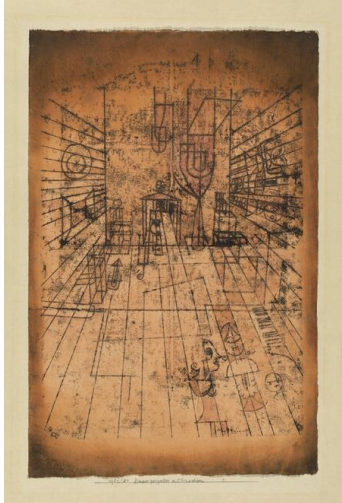


# FrameWork 10/13

## Patrick Howlett on THE ROOM AND ITS INHABITANTS



NOTES FROM A ROOM

A constructed space, often purpose built. I suppose something similar could be found in a cave or under the umbrella of tree branches. Shelter of some kind; a structure ends up serving a specific purpose.

The idea for the show was something very basic, somewhat obvious perhaps in the hope to get across something of the complexity and richness of a painting made with an awareness of the connectedness of form and content within an emergent process.

The artists in the show all excel at creating precisely ambiguous images. One artist that helps me unpack that idea is Paul Klee. The breadth and focus of his achievement in particular is useful for finding examples of what I am thinking.

When we opened the box and took off the wrapping of Robert Bordo's *lights out*, the dynamic texture of the surface and the decisive quality of the marks, completely knocked me out, seduced me. I had to rethink the painting I had looked at dozens of times on a screen. This is an experience I have had repeatedly with Klee and I probably can't and don't want to over-analyze it, but basically the painting is alive and playing itself out in front of you. It has to do with, I think, honing the syntax of form. As an image, *lights out* might not seem like a 'new' form, but as a painting, the relationship between the space and the elements within make you feel it.

Line, as Klee saw it, is active and it determines form. "Genesis as formal motion is the essential thing in a work".<sup>1</sup> Early last year, the artist and writer Robert Linsley and I were discussing what might make Klee relevant to artists today. One aspect, we determined, was the intellectual nature of his use of form and the concrete, specific quality of the results. Not that subject and form are a resolved unit, because when he is good the paintings are completely open and generative. This is opposed to what Linsley called the "general effects" of certain contemporary work.

Shape can be unstable, or perhaps one's ability to see a stable shape is dependent on fixing it as a figure in relation to its context. One of the great things about Klee is that he works with instabilities. An active, independent ground supports the active line of a figure, which then inhabits the two spaces. Justin Stephens' paintings also do this with a flat wit and a casual rigour that put the room in the painting and inhabit the space between. There might be a little of Boris Groys' 'weak gesture' wisdom informing Stephens' approach to composition or maybe the non-paint additions are figures of protection.

Richard Sennett writes about walls as sites of resistance, inert boundaries separating interior and exterior.<sup>ii</sup> More positively, they act as borders. While borders and edges seem inherent in conventional painting, recent discourses have attributed paintings current relevance as having to do with its ability to transcend those limits into an expanded field. But is this the only recourse for painting to let in the everyday?

In Roger White's painting the wall is particularly present. Containing a variety of fragmented and/or incomplete sketches, some with their own boundaries, the painting is an ambiguous collection of images on a white ground, stopped in mid-translation, keeping to the edges of representation. The focus becomes the formation of images themselves and what their abstraction infers to the viewer looking in.

"Today is a transition from yesterday. In the great pit of forms lie broken fragments to some of which we still cling. They provide abstraction with its material. A junkyard of unauthentic elements for the creation of impure crystals".<sup>iii</sup>

I can't help but think of Sandra Meigs' inclusions in the show, *Twitter* and *Facebook*, as two of these 'impure crystals'. These embodied characters come off the wall to flaunt their figurative duality and recall Klee's positive approach to abstraction and its generative possibilities. But they also share a provocative spirit that collapses the beautiful and the terrible: "the more horrible this world (as today, for instance), the more abstract our art, whereas a happy world brings forth an art of the here and now"<sup>iv</sup>

In keeping with the theme, painting may be thought of as a working space. In *The Craftsman*, Sennett writes about the use of ambiguity, anticipating it, using it as a tool. With edges, one must improvise and ambiguity is useful here. In Kim Neudorf's painting, the relation of figure and ground is a somewhat porous negotiation, as is the edge. The evocation of a space or figure is tempered by a tentative approach to surface. Like the texture created by Klee's oil transfers (as in *Room perspective with inhabitants* from 1921) or by many of his mixed media surfaces, Neudorf's suspension of paint creates a space for figurations repeated appearance and disappearance.

Something about Klee and much of the work in THE ROOM is that the work is self-revelatory but not self-reflexive. In Merlin James' paintings the image is constructed on layers of previous paint and canvas, with bristle traces and curls of plastic making their presence felt like they might on the shelves or doorframes of an old house. On the surface, the composition is divided into planes of subdued colour that cut right through the silhouetted figures. At once a formal device to emphasize flatness, it simultaneously produces a space that might suggest windows or light sources, generating imaginative relations between ground and figure.

Precision in Klee is revealed by both hand and mind, but not in the same place or the same moment. The way they impact one another suggests the intellectual and intensive nature of his work.

“When is the spirit at its purist? In the beginning.

Here, work that becomes (dual). There, work that is.”<sup>v</sup>

A similar duality can be found in the work of Allison Katz, though not as formally reductive. There is a consciousness of design working on both a formal and iconographic registers. Though she allows it migrate to other works, each work is imbued with that duality. Picabia also split form and content in precise ways.

That is one reason why Klee’s work is so generative and keeps on giving. Another, as Adrian Searle recently wrote in The Guardian about the 1938 work *Le Rouge et Le Noir*, is the movement created by Klee’s use of the elements: “the circles never hold their place. They seem to approach and recede, attack and decay as you look. It is a painting that keeps on happening as you look. It is happening still”<sup>vi</sup>.

Rebecca Morris’s watercolours also depict the moment of happening, thereby presenting it as part of their subject. Though her large compositions are usually built by arranging a wide range of fragmented shapes into specific formal designs, her watercolours make composing look instantaneous. Together, the five works in THE ROOM are spaces where the grid is both emergent and imposed, lost and found. Like Klee, I think, she uses it as a design trope with an awareness of its structural and theoretical import, but not reducible to a single history.

“Dream: I find my house: empty, the wine drunk, the river diverted, my naked one stolen, the epitaph erased. White on white.”<sup>vii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Klee, Paul. *The Diaries of Paul Klee 1898-1918*, trans. Pierre B. Schneider, R.Y. Zachary, Max Knight (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p.310

<sup>ii</sup> Sennett, Richard. *The Craftsman*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008)

<sup>iii</sup> Klee, p.313

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*, p.313

<sup>v</sup> *ibid*. p.312

<sup>vi</sup> Searle, Adrian. “Paul Klee at Tate Modern: More! More! More!”, in *The Guardian* (posted Monday 14 October 2013)

<sup>vii</sup> Klee, p.312