

## **Prophecy**

### **February 2007**

#### **Christian Hellmich**

By Daniel Berchenko

Christian Hellmich points crisp, de-populated architectural spaces whose illusory depth gives way to a ploy of surface and color at their fringes. The interpenetration of representation and abstraction brackets Hellmich's adept use of the techniques of Western perspective, bringing the act of painting itself into focus. This strategy allows the artist to conduct formal experiments without speaking in the solipsistic idiom of high modernist abstraction. Hellmich was born in Dusseldorf, Germany in 1977 and studied at the University of Essen. He has been in numerous group exhibitions, and recently was given his first solo show in New York at Lehmann Maupin Gallery. Hellmich currently lives and works in Köln.

In a review of your show Arrangement this summer at Lehmann Maupin, the New York Times' critic Ken Johnson said that your "works under the influence of the Leipzig School's curiously dour revival of Modernist representational painting." Do you see your work as related in any way to that of Neo Rauch or other members of the so-called "Leipzig School?"

I think my work is based less on narrative academic representational painting than that of the so-called Leipzig School. My work emanates more from a general interest in the process of painting and my reflection on this process through the act of painting. But there seems to be a common interest in the phenomenon of material presence in the art work which might be seen as an interest of many contemporaries. The Leipzig School has expanded from their geographical origin and history, and the name of the "New Leipzig School" has been used by the art market to label the current reappearance of representational painting. The group also includes artists from Berlin and Dresden. I neither studied in Leipzig, nor am I a member of this group of artists. The art that has influenced me is very wide-spread and includes painters from Manet to Richter, as well as more contemporary painters. But I think it has always been single works that have influenced me more than any whole oeuvre.

You've also been compared on more than one occasion to Giorgio de Chirico. Is the resemblance of your work to his intentional? Or do you think that there is a resemblance at all?

There might be an unintended resemblance. The emptiness of the space and the absence of man creates an unreal moment in both of our work. I think this unreal moment in my work is an effort to exemplify a clarification of the visualization of painting. How space is put together through painting plays a decisive role in this moment. And it is motivated mainly by formal decisions. However I don't refer to

the kind of metaphysical moments and strategies which in De Chirico's case anticipate surrealism.

How do you understand the engagement of your work with the tradition and techniques of representational painting?

Abstraction is very important in the production of my paintings. My approach to representational painting varies. The architecture in my work never represents real places. I construct the forms from parts that are fictitious or that I've collected in my archive of drawings and photos. The way I put the pictorial spaces together is guided by formal ideas and the process of painting. It is an assembling without regard for "correct" representational cohesion, although this way of putting things together is strongly influenced by the techniques of representational painting. There has to be a balance.

Are you at all interested in the tradition of social realist painting in the former Eastern Bloc that your contemporaries are said to revive?

No, I'm not. For me there is too much dogmatic substance in those paintings.

What is it about architectural spaces that interests you? Why have you chosen not to investigate the production of space in landscape painting, for instance?

The landscape has disappeared a little in my work, but it always re-emerges. At first the landscapes in my paintings were used as scenery for the architectural objects. But the determination of interior and exterior in my work has been accompanied by a renewed interest in landscape and an awareness of its role. Landscape can only be contemplated when it is segregated by an interior by some structure - and for me, this "shielding" of an interior space defines architecture. It does not matter how "open" or "closed" the architecture in question is; architecture is always characterized by this shielding of an interior against an exterior, which produces and determines the nature beyond it. I like the term "shielding" because it also refers to the separation of the space of a painting from its spectator. Often, painting is an act of describing a happening that the spectator can only passively participate in. On the other hand, I try to find a balance between the openness of the pictorial space and the closedness of the shielding of that space from the spectator so that every viewer has the possibility of finding his or her own painting. One could say that I am very interested in exhibiting the production of my paintings.

How do you understand the role of color in your work? What motivates your deployment of color and what determines the particular palette you've adopted?

I really like the idea of getting close to the color-palette of the objects that I find. While I was studying, I lived in the Ruhr region, which is a very gray area. One finds a lot of banal 1950s and 60s architecture there, lying in disrepair, with bleached and decimated colors. My palette reflects an interest in the reference of these colors to their past-a-past which includes the architecture of that period. I'm not exclusively interested in the 50s and 60s but I'm interested in the historical reference because it underlines the impression of the constructed-ness of reality.

As I mentioned, the painted objects are neither real nor imagined. The fact that there is never a real source of light within the painting- and only occasionally a direct one- offers broad possibilities in the use of color. I can choose how to charge a situation with my palette. This choice can be inspired by (art) history, imagination, coincidence, contingency. I often move from a very liberal to a more restrained use of color and then back again if necessary. Through this method, my palette has developed over time.

Can you tell us a bit about your own history: Why did you begin painting? When did you begin painting?

During the first years of my studies I was more focused on drawing and printmaking (etchings, silk screens). I began to concentrate on painting in 2001. But I still use certain aspects of the method that I used for figurative drawing in my paintings- for example, the technique of correcting a work again and again. In this procedure, "mistakes" and their "corrections" appear and are allowed to remain visible. In this process, we see that my work is not concerned with direct and closed representation. Instead it displays a reclaimed three-dimensionality- wrested spatiality- that balances the openness and closeness we discussed earlier. I'm still very interested in all possible combinations of space in painting and the results of these combinations.