red, whose quasi-Constructivist quality led me to other strong industrial colors. Eventually, to counter that boldness, I brought in baby blue and pink to lend a pastel sensibility. Over time,

the enamels have evolved from conveying graphic concerns with negative space toward more painterly preoccupations.

SS: *You generally present the enamels in groups, identifiable by their shared palettes and related motifs, in horizontal rows. Why?*

UM: Partly because that's how I make them, relationally as groups. But there's also a seasonal component. It's simply too hot to use the kiln in the summer, so when I make a set of enamels they also represent a slice of time. Each batch is like setting up an experiment and pushing it along. I'm trying to make active objects that have a built-in instability and offer more than one reading.

SS: *The first solo show of yours I saw was "WEATHER," at Callicoon Fine Arts in 2014. It consisted of a group of enamels displayed against a gray wall painting. What purpose did the wall painting serve?*

UM: I wanted to insist on white as a color and not merely a neutral backdrop. Colored walls complicate the figure/ground relationships within paintings, and prompt questions about where they begin and end. The Callicoon space at the time was a narrow Lower East Side storefront. I was fascinated by the fact that the walls were taller than the space was wide. For the wall painting, I mapped the width of the space up onto the side walls using Benjamin Moore Classic Gray, which has a sandy beige tone. But in the front, on the walls near the entrance, I slanted the wall painting back at a forty-five-degree angle to echo the way daylight slanted in. And the exposed heating pipes and radiators, which had been painted white to make them less noticeable, suddenly stood out against the gray walls, like a drawing that had been latent in the space.

SS: *In 2015 you worked on two shows at mumok. One was a solo show of your own work, curated by Manuela Ammer, called "The old expressions are with us always and there are always others." The second was an installation of work from mumok's permanent collection that you and Ammer co-curated, titled "Always, Always, Others: Non-Classical Forays into Modernism," its first three words cribbed from the first title. Where did that phrase come from?*

UM: I found it on the cover of the January 1919 issue of the literary magazine *Others*, which published poems by writers like Marriane Moore and Mina Loy, among others.

SS: *That group show, besides being a collaboration with Ammer, is also a collaboration with history.*

UM: Manuela and I were already working on my solo show when she invited me to collaborate with her on the selection of works from the collection. We subtitled it “Non-Classical Forays into Modernism.” For me, this was an opportunity to think through my relationship to modern art in an applied way. Many had assumed an obvious relationship between my work and early twentieth-century art. Even though I kind of knew what they meant, I also knew that I’d never fully thought this through. Working with mumok’s collection was particularly interesting. Founded in 1962, mumok started collecting modern art late, and it didn’t have the funds to compete with institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Instead, the organizers set out to build a collection that could still hold the grand narratives of modernism with work that was probably considered second tier. Mumok owns work by Eastern Europeans, by artists who stood alongside those recognized as “masters,” and by quite a few Chicago Imagists and Pattern and Decoration artists, which made for surprising combinations. I came to think of modernism as an ongoing search for means of expression rather than as a succession of familiar formal achievements.

SS: *In the mix of your mumok solo were two bodies of work: a group of fourteen enamels, collectively titled “Others,” and four woven wool rugs, three of which featured variations on an image of a cat. One of the first enamel painting you saw upon entering the exhibition shows three optically vibrant red, green, and black circles above a larger, yellow, spherical shape, against a white background. The forms clearly represent a vase of flowers. Why these images?*

UM: Around that time, I started to invite more recognizable imagery into my work, whether by following my studio procedures or by deliberately incorporating found images, like the cat. I arrived at the vase image by arranging shapes: the vase appeared, and I let it happen. It was satisfying to make a painting with such strong iconic pull that it both cohered as an image and fell apart formally: the smaller circles, which came to represent flowers, refused to sit on the same picture plane with each other. Flower still lifes and pet portraits belong to the repertoire of the hobby painter. At the time I was wondering whether I could use strong iconographic signifiers to put pressure on my formal strategies, to raise the bar for myself. Could I make a painting with a cat that wouldn’t be a cat painting? And in so doing, could I overcome various simplistic assumptions about modernist abstraction, gender, and sexuality that I felt were clogging up the reception of my work?

SS: *The cat image that the rugs were based on comes from a series of small gouaches titled “Oid” [2008]. Where does that title come from?*

UM: It’s just the suffix, meaning “like,” found in words like trapezoid or ovoid. The Oids were postcard-size paintings, sketches for working through ideas quickly. I’ve never shown them publicly, but I pulled them out for Manuela during a studio visit in 2014. I was weighing the question of whether to bring more recognizable imagery into my work, and that particular cat image seemed to propose a possible way forward.

SS: *Why rugs? Was the cat the first?*

UM: No. The painter Emi Winter had put me in touch with the Oaxaca weaving workshop of Jerónimo and Josefina Hernández Ruiz, with whom I produced a diptych in 2013. One rug was based on a drawing with a cropped triangle and diagonal lines; the other repeated the motif in one quadrant, alongside two variations of a stripe pattern and another rectilinear drawing. When I showed them, I used the rugs to occupy both the image space of the wall and the object space of the floor.

SS: *Black cats especially call to mind associations of mystery and bad luck.*

UM: True, but I was especially interested in that particular cat: in its flat silhouette and the way it’s been cropped; in the way the animal is posed and establishes eye contact, gazing up at the viewer from below with eyes that are cut out, empty but also full, with a legible expression.

SS: *In your mumok show, your offbeat materials and means were joined by more familiar art mediums. I was confused because it seemed you might be abandoning your experiments with alternative ways of painting. It must have been a decision . . .*

UM: More than one decision. I came to understand that the trajectory for my work was to move deeper into the studio and toward painting as a receding horizon. At the same time, I was beginning to feel overly safe and in control. I’d become fairly good at negotiating the processes and decisions involved in making the drawings that became enamel paintings and rugs. What would happen if I removed some of that mediation and started to use a brush? I wanted to challenge myself, to operate across a fuller spectrum.

SS: *Repetition seems to occur nearly everywhere in your work, whether in the variations of a motif within a group of drawings or paintings, or in the reappearance of a motif from an earlier group in a later one, where it can feel like the return of an old friend.*

UM: This kind of recycling for me is a conscious studio strategy, a process that involves tracing and stencil-making that lends itself to reconfigurations. It can be about doing something again to understand it better, or to see if it can function differently. I always try to repurpose my motifs, by mirroring them, inverting their color, changing their scale, or cutting them up. When I am working on a new group of enamels, I often return to earlier groups and see if I can carry something over in a meaningful way. Instead of building my work along a narrative of progress, proceeding linearly from one body of work to a different, supposedly better, one, I prefer a lateral narrative with multiplying sets of difference.

SS: *Recently you returned to a motif, an image of a high-heeled shoe, that you first used in 2010 to make the very first enamel painting. Then last year, you revisited it as the basis for the very large rugs that are currently in Venice, and two others that were in the Carnegie International. The shoe motif derives from a photograph, right?*

UM: Yes. It's based on a photograph of a cobbler's sign that I took a long time ago, I think in Brighton Beach. I based the first full-scale enamel plate on a drawing of that sign, but I considered it a test at the time. It didn't leave the studio until last year.

SS: *I first saw it as an intensely colorful rug, but the enamel version is in black and white. It recalls Warhol's shoe drawings.*

UM: Among other things, the reference to Warhol was on my mind when I used that template for the Carnegie rugs. I wanted to know how something can be iconic and open at the same time.

SS: *Not only are the shoe rugs big, but some are composed from vertical sections, each about a meter wide, that extend sideways three or five at a time. The horizontal result is something filmic or like an architectural frieze.*

UM: The horizontality is new. From the "Curiosity Drawings" onward, I chose to make everything vertical to establish a bodily relationship to viewers. The frieze offers a way to

maintain the vertical in a horizontal format—as progressions of figures, implying time and movement.

SS: *This fall, Moore College in Philadelphia is presenting two simultaneous shows based on your work, both curated by Mia Locks. One is a solo exhibition and the other a group show featuring artists whose work Locks sets in relation to yours.*

UM: Unlike my recent solo shows, which have all been about new work, this one looks back over the past decade. I'm hoping it will be useful for me to get a little distance and assess things. The only new element will be a wheat-pasted sequence of about two hundred black-and-white vector diagrams of the template drawings I've made since 2010. The diagrams will be hung well above eye level and will run chronologically around the galleries as another kind of frieze, spelling out in more detail what we've been talking about here.

SS: *There's something fundamentally enigmatic about your work. It draws us in with its rich visuality and beauty but leaves us not quite knowing what it's about. Perhaps that's the ultimate seduction: not being sure keeps us looking.*

UM: I'm interested in not knowing and believe it's a desirable approach to the world and to looking. Knowing often gets in the way of seeing things, and there's a lot that we, collectively, would do better to reevaluate.

<https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/ulrike-muller-interview-enamel-painting-humiliation-63667/>