

A conversation about painting
by Jip Hinten

The first time I saw David Roth's work was in 2019 when visiting his solo show "An Introduction to Painting" at Dürst Britt & Mayhew. The exhibition was indeed in several ways an introduction to painting, but not at all in the sense you would expect. The presentation consisted of videos, objects made from old painting rags thrown over wooden structures, and several canvases that had literally been dragged through the mud. Roth's practice can perhaps best be described as a research into painting, that goes way beyond a simple introduction to the medium. He looks into its origins, the process of making paintings, and the performative elements that can be involved in the final outcome.

Back in 2019 there was a small painting hanging in the front space of the gallery. This painting had such a presence it seemed to take over the entire wall. What intrigued me, were the thick blobs of paint, applied with wild brushstrokes, not aggressively but with almost wild enthusiasm. On the edges there were layers of paint so thick it seemed they had not even completely dried yet. It was an abstract image, that at the same time seemed to be telling a story. What was the painting trying to convey. A feeling? A sense of place, or time? At first glance I see only pale yellow, orange and dark green, but at a closer look bright shades of purple, blue, pink, red and turquoise revealed themselves. This small painting has kept me fascinated ever since.

The current presentation "Augensex" displays different types of work: a selection of recently finished small-sized paintings; several works on paper titled "Action Paintings"; and a so called "Combine Painting", which consist of one stretched and one unstretched canvas hung together.

Jip Hinten: Would you begin by sharing some first thoughts about your small-sized paintings?
David Roth: When I think about my small paintings I think of trying to paint painting: "Ich versuche die Malerei zu malen", as I would say in German. It is not only about using paint to create an image, but also about capturing the act of painting and the medium itself. There are so many different styles, paintings and artists I admire, which become the ingredients for my very own bowl of art soup.

JH: Do you relate to any specific art-historical traditions or painters during this process?
DR: I am a big collector of art books. While I studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna I used to work at the café of Vienna's biggest art supply store once a week. I used the tips I got during the day to buy new art catalogues almost every time. Nowadays, when I go to sleep there are towers of art books next to my bed, almost like a protective wall. Usually, I do not delve into them reading at night, I just look at their images before going to sleep.

JH: To me, your paintings look like landscapes, I can imagine there being trees and flowers. Do your paintings depict any real places or objects, or are they purely abstract images?
DR: Of course, nature is always helpful as a basis to depict more abstract forms and colours. But, when I begin a new piece, I do not consciously aim at painting a bird or a landscape. I try not to force the painting to have a specific motif. Each painting has its own character and life. I do give certain directions but they are changing over the course of the process.

JH: How do you start, then? Could you explain how you produce/create your paintings?
DR: When I was still studying and even for a few years after I finished art school I used to go to the studio under pressure (of my own making) to create an extraordinary piece. But high expectations are the biggest enemy of ease. I needed to find a way to enjoy being in the studio and also to leave it in a good mood as often as possible, even if I did not make a masterpiece. So, I

proposed to myself something which I can achieve every day in any mental and physical condition: leaving traces on a surface. My strategies adapt to each new project but getting rid of specific aims or ideas for the final result seems the key to me. I try to think as little as possible during the painting process.

When I begin I feel which colour I want to start with and then one thing leads to the other, or mostly nowhere. But nowhere is always somewhere else.

I tend to work on different projects at the same time - some more conceptual with certain self-imposed rules, some freer, more experimental and painterly. Sometimes I paint on a standard canvas on a stretcher, sometimes a rag which I used to clean my brush with will become a painting or the other way around. There are periods, when I keep producing, almost in a trance and periods where I just look at what I have made and think about it for hours - and there are periods, when I am totally lost. When I am working on different projects and different surfaces all over my studio, it becomes a mess quickly. The resulting chaos may be exactly what is needed, even helpful, inspiring and stressful all at the same time. A situation that calls for decisions - decisions - this is what painting is about, I guess life as well. The moment when I clean and tidy up the studio is very important and helpful: I take a look and see what I have actually done. Sometimes it takes months to come to this point. Time is an important factor in the growing of the works. Often it takes me years to see the growth.

JH: Many of your paintings are dated with quite long time frames, 2007-2020 or 2010-2020. What is going on during these long lapses of time? Did you recently decide to pick up older works, or is it a part of a continuous process during which you review one work several times?
DR: I have no rules when a painting is finished and after I finish a painting. As I mainly use oil paint which needs time to dry, I usually work on several different canvases at the same time over a period of several months. Then I put them away, to let them breathe and dry. After I left them alone for a while I look at them again with a fresh eye, to decide what to do. Sometimes a work turns out to be finished already, more often it needs more work or a new start. It is like being in love: you work on a piece and you feel like you absolutely love it. But at some point you need to take a step back, let it rest for a while, to see if it was not just a crush, but whether you are actually in love. My "filter", declaring something to be good or bad, has big holes.

The function of a surface may also change over time. A painting might look like a finished painting, but ends up being turned into a palette again. Or a rag or a palette, a 'side product' so to say, becomes a painting.

JH: You have an interesting way of layering paint on the canvas, in several works enframing the image with thick slabs of paint. Would you explain, why you do this?
DR: Initially these thick slabs of paint appeared accidentally. I was using the canvas as a palette and sometimes there was a lot of paint left on my brushes, which I then swiped off along the corner of the canvas to get rid of it, which resulted in these thick areas - some of them have a frame-like character. For a few years now, I have been using it as a stylistic device. It has become part of my painting vocabulary.

JH: This instance you describe makes me think there is an element of chance in your work, which influences the final result in different ways.
DR: I took my paintings outside, through nature or a museum or I simply painted on them. I have the feeling there is always a kind of teamwork between me and my paintings. It is a cooperation of me, the surface, the colours or the medium that leaves marks. I give the direction and the impulse, but it is an ongoing interplay/interaction between assisting and being assisted.

JH: There are works included in the presentation that you refer to as Action Paintings. When I think of action paintings Jackson Pollock's famous large drip paintings come to my mind, not these clean spots of watercolor on small-sized paper. Would you tell me a little more about these works?
DR: The works are based on onomatopoeia, where a word is created that phonetically imitates, resembles or suggests the sound it describes. When I hear such words, like BOOM, SPLASH or SCRATCH, they remind me of flashy neon colours from comics. The titles are the name of the blend of a certain colour combination. The names follow from initials of the shades which were used to mix a new tone. But these newly created colours are brownish, greenish and greyish - not flashy at all. There is a huge contrast between what you associate with Action Painting and what these works look like - simple and clean, delicate watercolour blobs - far away from expressive gestures and fierce hues. Silent beauties instead of loud eye catchers. I like creating these moments, when you do not know whether a work is serious or humorous. I like it to be both.

JH: Finally, I would like to discuss your Combine Paintings. In these works many aspects from your practice seem to come together, combining paintings and side products (palettes), old and new works, still and dynamic compositions. They present different layers of paint, layers of time, and layers of meaning all in one piece.

DR: As I mentioned earlier, I like to work on different pieces at the same time. Sometimes there are several completely different works "growing" side by side. I do not commit to a single style or medium. This method or preference, if you like, is what actually brought these *Combine Paintings* on. The paintings of the *Combine* works need each other to be complete, they find and suit each other. It took me a while, to get to the point where I liked my paintings as much as my palettes. But now I feel that they are finally on the same level.

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Jip Hinten is Junior Curator at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, Netherlands and part of the curatorial team at Exhibition Space 38CC in Delft. At the Kröller-Müller Museum she has curated exhibitions about Dutch painters and sculptors such as Bart van der Leek, Sjoerd Buisman and Armando, and worked on presentations with works by conceptual artists such as Hanne Darboven and Charlotte Posenenske. Since 2017 she has been researching the history of the Amsterdam based gallery Art & Project (1968-2001) in preparation of an extensive publication and exhibition that is scheduled to take place at the Museum in the spring of 2022.