## View and Plan of Toledo

By titling his exhibition after a painting by El Greco, Thomas Scheibitz emphatically espouses the tradition within which he locates his work. However, he neither dresses himself in historical garb nor does he hide behind a great name, for his choice does not simply refer to the history of painting but also takes precise aim at a strategy in his work that is manifested in the picture of this title. The fact that mutually exclusive modes of representation – a panorama and a map – appear in the same painting comes as a surprise. This is possible only by avoiding a single mode of representation and instead aspiring to a synthesis in which various pictorial elements are combined and united through the painterly means of form, colour, and gesture. What remains of the view is then no longer a window that looks out on the world as the symbolic quintessence of reality, for the view laps over into a plan, into forms and figures placed side by side and thereby projected onto a surface in a syntactically legible arrangement. Scheibitz's pictures, accompanied in the present exhibition by this programmatic title, direct our gaze to the traditional window situation but the window opens onto an impenetrable, splintered reality whose only certainty lies in the pictorial surface itself. Common to both view and plan is the insistence on a visuality with no distracting narrative elements.

In contrast to the idea suggested by the title, the composition of the picture, painted and thus titled by Thomas Scheibitz in the summer of 2000 (p. 35), does not draw on the older painting but rather on contemporary Japanese comics. The source is not an easily legible scene of figures that typically forms the basis of pictorial narratives. Scheibitz has instead selected one of those inserted, full-page representations of an almost abstract scenario as his point of departure. The fact that the comic is black and white is not to the painting's disadvantage. It actually enhances the freedom to translate the configuration of lines into a representation that consists entirely of fields of colour and some very few graffiti-like markings. It soon becomes obvious that the painted picture has as little to do with its source in comics as El Greco's *Toledo* does with a historical city map. One can therefore conclude that we are not faced with information and narrative but strictly with view and plan – frontality of appearance and symbolic map. The artist avoids a fixed spatial context in this crowded ensemble, marked by a *horror vacui*, by generating changing relationships among various parts of the picture plane through affinities and contrasts in colour and form. The uniform addition of irregular rock-like shapes in the original picture is here broken by a line above the middle, a kind of horizon that stakes out a foreground and a background, map-like levels and fronts of buildings. There is no such intervention in the forerunners of this painting, *Wandbild VI|Mural VI*, 1998, and *Dubai*, 1999, which are also defined by a splintered or chessboard pattern that undermines the tectonics. The diagonal that traverses the plan and the glimpse of cloud formations between the buildings lend order to the myriad subdivisions and contribute, along with the black interstices, to their legibility. The differentiated parts, each singular in colour and shape, are thus locked into an overall view and plan.

El Greco and Manga comics are the extremes that delimit Thomas Scheibitz's paintings, though neither is to be taken all too literally. These references reveal the world in which the artist lives and the concerns that he addresses but the synthesis would fail if single scraps in the paintings were to become distinct and isolated. Actually, Scheibitz's work does not involve quoting his source materials in his paintings but instead consists of circumventing their context and using them to discover imagery suitable for application to ideas of a different order. No empty, neglected spots are permitted to appear in these pictures; the single fields are worked through and activated in a painterly process that begins from scratch each time. This does not happen in the sense of a modernist all-over composition since most of the compositions target a motif; the approach is more traditional inasmuch as accessory pictorial elements must be invented to anchor the central motif. To this end Scheibitz has been collecting picture materials for years – in newspapers, magazines, advertisements and reportage, comic books and books of older art. These selections are more or less randomly placed in transparent folders and filed away, a simple system that has long been unable to cope with the steadily accumulating quantities of material. But the artist regularly browses in search of pictorial material through the recent clippings that fill the envelopes and drawers in his studio. This description clearly indicates that Scheibitz's collection cannot be compared to Gerhard Richter's famous *Atlas*, in which clippings, photographs, collages and drawings are sorted and stored by subject matter or chronology, therefore inevitably generating a biographical continuum.

Scheibitz's collection of images offers no personal insight apart from the fact that it can be seen as a selection from the collective world of visuals and design to which human beings in the Western world have been exposed in the year 2000. But even that could lead to sociological assumptions and assessments, which certainly do not prevail in this artist's case. Scheibitz does not rummage through the clippings in search of subject matter; his collection might at most be described as narrative white noise or the uniform rumblings of a zeitgeist. Nor is he interested in discovering striking solutions or particularly successful inventions in graphic art and design, for he rarely makes use of a found picture without thoroughly reworking it to satisfy his own needs. Extreme examples are *Toy* or *Greeting Card*, (pp. 9 and 31) where the painterly treatment lends pictorial cogency to the depraved object and thus shuns flirtation with the triviality of popular culture. What Scheibitz is hoping to discover is the suggestion of something that might as easily be found in the styling of an advertisement as in a Gothic votive picture, a quality that cannot be formulated with anything but visual means and that inexplicably transforms the found clipping into a thrilling event. It is something that can only be achieved by the 'high' medium of painting.

If the use of comics indicates Scheibitz's commitment to the contemporary world, though without succumbing to either enthusiastic exuberance or cultural criticism, then the reference to El Greco signals a programme and a practice. The name El Greco was initially associated with specific imagery rather than actual reception, for it was not until a few years ago that Scheibitz had the opportunity to see the work of his much admired model in the original. Contained in Scheibitz's programme is the intention of developing a painterly expression that exploits contemporary imagery in order thereby to paradoxically cast off naturalism and heighten the representation of inner experience. The stylisation discovered in found details is communicated to the picture as a whole and leads to extremely artificial constructions. These are intensified through colours consistently mixed with white and suffusing the entire painting with an even, incisively cool light. The whitish brightness emphasised to the point of ecstatic expression evokes, as Max Dvořàk commented in connection with El Greco, "the impression of boundless expanses". This is perhaps most strikingly illustrated in *Heaven* (p. 59),

a canvas of painted emptiness achieved only after several attempts, in which the white areas, piled on top of each other and differentiated through underpainting, show the agitation of painted Baroque ceilings; and yet Scheibitz carefully underscores the figuration by means of verticals. In such works he reveals himself as an artist who, in Mannerist fashion, eschews the objective projection of reality onto the picture surface thereby lending painting maximum independence. Even so, the choice of motif and his painterly virtuosity preclude purely subjective divestment.

This alone does not suffice to explain the artist's programme and practice. Thomas Scheibitz grew up in Radeberg near Dresden in the seventies and eighties. Coming from a family involved for many generations in the trade of funerary sculpture, he too chose to follow an artistic career. After graduating from high school and completing an apprenticeship as a metalworker, he took evening courses on various artistic techniques and finally began studying painting in 1991. Dresden has repeatedly played a leading role in German art history – from the circle of Romantics around Friedrich, the Nazarenes, late Romanticism around Adrian Ludwig Richter, the Realists Gille and Rayski, the painters of *Die Brücke*, Otto Dix, and Gerhard Richter. But, isolated from contemporary artistic developments, the academy primarily offered a budding painter in the early nineties a solid education in the craft, an approach to painting as a useful practice that is worth pursuing – and the princely collections. Unlike Leipzig, the fact that the Dresden Academy did not advance a specific stylistic school essentially provided a fertile context for the development of young artists. Great emphasis was placed on explicit painterly problems, with students hotly debating such technical issues as the relative brightness of a particular colour within the picture plane. It is therefore not surprising that hardly any traces of a Dresden painting tradition, which in itself did not form a unity either historically or stylistically, can be detected in Scheibitz's paintings. Access to classical modernism was also difficult since there were hardly any first hand possibilities of studying the works and only few professors taught bits and pieces of recent art history. More importantly, Scheibitz shunned 19th century painting and always felt closer to older art than to Dresden Romanticism. During his studies, he says, he was more attracted to the collection of Old Masters in the Zwinger Museum than to the gallery of New Masters.

Scheibitz's training at the academy led to his understanding of the painting as the ultimate aim while sketches and drawings tended to play a supporting role. The paintings are first outlined in pencil or with markers, often based on preliminary drawings. But in addition to these, the artist has produced a body of drawings whose scope is such that it cannot be adequately treated here. Using the term 'autonomous drawings' is undoubtedly justified by the unlimited diversity of motifs, means and modes of expression. Common to most of the drawings is only the fact that they are executed on standard A4 sheets of paper. Their task within Scheibitz's oeuvre is to keep a diary-like record of his thoughts and to experiment with motifs he has seen. These drawings allow the study of many details in the process of their evolution, details that the artist condensed or formulated with greater severity in his paintings for the sake of a larger whole. A case in point is the shape of plants whose source in nature is initially legible, before gradually becoming a constructed shape, an arabesque completely devoid of mimesis.

These brief remarks cast light on the artist's biographical background, but the present showing of this still young oeuvre is not chronologically oriented. In summer and fall 2000, Scheibitz painted some 25 pictures for the exhibitions in Winterthur and Leipzig, which might be seen as a multipartite overview of the painterly territory he has charted so far. This territory could be described in terms of painterly genres because, although Scheibitz's work is interlaced with contemporary imagery, it intentionally operates within the order of traditional genres, as if these

pictorial themes were givens to be investigated and exploited in formulating his own ideas. Initially unpopulated landscapes predominated; they also form the majority in the current selection. Interiors followed – the shop window paintings of 1998 may already be included in this genre – and are represented here in *Anlage/Layout* (p. 41) and *Designbild/Design Picture* (p. 46). The latter contains still-life elements, a genre the artist had previously avoided until explicitly addressing it in *Stilleben/Still Life* (p. 36). Figures, which probably put up the greatest resistance to his artistic approach, are introduced in *St. Johann, Ohne Titel/Untitled (no. 274), (no. 275)* and *Paar/Couple* (pp. 53, 48, 47, and 43).

However, genres only offer a rough framework because the painting consistently sidesteps a naturalist rendition of motif, especially in *Couple*, repeatedly reworked, reduced, and clarified by Scheibitz until no hint of portraiture remained. Although the shape of the heads can still just be made out, they look like empty, decorative vases placed on flat truncated shapes of saturated colour in the lower half of the painting. The two dots in the countenance to the left sit so far apart that they are no longer necessarily read as eyes, and the faces are outlined in such fashion as to escape a mimetic impression or an overly literal adaptation of the rectangular shapes. The quiet scale of grey and brown tones is broken by contrasting colours from purple to pale pink to the left and right of the heads. The composition revolves around a pictorial axis shifted slightly to the right so that the line ascending to the vertical axis and the lighter tones unite and brace the various parts of the narrower figure to the right. Moreover, the red strip between the two truncated shapes and the triangular shape in the centre of the picture play important roles as secret leitmotifs.

The treatment of interstitial spaces and other transmitting shapes as self-contained independent elements is shown in *Rahmenbild/Frame Picture* (p. 2) where the central motif gives way to a sequence of overlapping frames that seem alternately to push the inner form off-centre from one side to the other. But Scheibitz does not make a formal basic pattern out of this that could in any way be associated with geometrically oriented decorative art. The painting is one pole of a work whose opposite pole is found in *Rise* (p. 55) with its diversity of forms. It expresses feelings of painterly lack of restraint and contingency, exhibited in Germany's recent past perhaps only by Palermo. But the two pictures in which figures rise out of solidly painted backgrounds, *Ring* and *Funny Game I*, (pp. 42 and 56) also show an affinity here. Particularly with respect to *Frame Picture*, they reveal how a seemingly monochrome plane enlivened with older layers of paint joins in to help secure the position of a certain shape that seems to be folded up out of the picture ground or to be opening onto an architectural situation. *St. Johann* is also more closely related to *Frame Picture* than might be supposed at first sight. Every limb of the figure, which Scheibitz discovered in the folk customs of South Tyrol and sketched in his notebook, is infused with the thought of rendering it in recognisable form without confining it to an anthropomorphic rhythm. One is reminded of an extreme representation such as Pontormo's *Saint Quintinus*, who has been pierced diagonally with a long nail and is framed in a wooden scaffold, with metal fittings that seal off the representation. One might argue that the comparison is farfetched, but like Scheibitz's own reference to El Greco, it goes beyond formal affinities and demonstrates an artistic self-understanding that is oriented more towards Mannerist invention than towards the conventional models of art history.

This description reveals the anti-naturalist impetus that determines Scheibitz's paintings and undermines the collage of pictorial elements. The origin of the figures, having become irrelevant, has disappeared entirely, and even in *Design Picture*, a study of an anonymously fashioned world, the execution is directed towards eliminating anything that could be associated with Pop Art. The close relationship between picture source and its visual rendition,

the combination of heterogeneous materials according to principles that naively exploit the surrealist effects of shock and alienation, lose their relevance when, as in this case, non-interference gives way to a painterly treatment of the material. The resolution of this problem is especially striking in *Design Picture*, since it for once represents an almost complete take-over of the original advertisement, in which the picture-within-a-picture and the stage-like theatrical atmosphere are prefigured. The original even contains the red frame around the inner picture that substantially contributes to the unreality of the scene. The composition, an arrangement of cube-shaped forms braced by two columns, is invaded by elements that make conspicuously painterly statements – from the dripping paint on the left to the slight markings against the grey background on the right, from the still-life arrangement at the bottom of the picture to the sculptural figure on a stand to the left. Surroundings and background, if we may even use such terms, are related to the interior of the picture in a variety of ways, through the extension of planes, the similarity and contrast of colours and in the play of illusion between foregrounded and receding elements.

Scheibitz's reference to the contemporary design of objects does not end here. We are faced with fundamental concerns that are subtly linked to the practice of painting. The key to this is found in pictures whose subject matter embraces forms of writing and illuminated letters. Slender decorative letters already appeared in *Schaufenster/Shop Window* of 1998 and were explicitly addressed in *Zierbuchstabe/Illuminated Letter* of 1999. Soon afterwards, they traversed the odd, twice-folded space of *Schriftbild/Lettering*. In between Scheibitz secretly experimented with typographic effects by designing the covers of his catalogues and the invitations to his exhibitions. The resulting mix of popular vocabulary drawn from CD covers, party flyers and desktop advertising design was invested with a personal spin of his own. His objective was to construct letters that were not meant to be generally binding but, being on the edge of abstraction, could function both in paintings and in printed matter as a vehicle of information. Showing a certain self-evidence and formal independence, they hark back to the carved inscriptions and stonemason's marks, which are part of Scheibitz's family background. These letters speak to the reader and acquire an emblematic thrust through a functional economy and stylisation that turns them into signs. The artist underscores the emblematic implications in a number of laconic pictures, such as *Ohne Titel/Untitled (no. 274)* (p. 48), by placing the figure against a neutral ground. Formal condensation lends this rider a monumental presence that transcends its original source, a Swiss children's book of figures made out of folded paper, and invests it with a remarkable pathos.

In the same year, Scheibitz applied the division of the picture space into horizontal bands in *Lettering* to a second painting, *Schriftbild II/Lettering II* (pp. 44/45), creating an almost symmetrical counterpart and thereby producing an extremely elongated horizontal frame of reference. Starting with a narrower land-scape format than in the first painting, Scheibitz introduces four levels, with a heavy dark-green band at the base suggesting the ground. However, the three bands above it subvert this interpretation since they offer no clear-cut horizon. Between the top and bottom of the picture, white bars, such as might be used for decorative letters, traverse the painting like stays; they run counter to the attempt to read the picture from the left, and after overcoming the seam between the two, the gaze is arrested by the weighty rhombic shape before following the tapered figure to the right hand edge of the picture. From there the flat shape resembling the letter Z guides the eye back to what is happening in the central portion of the picture. Although the same bands of colour traverse the entire length of both parts of the painting, the colouring diverges in the right part, which was painted as a response. Here the artist used a canvas primed in dark blue, and the resulting more saturated appearance of the colours is better suited to the shapes there, which are fewer in number but more compact.

To a certain extent, however, the majority of Scheibitz's paintings can be associated with the idea of the landscape if the latter is seen as a suitable stage for the placement of a great variety of appearances. Several forms are repeated as products of civilisation – plants, fence, building – but the moods of these land-scapes range from rigorous layering as in *Haus|House I* and *II* (pp. 37 and 49) to the undeniably poetic expression of the gently rising, curved silhouettes in *Ohne Titel|Untitled (276)* (p. 39). In the landscapes, as nowhere else, the viewer is confronted with a combination of seemingly incompatible elements. Scheibitz is well aware of this initial alienation and the subsequent search for a syntagma to unite the various elements. The flatness of these landscapes produces a stage-like effect and even when spatial illusion is implied, the representation generates shallow layers that seem to be located just below the picture surface. In *Funny Game II* (p. 57) circular and squared figures, occupying the corners of the picture, are connected by white lines related to the drawing of the house. The condensed foreground is embedded in hatched lines made with a marker that bring out the shapes, unlike the flat representation of the background. In the flat planes adjoining the figuration, one might again recognise an effect reminiscent of Mannerist tradition. And so, in his studio in Friedrichshain, Thomas Scheibitz paints pictures against a backdrop of thudding techno rhythms, whose wealth of painterly revelations and concise formulations are a far cry from the reproduction of a lifestyle or the romanticising hyperbolic treatment of the city. Instead, though coming from entirely different premises, they unexpectedly relate to what Max Dvořàk described in his essay of 1920 on El Greco as "dreamy unreal being, which strictly follows the inner inspiration of the artist, not only in composition but also in the shapes and colours that overrule observation and lay no claim to being a record of appearance."

*Dieter Schwarz*