

## Sacred conversations

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If time were brought to a standstill, would space disintegrate into expansive formlessness? In this improbable state of existence, the peach would surely not decay – and so, the question of eating could be put on hold for another century. As if intrigued by such a physical impossibility, Katharina Schilling paints scenes that unfold out of time. She probes an age-old painterly conviction, that pigment is as good a substance as any to reconstitute a world of vibrant matter. Adopting techniques and imagery from disparate sources across art histories, Schilling brings a consciousness of the networked, inter-referential nature of artistic production to familiar, aesthetic rituals.

In the initial treatment of the canvas, Katharina Schilling often employs methods of painterly abstraction. Working first on unstretched cotton cloth, she tends to the capriciousness of pigments, mediating their respective chemical properties to stage a moment of tension on the painterly plane. She does so without drawing attention to herself in the creative act – there are no visible brushstrokes or indexical traces of her making. These abstractions seem to expand indefinitely, beyond the highly subjective, momentary impulse of “pure action”. Accordingly, Schilling does not immediately pin down the resultant maelstrom of colour with stretchers, which would serve to fossilise a composition. Rather, she leaves each canvas in this primordial state for an indefinite time, as though waiting for disembodied substances to coalesce themselves into objects on the picture plane.

When these objects do emerge, they do so not on top, but out of the whirling chromatic depths of the canvas. Schilling often draws out phenotypes of darkness, as an absence of light: the rhubarb stalks that grow in sheds without sunlight, the slick side of an iPhone that very ostensibly does not glow like its more familiar, frontal surface. As in Dutch and Flemish still-life paintings, these articles are sometimes caught tumbling in slow motion, but their origins remain deliberately obscure; from the fruits and vegetables that become symbols of globalisation and the illegibility of international markets, to the soaring arrows fired by no one. The rounded corners of the canvasses simultaneously recall playing cards, coats of arms and the ergonomic designs of our device-prostheses, symbols of common identity with which we attempt to navigate the unknown. These are paintings of a new dark age, in which increasing technological complexity produces a world in which we understand less and less.

Which brings us to another important pictorial repertoire from which Schilling borrows, namely: medieval manuscripts. Cropped scenes of biblical crusades result in assemblages of limbs, animal and human, that trail into and back out of the image in continuous torrents. The historicity of the visual language calls forth a viewer who is devout and contemplative, solitary but tuned into the oceanic feeling that constitutes religious experience. Schilling zooms in on the bodies of ritual, displacing gestures and events from grand historical narratives to inspect the interpersonal dimensions of communities, which are based on shared beliefs. The seeming anachronism of these paintings is, however, perfectly timed.

It is worth regarding all of Katharina Schilling's paintings as being intimately involved with one another. Like the *sacra conversazione*, a genre of painting popular in the Italian Renaissance, which sees Virgin and Child pictured alongside saints, angels and donors from disparate times and places, in a 'sacred conversation'.

Across a series of interconnected planes, Schilling dissolves a traditional notion of history with its neat linearity to enable diverse concepts and entities to interact in productive tension with one another: the spurs of progress against soft, slow flesh and the vines ensnaring the arms that would embrace. Together, these paintings show what might lie behind the veil lifted from modernity, what can come out of the darkest of ages. In a kind of hopeful stasis, Katharina Schilling allows worlds to float for a moment, in order to free images, objects, motifs and gestures from their historical binds. Once dispersed, they can then offer themselves up as the basis for a new community – at a time when one cannot say “when” uncomplicatedly.