

Urs Aeschbach

Whether of the natural world or constructed, the paintings that Urs Aeschbach has been making for several decades have portrayed the most normal of scenes as complex, autonomous universes. From cityscapes and landscapes to still lifes or more abstract structures, his images neither depict reality, nor create purely virtual scenarios, but rather release the inner life of things. Trees are a recurring motif within this highly personal approach to painting, largely because the artist continues to see it as an interesting challenge to create an illusion of their scale and monumentality on a two-dimensional surface. In each of the works discussed here – the three paintings entitled *Schwärmer I – III*, as well as the much larger work *Ende der Geschichte*, - the subject matter is a fallen tree, lying on the ground, with two mushrooms growing out of its bark.

An abiding feature of Aeschbach's work is that the artificiality of his images encourages them to be read as models. This impression of a miniature version of a world is enhanced in the four paintings by their collage-like construction. Aeschbach drew his source material for these paintings from various contexts, ranging from found photographs, that he either used one-to-one or selected details from, to illustrations from a book about mushrooms. On the basis of the vivid, luminous palette of toxic pinks, greens and oranges, it is clear that these faithfully reproduced botanical representations have also been given a contemporary and witty re-boot by the artist. One imagines Aeschbach experimenting on his computer with different colour combinations in order to test the effectiveness of each as the carrier of emotion. The dominant colours are various shades of vibrant pink : the poisonous cerise of the mushrooms in the largest painting, *Schwärmer III* ; the luminous purple pathway and hazy red forest that contrast with the turquoise foreground in *Schwärmer II*, the mauve sky and mushrooms of *Schwärmer I* and sickly pink forest of *Ende der Geschichte*. Aeschbach pushes to the limit the use of these single artificial tones to exaggerate the depiction of the forest setting to resemble wallpaper. Both the turquoise version in *Schwärmer III* and the pink variation of *Ende der Geschichte* recall the digital transformation of black and white photographs in coloured positive and negative images.

The resulting heaviness of the tree trunk reflects its lifelessness, whilst acting as a contrast to the parasitical mushrooms thriving on the dead wood. In each case these are growing towards the light, the slender curve of their stems imbued with a disturbing sense of vigour. With humour and a lightness of touch, Aeschbach plays with the fantasy scenarios of nature's drive for control, familiar from film and literature. These paintings are certainly more science-fiction than Romantic, their images of nature sinister rather than idyllic or sentimental. The resulting paintings seem to hover in an otherworldly zone that is neither day nor evening, or perhaps a permanent transition between the two.

This ambiguous relationship between light and dark is a feature of Aeschbach's work that becomes even more significant in these paintings. Whereas *Schwärmer I* appears to depict the subject matter in a warm glow of sunlight beneath the open sky, the other three paintings in the group set a scene of daylight diffused by thick forest and possibly the onset of dusk. The light enters each painting from the top left-hand corner but never reaches the upturned base of the tree, leaving it in darkness. The exception is *Schwärmer I*, where the uncanny silvery glow of a growth of funghi reflects the similarly coloured seed pods emerging from the base of the painting, as well as the rock towering above the scene in the background. In the other three paintings the scant light there is leaves the tree trunk in almost monochrome green or pink, with darker tones of the respective colour indicating the knotted structure of the bark.

Although photographs or illustrations were the starting point for these works, Aeschbach never transfers the source material one-to-one, but develops a very personal visual language. The

combination of images results not only in the collage-like construction of the paintings, but also in the ambivalence of scale. Although the artist chose four different dimensions for the works, ranging from small and medium format to large-scale, the depicted size of the tree trunks and mushrooms remains unclear. There is no pretence at realism, since the illusion of depth is replaced by a confusing juxtaposition of barely differentiated foreground and background. In *Schwärmer I*, for example, the tree trunk appears to float between ground and sky, while in *Schwärmer III* and *Ende der Geschichte* the path in the foreground is cut short by the tree pressed against the illusionistic forest.

The ambivalent perspective does not, however, affect the impression in each of the four paintings that we are looking at a detail of a much larger image extending beyond the picture plane. The densely packed trees in the background draw the eye upwards, whilst the tree trunk itself disappears on the right hand side of each work. Encouraged by the apparent force of the mushrooms, we read the paintings as glimpses of fantasy spaces recalling both old-fashioned fairy tales and the shiny screen of computer games. It is neither narrative nor the setting for an event that is indicated here, but rather a glimpse into another world. The apocalyptic titles suggest that this may be the last remains of the natural world, about to be taken over by parasites. However, the fusion of the photographic source with the playful creation of fictional images indicates that Urs Aeschbach's aim is to explore the painterly process as re-evaluation and transformation.