

On Revealing and Concealing

The recent works of Ina Bierstedt

For almost twenty years, Ina Bierstedt's painting has addressed nature and landscape. As a result, she reflects not only on landscape painting and its artistic and art historical significance, but also on the media conditions which are inextricably linked to artistic debate today. An archive of her own photographs and found images forms the basis of Ina Bierstedt's work. Her pictures are never narrative in the sense of connected, temporally organised stories; rather, Bierstedt captures moments of nature, architectural fragments such as roofs, stages and staircases, as well as tents, shifting proportions and perspectives to allow dissonant contexts and levels of perception to collide. As a result, Bierstedt's work is permeated by an interplay of revealing and concealing. This ambivalence is increasingly evident in her more recent works and plays a crucial role in Bierstedt's images of interior spaces.

Tarndecke (Camouflage Cover) is the title of a painting from 2020. A semi-transparent motif, which can be read as a cover or a tent-like roof, floats amid a birch-tree dominated landscape and at the same time is directly connected to it. As the cover creates a backdrop and a stage for the trees, it is in turn given a backdrop by the yellow and green tones of the landscape and the intense blue of the sky. The branches form a pattern on the floating cover — similar to a camouflage pattern which protects animals in nature and has long been used for military purposes. In recent years, Ina Bierstedt has consistently traced this connection by cheekily depicting patterns and camouflage on unprimed camouflage material, as in the paintings *Zebras* (2019) or *Wild* (2019).

In many of her works, Ina Bierstedt contrasts camouflage with an exaggerated showing. In the painting *Landschaft mit Faltschiff (Landscape with Folded Ship, 2020)*, a painted and at the same time paper-like folded object — a boat or rather a hat or a tent? — floats gently out of the center of the picture in a landscape dominated by blue, green, and yellow tones. Heavily applied paint creates movement and spatial depth, overpainting allows lower layers of the image to play a role, especially at the lateral edges of the picture. The folded ship emerges within reach, while the landscape appears to be an eruption of color which has obliterated everything concrete or referential.

Ina Bierstedt's ambivalence between revealing and concealing is particularly expressed in her numerous works with circus tents. The circus as a parallel world, as a place of sensation, as a stage for the unexpected, where the rules of everyday life seem to be suspended, has long inspired artists such as Alexander Calder, Charlie Chaplin and Cindy Sherman, amongst many others. Not the narrative, not the masquerade or the taming of nature, however, are of interest to Ina Bierstedt. She reduces the circus to the archetype of the tent and refers to a world removed from the commonplace. In Bierstedt's painting, the excessive showing and performing, which the circus represents, is presented with *Strichtarn* - a military camouflage pattern used in the GDR (the German Democratic Republic - the former East Germany) - as a pictorial background or in front of a color landscape. In the painting *Zelt (Tent, 2018)*, for example, the background of *Strichtarn* and the striped pattern of the tent form a curious connection, even though they represent such different levels of awareness. *Schild und Schimäre (Shield and Chimera, 2019)* shows a bird's-eye perspective of a circus tent, which mutates into a shell-like protective shield.

Ina Bierstedt has transposed the dialectic of revealing and concealing, which has always been present in her work, to a new level in some of her recent works. She increasingly turns to contemporary historical contexts, which has coincided with a turn from landscape to interior space. She first addressed interior space within the framework of her multi-media project “Verspiegelte Fenster” (“Mirrored Windows,” since 2015), which is based on the legacy of her father, Wolfgang Bierstedt. He worked as an artist outside of official East German culture and was thus only able to show his work rarely and in semi-public settings. Alongside her father’s paintings and graphic works, Ina Bierstedt uses photographs and written documents as the basis for this project. The painting *Lichtverhältnisse* (*Lighting Conditions*, 2014) is based on a photograph of a Wolfgang Bierstedt exhibition and his comments written on the back of this photo. The image shows a wall of works mounted in passe-partouts, but Wolfgang Bierstedt’s works are not identifiable; they are obscured by a turbulent, painterly play of light and dark. With light and color, and through her father’s commentary on the source photograph, Ina Bierstedt raises here those questions with which she has always grappled in her painting. At the same time, she connects this with the issue of the cultural and political possibilities of showing art publicly and putting it up for discussion. The dense arrangement of the works, the lack of frames and the omission of precise details about the space indicate an interest in visibility, but not in a representative presentation. It was precisely this potential for visibility that was denied to nonconformist artists in the GDR, as in other Warsaw Pact countries.

Since then, Ina Bierstedt has continued to consider the conditions under which art can be exhibited. Shortly after beginning the project “Verspiegelte Fenster,” she came across the catalogue from an opulent 1993 exhibition at the Folkwang Museum which documented the collections of Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov. As successful Russian textile merchants at the end of the 19th century, Shchukin and Morozov had considerable fortunes at their disposal; at the same time they had a great sensitivity and enthusiasm for contemporary art. From the turn of the century, they both concentrated on French painting, and Shchukin in particular maintained close contacts with artists and collectors in Western Europe. They are thus part of Russia’s tradition of orientation toward Western European culture, which was initiated by Peter the Great and contentiously debated in 19th-century Russian intellectual circles. However, what Shchukin and Morozov collected at the beginning of the 20th century was met with clear rejection in Moscow and was, for example in the case of Matisse, still being fiercely attacked in Paris in 1910. Shchukin was not deterred by this and from 1909 on, he regularly invited academy students to visit his home. In doing so, he acquainted a young generation of artists with works by Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse and numerous others working outside the conservative academism that prevailed in Russia.¹ After the October Revolution, Shchukin and Morozov emigrated to Western Europe and both of their collections were expropriated.² The conditions under which Wolfgang Bierstedt was able to exhibit in the GDR and the presentations of Shchukin’s and Morozov’s collections were extremely different: Wolfgang Bierstedt was only able to show his work in a humble, semi-official setting, while the prestigious collections of the two Russian entrepreneurs stand in stark contrast. Nevertheless, Shchukin and Morozov were also victims of political repression.

¹ Albert Kostnewitsch, *Russische Sammler französischer Kunst. Die Familienclans der Schtschukin und Morosow*. In ext. cat.: *Morosow und Schtschukin: die russischen Sammler, Monet bis Picasso*, Köln 1993, p. 35-137, here p. 70f.

² *Ibid*, p. 123f.

In her painting *Blanche* (2016), Ina Bierstedt takes as her starting point a photograph of the Cézanne room in Ivan Morozov's house, which was published in the above-mentioned catalogue as a small-format text illustration. Dominated by grey, blue and red, it shows an interior space that is opened up by glistening white light. The light source appears to be behind a curtain on the left side of the image, but the opacity of the curtain does not reveal a window. It is not the outside light that illuminates the room, but a light within the picture that emanates from the curtain as a painted veil of color. The light is inherent in the color and is bound to its materiality, something Wolfgang Schöne has called *Farblicht* - color light.³

Beyond the window as a motif, painting here oscillates between the Albertian window and Greenberg's "picture plane"⁴: Alberti's *fenestra aperta* leads, as Panofsky described, to a "fortification and systematization of the outside world."⁵ Thus, it is not the picture as a surface and its specific material condition that is being referred to, but rather a fictitious view through it, the view into an imagined world - here into an interior space. At the same time, however, this interior space in Bierstedt's painting *Blanche* conceals significant motifs: the window behind the curtain and, above all, the pictures on the wall, which are replaced by abstract painterly compositions, as in the painting *Lichtverhältnisse*. This concealment occurs to draw attention to painting: the curtain is a veil of color, and various painterly passages in the picture (the red trace of paint to the left of the curtain or the loosely painted edge of the chandelier) refer not to objects in the room, but to the act of painting itself. The surface of the painting is dominated by the texture of wood; through the repeated removal of paint, the blunt materiality of the wood's structure is revealed. The picture is thus *fenestra aperta* and "picture plane" in equal measure. It clearly shows a salon-like, prestigious room but conceals what is essential - namely Cézanne's works on the walls - in order to show the painting's materiality (including its support surface) as detached from the representational.

Ina Bierstedt's painting *Gelbes Zimmer* (*Yellow Room*, 2019) is far more abstract. The work also returns to her engagement with the collections of Shchukin and Morozov and depicts a salon-like interior with closely hung paintings. A figure or sculpture occupies the center of the room and sensitively suggested, rectangular compartments, together with matte red paint traces, structure the surrounding void. At the top of the picture, a ceiling mirror is implied, referring to the prestigious nature of the room.

Ina Bierstedt's interiors are actually paintings of interior spaces rather than genre paintings in the narrow art historical sense. In his theoretical study of the genre of interior painting, Wolfgang Kemp pointed out that art does not draw boundaries, "but has found its innate role in the creation of

³ Wolfgang Schöne, *Über das Licht in der Malerei* (1954), 7. edition, Berlin 1987, p. 210f.

⁴ Between these two poles, Saskia C. Quené describes the painting *Großer Vorhang* by Gerhard Richter. The concise formulation of the oscillation between the idea of the picture as an illusion of an extract of the world and the self-reflexive concentration on painting itself strikes at the core of Ina Bierstedt's *Blanche*. Cf. Saskia C. Quené, *Malerei deckt zu, Kunst deckt auf*. In exh. cat.: *Hinter dem Vorhang. Verhüllung und Enthüllung seit der Renaissance – Von Tizian bis Christo*, Museum Kunstpalast Düsseldorf 2017, p. 256.

⁵ Erwin Panofsky, *Perspektive als symbolische Form*. (1927) In: *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstgeschichte*, Berlin 1980, p. 99-204, here p. 123.

contexts.”⁶ With her paintings of interior spaces, Ina Bierstedt creates such artistic contexts not by understanding the interior in the sense of the everyday and private, but by addressing its contemporary and historical significance and function in a way that both reveals and conceals. She transforms found images with genuinely painterly means and examines the visibility and public impact of art. Here it is interesting to consider Kemp’s comment that the concept of the private often occurs in connection with the interior and is not infrequently used anachronistically. However, according to Kemp, *privatus* "means 'deprived,' which is to be understood in terms of the ancient primacy of public space.”⁷ It is precisely this deprivation of the public sphere that is central to Ina Bierstedt's approach, because private collections, such as those of Shchukin and Morozov, remain private, even if they temporarily admit the public. Likewise, presentations in semi-official settings, like those of Wolfgang Bierstedt, do not lead to open public discourse. The interplay of revealing and concealing which has long been intrinsic to Ina Bierstedt’s work has thus found a contemporary, historical and political resonance in her paintings of interior spaces.

Claudia Beelitz

⁶ Wolfgang Kemp, *Beziehungsspiele. Versuch einer Gattungspoetik des Interieurs*. In: *Ausst.-Kat. Innenleben. Die Kunst des Interieurs von Vermeer bis Kabakov*. Städtisches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie Frankfurt a.M, Ostfildern-Ruit 1998, p. 17-29, here p.17.

⁷ *Ibid* p.17.