

Encounter in Spring and what follows The most recent of the four exhibitions, at Galerie Max Hetzler's Bleibtreustraße space in Berlin in 2023, focused on the abstract tendencies in Karel Appel's oeuvre. The starting point was *Rencontre au printemps* (Encounter in Spring, 1958; pp. 47–49), a work measuring two and a half by four metres for the UNESCO in Paris, which happily could be loaned for the exhibition. After returning from his first stay in New York, Appel had painted it in the studio of his friend Sam Francis in Villejuif, a suburb of Paris, because his own Paris studio was too small for such formats. The painting has a sister piece with the same measurements, *Rencontre des mondes* (1958; p. 45), in the collection of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. It is particularly interesting for the present context that it was precisely this painting whose blocking by customs led Karel Appel in 1964 to the overnight creation of his documenta picture. These 1958 works heralded the most abstract phase in Appel's work (lasting until ca. 1965), represented in the previous London exhibition with four pictures, and here in Berlin with *Rencontre au printemps* and *Shattered World* (1960; pp. 50/51). At this point it should be noted, however, that Appel was never a fully abstract painter. As the titles of all paintings in the exhibition suggest, he associated his pictures with concrete experiences, even if at first glance they appear abstract.

Such closeness to abstraction then was interrupted for about a decade and Appel instead drew on the pictorial worlds of his early Cobra work – now, however, in a poster-like, flat and rather non-painterly aesthetic related to Pop Art (a connection that can also be found in his maquettes for colourful sculptures from the early 1970s; see pp. 121–129). He returned to pure painting with a series of thirteen square canvases under the title *Visage-Paysage* (1976–1977), whose *No. 4* (1977; p. 53) hung in Berlin opposite *Rencontre au printemps*. The series is unique in his work as it takes a systematic-serial approach (the square format is unusual for Appel) to explore two classic elements of painting at the same time: the face that beholds and the landscape being beheld. The artist's long-time companion Michel Ragon coined the term 'lyrical landscapism' for this approach, reminiscent of the *abstraction lyrique* of the Nouvelle École de Paris in the 1950s. As the reality of the



painter is merged with that of the painted, the series can be seen as a pictorial statement of the artist's self-understanding while at work. In the last hall of the exhibition, this artistic self-image was condensed as a red thread by the combination of paintings from widely separated work phases – including the much later *Natural Phenomenon* (1991; p. 65). In contrast, the other three rooms focused each on a particular approach to abstraction, starting from the mid-1970s.

The most striking stylistic features of Appel's paintings are generously drawn, expressive lines and massive monochrome colour surfaces. None of this can be found in his 1979 series of *Trees* (pp. 57–59) in the first room. They are characterised by short and parallel brushstrokes, forming rather analytical structures that

converge within the vertical picture format to something suggesting a tree. Appel always mistrusted his own painterly virtuosity and instead sought the challenge of the unknown. In this mutation of his style he seems to have thrown everything he knew overboard. *Still Life* (1979; p. 55) and *Window* (1980; p. 63) are painted in the same manner, which was inspired by reproductions of greatly enlarged details from paintings by Vincent van Gogh that Appel had discovered in a book. He recognised in them a striking combination of spontaneity with discipline and applied his discovery rigorously up to the beginning of the 1980s. Later he took it up again as a stylistic element in a fragmentary fashion, e.g. in some of the monumental pictures of the early 2000s, such as *Empty Black Sky* (2000; p. 74) or *Thought's Boomerang* (2000; p. 73), which were exhibited in the central exhibition hall. Another room showed pictures from the late 1990s, including *Up to the Sky No. 3* (1998; pp. 66/67) and *Birth of a Landscape* (1999; p. 68). While they are also composed of more or less parallel brushstrokes, these are somewhat longer and above all more curved, which is why the works are vaguely reminiscent of impressionist landscapes.

In the latest painting in the exhibition, *Evening Forest* (2003; p. 79), which hung in the winter garden, Appel used found objects (as in many of his object paintings, for which see the next chapter). Here, wooden branches are mounted in parallel on the picture surface, thus combining abstraction with concrete figuration. This is another expression of the central theme that served Karel Appel as a compass throughout his career: the unbreakable unity of humanity and nature, which we all too often lose sight of in our high-tech global culture.

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