

Latent Realities:

On Daniel Lergon's *Rotverschiebung*

For his first exhibition at PSM, Daniel Lergon presents a series of six abstract, gestural paintings titled *Rotverschiebung* (Redshift). While the name is borrowed from physics, as indeed most of his exhibition titles, Lergon's works themselves evince painterly concerns involving light, surface, and movement, revealing a hidden world of form and color.

Redshift is a phenomenon that occurs when electromagnetic radiation (like light) shifts toward longer wavelengths as an object moves farther away from us. This is something we can't usually see with our own eyes, so imagine an ambulance siren in the distance, whose pitch increases as it approaches us and decreases as it goes past us. The sound waves from the siren are pushed closer together as it moves toward us, and spread further apart as it moves away from us. The same thing happens with light, but since light travels much faster than sound—a million times faster—we don't experience the shift of light in our daily lives. We do, however, perceive visible light as a spectrum of colors, increasing in wavelength from violet to red—most noticeable in rainbows. So as a luminous object (like a star or a galaxy) moves further away from us, the wavelengths of the light it emits are stretched, and when that happens they shift toward the red end of the light spectrum.

Astronomers, such as Edwin Hubble, have discovered that not only are distant galaxies receding from our solar system (the Milky Way, where Earth is located), but also that their redshifts increase proportionally with their increasing distance. Simply put, the further away the galaxies are, the faster they are moving. This generalization has become what is called Hubble's Law: the greater the redshift in a luminous object, the greater the distance and speed of the object. Research in physics has confirmed this "law of redshifts," which in turn provides support for cosmological theories that postulate an expanding universe. Hubble's Law about redshifts is some of the very first measurable evidence that we have for the expansion of the universe—something we cannot witness with our eyes, and a wildly fascinating thing to think about.

Lergon uses the physical phenomenon of redshift as anecdotal inspiration for the title of this exhibition, but it also provides him (and us) with a way to think about what is happening in his new series. In each of the two gallery rooms there is a series of three of paintings done in Alizarin crimson oil paint on white canvas—for a total of six. In the first room the visitor enters, the Alizarin crimson has been thickly applied to the canvas, creating a dark red background. Lergon then removes paint, resulting in background pinkish hues. The works are of equal height, but of different widths—200 x 100 cm, 200 x 200 cm, and 200 x 300 cm—progressing (or expanding) horizontally. In the second, brighter room of the gallery, the base layer has been painted in a thinned out crimson. With these three paintings Lergon added paint, allowing the abstract shapes to look more like they are in the foreground. This series of three works expands in height, from 100 x 200 cm to 200 x 200 cm and finally to 300 x 200 cm.

The six red paintings are thus expanding along two dimensions, width and height, evoking the "redshift" that their use of color humorously literalizes. But it is the color and composition of the works that really draw the eye. There are a myriad of shades of red to be found in the flames and plumes that move across the canvases, belying the fact that only one pigment has been used. Thick, almost black dark crimson is pulled in one direction, while a diluted crimson creates a light pink that fades out in another direction—as if being directed by forces of nature. We are seeing the same color in different states, expanding in multiple directions in these "redshift" paintings.

Some of these crimson compositions are reminiscent of Max Ernst's "Fleurs" series, where Ernst pushed the paint in a staccato manner to produce shapes vaguely resembling flowers. But the "Fleurs" are more evocative of primordial, nonconcrete objects, and are set against mostly empty backgrounds, lending them a strange and extraterrestrial quality. In Lergon's paintings there is also a play of emptiness and fullness across the canvases, with large parts of the painted plane that are clean and void of everything but ground or base color. Then there are the gestural elements of the composition, which can usually be found moving across or near the center of the canvas. In one respect we have a figure, albeit an abstract shape, and a background. What's more, Lergon's compositions actually flit between being figurative, in the sense of loose familiarity, and being abstract. We will often see a shape that we think we recognize: Is that a blooming flower, or a flame? At the same time, an overriding abstractness takes the composition back to the more fleeting, non-specific, and elemental. Could that image be a depiction of some chemical process, or some fundamental

physical reaction? Such questions arise concurrently with those about what we think we recognize, and it is this oscillation between a felt recognition and seen abstractness that gives Lergon's painting a very unique ambiguous quality. It's almost as if the paintings are evidence for something we can't see.

The new red paintings are unmistakably related to his earlier series—perhaps his green series especially, thus representing a literal red shift—in the way they use background and foreground. There is a more direct continuity between all of his works, however. In all of his paintings to date there is a ground (a primed canvas) that interacts with a substance (such as added paint or acidified water) to reveal a diverse set of qualities of that substance, such as thickness and thinness, darkness and lightness, transparency and opaqueness, suppleness, and so on. The Alizarin crimson, for example, is used to create shades of pink, bright red, dark red, and perhaps a few shades we can't name. There is thus continuity in the fact that all the works play with the different densities of the overlaid painting material. There is also a general link between Lergon's series in the idea of a charged or catalytic surface—from textile or retroreflective fabrics to wall drawings and metal surfaces, and then to the recent red and green paintings. In each of these series, different substances are used to interact with these surfaces (e.g., transparent lacquer or acidified water). This idea of a reactive surface appears again in the newer red and green works, where the background clearly plays an important role as it shines through the different layers of Phthalo green or Alizarin crimson pigment.

While all of Lergon's works thus share certain features, the genesis for the current red series goes back to an exhibition from 2009 at Andersen's Contemporary in Copenhagen titled *3K*. The title of that show was taken from a moment in the universe's history when matter and radiation separated. The afterglow of this process can be observed today in the remaining microwave background radiation that has been red-shifted, and that has cooled down to three degrees Kelvin (3K) because of the expansion of the universe. Again, Lergon pulls an exhibition title from cosmology and physics. This adds some inscrutability to his work, keeping the viewers on their toes, while also providing clues to interpreting it. But there is more we can take from the titles of the exhibitions. The laws of physics are the key to reading the evidence of something, evidence of how the world around and above us works and behaves. The evidence we have will often be of something that is not observable by the human eye. We cannot literally see the universe expanding, for example; rather, we use redshift as evidence for it. The fact that we can observe the lengthening of light rays (toward the red end of the light spectrum) tells the story of an expanding universe. Movement is thus evidence of (past) change.

Lergon's compositions are portrayals of change, a very basic feature of all physical matter. They show states of action and flux across a painted (or charged) surface. Though they are moments frozen in time, as it were, their evocative brushwork and thoughtful formal qualities allow us to glimpse a broad spectrum of color and form that alludes to a once very active surface. Lergon's crimson paintings are also evidence of what is not seen, just as redshift is. They are evidence of what is happening between the color pigment, light, and our eyes.

Painting, like physics, is an exploratory and active endeavor, where artists experiment to see what works. But viewing an artwork, and perhaps especially so with painting, is also an active process: we use our eyes and our minds to try and discern patterns and meaning, teasing out interpretations. In his essay "Creative Confession," Paul Klee argued that the visual act of viewing is productive perception. As Klee writes: "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather it makes visible." The viewer, in other words, makes something within the artwork visible. Klee continues: "Formerly we used to represent things which were visible on earth, things we either liked to look at or would have liked to see. Today we reveal the reality that is behind visible things, thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the universe and that there are many more other, latent realities."

In that way, painting and physics share something: the idea of revealing a reality behind what is visible. The paintings in *Rotverschiebung* do not claim to be examples of the phenomenon after which they are titled, but they do something similar: they shift our eyes and minds to a place where a fading crimson brushstroke can be a smoke plume or a chemical reaction, or a fiery red veil concealing whatever our imagination conjures. This is the reality of painting.

—Aaron Bogart

PSM
Sabine Schmidt
Schöneberger Ufer 61, 10785 Berlin
phone: +49 30 75524626
office@psm-gallery.com
www.psm-gallery.com

