

Ralf Dereich: amuse

October 2 until November 13, 2010, Cruise & Callas, Berlin

Happiness is harder to depict than the lack of it, and also more uncommon. The more direct the celebratory approach, the rarer it is, especially if it is to be, and to remain, convincing. It is tougher to praise accurately than to denigrate. That goes for the writing about art as well as art itself. Ralf Dereich's work is singularly pure in the playful directness of its optimism.

When you look at a drawing by Dereich, you can watch him think. Typically, there is a curling or looping line or set of lines roughly covering the page. The speed of the line is fast enough to be spontaneous, and slow enough to catch itself moving, giving the artist the opportunity to observe and adjust his own performance. You can see the artist watching himself as he loops his pen around the paper, giving it a wiggle here, an about-turn there, like a mime artist, or clown, responding to the audience's minutest reaction. Dereich, though, is his own audience when making them.

The paintings' loops and smears and swirls are so multidirectional that they could sustain any number of metaphorical readings, based, say, on music or dance, or the question of freedom, or sex, or how a mind works. My chosen analogy is voice. The paint workings can come across as utterances. A blue/grey meandering line breaks a chocolate ground, and sings, trilling a loop in the melody. It is not left alone, however, and blurring strokes talk over it, abruptly interrupting, perhaps heckling. Strokes speak over each other like quips, closing the conversation. Across the work the tone may range from barbed gaiety to nonsense, from the outright exultant to more muted, distant, charming, drunken, unpredictable, slurred or silver-tongued. They can be slinky, they can show chutzpah. At an extreme, certain sayings may come to mind, taking the piss, having a laugh. The expression is open but aware, full but free, vernacular, human and real.

These differing tones of voice become apparent through repetitions and variations of a family of moves. Freedom and spontaneity is sought, but a framework is in place, being opened and modified gradually. What is at first spontaneous becomes known and has to be adjusted to. When, for example, the line eschews the usual comfortable gay loop and takes on a rough egg oval, the euphoric dance goes and a massiveness comes in that is no longer so seductive, and verges on aggression. But even when laying an egg, a struggling Dereich is not really struggling, and is still playful and upbeat.

The emphasis is not on facility or technique per se. There is no hierarchy of quality as such. They can surprise in their unashamed dumbness, which is actually a form of clarity. The artist says that there is no good or bad. This is visible, and is a good thing. Silliness will permeate the most lovely arabesque. Neither exactly sublime nor ridiculous, the work rather veers from the beautiful to the comedic.

These looping lines, drawn or painted, are not pre-planned, and have no origin outside of themselves. They do not depict the world, and their prime subject is not the history of painting. The starting point is not a window on to the world, but a monochrome canvas. They open out from, and back to, nothing, but in the meantime they exhibit the potential to touch anything. Similarly, the home key of the palette is neither a heavenly white nor a set of primaries, but a mid-grey, and seems to be mixed outwards from there. Brightness and clarity emerge from the murk, approaching an ice-cream impurity.

The notion of the medium here is, then, a strict one, and remains true to itself as far as it can, but gives itself as much freedom as possible within that. The paintings serve as a model rather than a reflection. The exhibited quality of mind is receptive, open, childlike, naive but knowing, naked. There is thus the room and potential to model a very large conception of one's experience within the world

One such large conception of life is comedy. Joy here is not refined and sanctified, but broad, fine and funny, open to all sides of life, high and low. The veering from the grey to brighter colours, the more aggressive tinges, the rough obliterations of the most seductive traces: all of these nuance the delivery in a way that allows room to move and breathe. The balance of qualities – smart, dumb; dirty, fine; open, murky and free – stakes out a sensibility large enough to encompass but transcend cynicism. It is, to me, this that pushes the work into a realm of its own, as this is how a purity of spirit is maintained whilst attaining essential credibility. We are not being given an otherworldliness, a sign. Here, happiness is present, and believable.

In comparison to Dereich's work, much art, certainly most painting, looks particular. This work is credible and carries the little baggage it does lightly and openly. The tone seems new to me. Whatever relics of European painting reappear in formal terms in Dereich's work – and his method of improvising will turn up such ghosts in just the same way as a pianist will hit on old tunes – the terms are reversed. The tragic is banished, and the bacchanal is ushered in. The undiluted joy, the complexity of tone, the nuanced appreciation and application of the old medium of painting all maintain a universality often thought impossible today.

Richard Neal