

Measuring the World

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She is often out and about with her camera and painting utensils, especially in the Cevennes, the southern French plateau with its wild, austere landscape and rivers winding their way through deep gorges, or in her native Palatinate region with its soft vastness of the cultivated Rhine plain – both regions covered by an overarching sky in which the spherical structures of enormous cloud formations unfold their dramatic scenario. For Heike Negenborn, this immediate contact with nature is vital for her images attained from reality, with which she is currently taking center stage in landscape painting. Low horizon lines, flat landscapes with a one-point or two-point linear perspective, meticulously captured details of trees, shrubbery, or rock formations, olive tree groves or vineyards, the apparently infinite sky with diverse cloud formations familiar from the Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century: these are typical of Heike Negenborn's landscape paintings. The quality of her art evokes an almost photographic depiction of the real world, which seems lost in reverie despite the moving cumulus clouds and a particularly dramatic use of light. She transfers the onlooker into the pleasant incommensurability of scenic expanse which, despite its having been formed into a cultivated landscape by humankind, does not indulge in a fanciful illusion of untouched nature but, as a result of its openness and apparent wilderness, suggests a feeling of freedom, solitude, and infinity. Here one can breathe, here one can be, in a shapely proportionality of sublimity and self-assertion.

Heike Negenborn's sketches and paintings are governed by a linear perspective grid, which may not only be perceived beneath layers of paint, but which intentionally overlaps and breaks through the scenic illusion. The grid hence serves as a constructional basis for the landscape in order to support the highest possible illusion of depth and space, as can also be seen in her latest series, *Netscapes*. Here, towering clouds grow into the landscape, flowing across the horizon as if wanting to escape the two-dimensional picture plane. The graphical result of capturing and measuring a cultivated landscape on-site, based on a specifically developed color-coded grid, confidently traces these excerpts of nature in order to genuinely depict and fixate it on the pictorial ground. This makes it similar to a documentary survey, either modulated in an intense range of color or else reduced to a sketchy black-and-white depiction. In some paintings, the execution is so keenly modulated that they at times resemble digitally created photographs or colorized photographs from the nineteenth century, albeit considering that these were far hazier. Within other works, it is not lines but pixelated grids similar to a digitalized enlargement that define the landscape, thereby referring to the undeniable present of the twenty-first century and its appropriation of visual perception through the medium of digital photography.

The dialectic in observing world, nature, and cultivated landscape, as well as the ambivalence in capturing the artistic natural excerpt on something verging between on-site sketch, photography, mathematical construction, artistic interpretation, and subjective perception – which is an integral part of every observation of nature because it is constituted solely through the individual sensitivity of the observer – this dialectic between scientific analysis and the imagination reminds one of Daniel Kehlmann's novel *Measuring the World*. In this work, Kehlmann describes the mathematical and geographical findings of the contrapuntal protagonists Carl Friedrich Gauß and Alexander von Humboldt in between theory and empiricism,

consistently grounding the establishment of the reader's empathy for his figures and scenes through dialectic breaks. Kehlmann creates a stylistic polarity – which is also reflected in the characters' double biography – by, on the one hand, introducing the laconic contemporary habitus of short sentences and a sober structure reminiscent of the style of scientific essays. On the other hand, he uses idiomatic language that reminds us of the language of the nineteenth century, including swift changes between seriousness and pleasantry, tragedy and humor.

Heike Negenborn's work is also defined by a profound ambivalence between a mathematical and geographical exploration of natural scenes, her own perception, as well as experiences in contemplating nature. By referring back to Dutch topoi of landscape art (without which contemporary landscape painting would not be conceivable), she stays committed to the reality of the present-day world. She disenchant the topic of landscape, which has been imbued with pathos since Romanticism, by implementing grid structures, offering reassurance by drawing reference to an objective instrument of the geographical as well as the artistic method of measuring landscape and space. The grid furthermore provides an intellectual frame of sobriety as it calls to mind historical paragons of perspectival construction known since the Renaissance. On the other hand, her at times dramatic cloud formations and her use of emotionally charged light and color elements allow her and her aesthetical works of art to mediate a feeling of sublimity or at least an awareness of its possible existence. Considering the vastness of her landscapes and the ephemeral density of her soaring clouds, a subtle effect arises that vacillates between the forces of nature and a breathless silence. Here one can dare address the notion of beauty without risking to fall for superficiality or sentimentalism.

Whereas in Kehlmann's work the waves' continuous breaking at the shore inspires the pragmatic and yet highly philosophical question of how to set the demarcation line between water and land, Heike Negenborn's work raises yet another question: where does the documentary nature of her depictions of landscape and measurements of nature end, and where does the empathetic perception and artistic imagination of landscape begin? Here as well as there, it remains an intangible, flowing transition, one that cannot be measured or fixated. How soothing it is for the recipient to discover that despite all the objective methods in the world and in art, the same elemental considerations are blended into an insoluble dialectic, providing nature and landscape not only with a realistic perspective, but also with an indispensable artistic perspective that focuses on the fascination of nature's grandeur, beauty, and immeasurability. With this in mind, the landscapes created by Heike Negenborn can be understood as either a complex system of poetical analysis or an analytical poetry about experiences of landscape.