

## Norbert Prangenberg

As a youth, he had no idea what to do and what he should become, so eventually he began an apprenticeship as a goldsmith due to a fascination with the word itself – as he explained on various occasions – and this was in fact a good prerequisite for Norbert Prangenberg to start something special, namely: drawing. At first, he only drew, but it was not long before linocuts followed and then pictures and ceramics a little later. However, whatever he laid his hands on, his work always had its roots in drawing, for this was commensurate with a kind of existential not knowing, the destination to which his chosen path would lead.

A group of early drawings is on show at the Skulpturenhalle in order to provide visible substantiation of this claim. The drawings are executed on thin sheets of paper that cockle under the moist ink; what is to be seen on them is equally unprepossessing at first sight. Prangenberg only drew using a pencil or an ink brush; some sheets are almost completely blackened, while the 'figures' emerge as areas left white. As far as the figures are concerned, these are circles, mere spots, triangles, rectangles and often diamond-shaped. There are traces of preliminary drawing to be found on the surfaces, but the liquid ink barely follows these tracks. In fact, you don't get the impression that there was a plan from the start to inform a composition, for the shapes appear as if strewn about by chance, only entering into playful fragile relationships with time. These are constellations that stop short of becoming a finely balanced thought-through composition, such as might stabilize the figures. Prangenberg ceases to draw before this can happen; he stops before the ink covers the whole of the white surfaces and before the luminous quality of the paper is completely extinguished.

Two sheets, one only partially covered in ink, the other not at all, allow the process of drawing to be observed at an early stage. On one of them, object-like shapes can be discerned that could be referencing something seen. The drawn might disappear into the darkness, but this black does not amount to a whole, thus retaining the tension between coincidence and consolidation. On the other sheet, two of the squares are altered by having circular holes cut out of them; this does not only affect the shape, but also means that the white of the wall augments the lines drawn on the blank sheet. This has the effect of

bringing the surface of the piece of paper forwards to lie in front of its support, hence underscoring its materiality. Prangenberg pursued this play with levels by making incisions in the sheets of paper and at the edges, which undermines the stability of the drawing, just like the fine white spaces in the black of the ink. The graphic statements and their cancellation – indeed, deletion – all this happens effortlessly and yet precisely and with care, seemingly gauche and yet with a certainty that is achieved in the process of doing. The simple shapes which keep emerging from drawing never give the impression of a subjective way of working alone, nor any sense of an exaggerated determination to be expressive. Prangenberg succeeded in clarifying his inner world by working on a drawing; thus, he did not produce a static result, but forms in a state of flux that communicates itself to the viewer.

This is also true of the pictures with their odd colour impact that has to do with Prangenberg's preferred technique. At this point in time, oil paints did not suit him, because they had to be applied with a brush, which he experienced as an unwelcome intruder between hand and surface. Prangenberg favoured watercolours, which he used to create a transparent, indefinite ground. He proceeded to work with pastel crayons, never in flat expanses, but rather in repeating lines, thus allowing the surface room to breathe. Large picture formats led Prangenberg to work on the floor instead of the wall, from all four sides, or even from inside the picture plane. Throughout the process, the orientation of the forms remained open; eventually, they became subtly adjusted to an up and a down and to back and forth. The clusters of looping lines on the two square works follow along the outer edge, or turn inwards to skirt around the diamonds and circular shapes formed in the surface. The immaterial shine of the pigments on an elusive ground that eludes being located, apparently welling up inside the circular shapes, results in a strangely hovering surface, bringing Odilon Redon's work to mind, for example. Painterly ground and drawing are not distinguished by dark and light, but intertwine to become a radiant composition.

The drawing with the black irregular jagged shape seems to herald one of the flat ceramic objects that Prangenberg made in the 1980s prior to works for the wall. The floor piece made of fired clay with its curved spreading 'handles' is from that period which, along with the clay loop, again bring the connection between drawing and ceramic to the fore. Drawings are not preliminary studies. It is more the case that the mind-set of drawing in

lines informed the development of the three-dimensional objects that took Prangenberg across the boundaries between genres for the first time. As a historical backdrop, Lucio Fontana, who in the 1930s in his ceramics had already achieved a fusion of painterly and sculptural ideas, was an inspiration for such practice. In Prangenberg's floor piece, gaping forms are attached at various points and echo the white circles in the black paper planes. Just as the latter opened up the surface, these 'buds' intervene in the linear mesh, giving rise to the idea that the floor piece might advance from lying low into a third dimension in terms of height and volume. Finally, there is colour glazing, not to decorate the surface, but as a factor that carries the figure well beyond its recumbent passivity.

The inherent potential of this piece in a nascent state was brought to fruition by Prangenberg over the following decades in two types of works: lying figures and standing ones. This was enabled by his collaboration with Niels Dietrich. It was Dietrich who built the first kiln in Prangenberg's studio at Oedt near Krefeld, used the kiln to fire the figures and thus laid the foundation for the ceramic works of the generation of artists who found their way into Dietrich's workshop in years to come.

In keeping with his approach to drawing and painting, in ceramics Prangenberg went in search of simple forms with nothing premeditated or contrived about them. According to Prangenberg, confidence in this practice was gained by his study of Palermo's works. And so, pointing to an archaic aspect would take us in the wrong direction; the geometry entails forward-looking clarity, not recourse to a primitive world of forms. Although Prangenberg used the term 'figures' and although human size is attained or even exceeded, anthropomorphism is not the theme of these ceramic pieces – on the contrary, they move away from notions of trunk and limbs. Prangenberg was not interested in forms in bodily terms, but more in the surfaces, which were fashioned from both sides, inside and outside, while the figure was being built up. The standing figures are accumulations of strips of clay, which Prangenberg laid on top of each other by hand. Pauses were necessitated by the time required to allow the clay to dry in order to become stable enough to support the next rings of clay. In between, Prangenberg added round elements unfurling rather like a fan, placed at an angle to the rings from which they were derived in a formal sense. They break up the vertical thrust of the figure as well as its tight cladding.

In this manner, the work proceeded at a slow pace, paying attention to how the figure evolved around its axis, and the relationship of the exterior to the interior. Although the interior was usually not directly visible, and then often only through larger or smaller gaps in the clay rings, Prangenberg took as much care with it as with the external surface of the sculpture. The interior is often more markedly structured than the exterior, because while the rings were being built up, Prangenberg worked the clay by pressing his thumb into it to leave regular prints. If he glazed the outside surfaces, he also treated the inside in the same manner, in order to guide the eye towards it and light up this inaccessible space.

The recumbent figures were not fashioned directly; on the contrary, their profile was first drawn on paper. Then a wooden template was sawn, around which the figure was built up in clay. The surface became covered in cracks and punctuations, like a membrane mediating between outside and inside, instead of appearing to be a solid mass. Finally, the figure was glazed and fired. It found its definitive position when it came to rest on the floor, where light could penetrate at an angle into the interior and bring it to life.

There is a group of such figures lying on the grass around the Skulpturenhalle. Prangenberg himself used to exhibit standing and recumbent figures outdoors, so this kind of presentation is in keeping with the artist's intentions. However, this should not be understood as proposing any correspondence between the organic shapes of the figures and the natural forms surrounding them. The figures are built structures, beholden only to themselves and thus just as foreign in a natural setting as in an architectural space. They draw energy from the way they are made, allowing them to confront different situations without becoming lost in formal and meaningful associations.

In his final years, Prangenberg felt free to strike out on new paths in his painting and ceramics. He left behind the large formats to be encountered frontally and instead, turned to improvised sketchy ceramic works on tables. Viewing is from above onto partially glazed handy-sized pieces made of lumps and boards, assembled on plinth-like bases to achieve an odd sense of space. You think you can identify hints of objects, figures and landscapes. It is as if Prangenberg was returning to the lightness of his early drawings in other ways.

The highly colourful small-format oils are painted in impasto, not only on small canvases, but also on wood and on cardboard. Although oil paints slow down the painterly process, the visual results appear spontaneous and direct. Contained within an area treated in an abstract manner, they mostly capture a figurative image in the painting, formulated in a childlike idiom, paying no attention to masterly technique. These scenes with human figures and animals are far from being idyllic, but often show battling warriors, whereby one has to admit defeat. Inside his chaotic and furious colour scheme, Prangenberg played out an intimate end game, gaining pathos from the renunciation of any grand gestures.

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