

ARTISTS' PAINTERS

IRA BARTELL

LEOPOLD-HOESCH-MUSEUM

## CONTENTS

JOHN GAVIN

Ira Bartell Paintings: Innerer Klang

4

ANDREA KLASSEN

Ira Bartell

8

Works

11

Biography

38

Imprint

40

## IRA BARTELL

Ira Bartell is an extraordinary American artist, who for three decades has exerted significant influence on the Cologne art scene.

At the beginning of the eighties, he met artists of the Mühlheimer Freiheit and shared a studio with Gerhard Naschberger and Walter Dahn. In search of his own artistic voice, he eventually moved into a studio of his own, since, according to Bartell, having space is the most important precondition for expressing oneself. He has not ceased to create new forms for his uncommon ideas and his boundless fantasy, thus capturing and captivating his audience.

This exhibition unites for the first time Bartell paintings from more than three decades. While only a section of his complex oeuvre can be shown, there is an opportunity to observe his development as an artist and some layers of his creativity.

However, Bartell's work can only be grasped completely if one includes the objects and prints he creates with intelligence and wit, such as *Stereo Flamingo*, tree plantings based on Fibonacci numbers, and the *Artbox*.

The exhibition takes us back to the beginnings of his oeuvre. Canvases of different sizes and captivating paperworks (some on handmade paper) dating from the eighties express his artistic precision (e.g., *Off the Coast* and *Charmer and Snake*).

As an American with Jewish roots, Ira Bartell grew up in Manhattan's Upper East Side with his mother, an art teacher. In the seventies, he found his way to Paris and then to Cologne, his home now for 30 years. His first studio in Cologne was in the center of the city at Bismarckstraße 13. Today, he works in a dilapidated castle in Grouven, beyond Cologne's city limits, where he also keeps sheep, chickens and goats.

I first met Ira Bartell in the mid-eighties. As an art-history student, I worked as an assistant in a Cologne gallery, living in the middle of Cologne's art scene.

How would an American artist with roots in American abstract expressionism express himself in Cologne? How would the Cologne art scene influence his painting? I was curious. To this day, I accompany Ira Bartell as a friend and follow his artistic career with enthusiasm and curiosity.



*Stereo Flamingo*, 2001, pigment transfer lithograph on Zerkall paper, 24,5 x 17 cm

Like those of the American expressionist artists, Ira Bartell's works in the eighties tended to be more intuitive and emotional than intellectual, the forms more organic and biomorphic than geometric, curved rather than rectilinear, not structural. And he was fascinated with the mystical, spontaneous and irrational.

Ira Bartell's biography reflects a life in two worlds and two languages. Just as in conversation he switches as a matter of course and almost unnoticeably from English to German and back, his works reflect a dialectic reaching from sublime painting, subjective, organic forms to precisely calculated systems.

It is precisely this ambivalence that makes his work so vibrant and interesting.

Ira Bartell's paintings are always abstract, but at the same time can be experienced in a very specific, sensual way. They are not depictions of something external; they are experiences, states of the soul, something internal for which he finds an expression.

His works exude something breathing, flowing, not precise depictions, but rather something living.

Bartell's complex work as a painter can be divided into various phases.

He often develops his ideas in series, experimenting and exhausting all possibilities of painting. Colors play a prime role in this context. Hence, there are a purple, a red, a blue, a green and, finally, a white series. Does the order signify something? Is it a coincidence that his latest works are white?

Often, several layers of paint are superimposed. Two dimensions thus gain depth, giving the paintings body and volume and letting them appear surprisingly three-dimensional. Layers that have been painted over partly remain as forms shining through. Paint is applied thickly or almost translucently, the surface being matt or shiny. The paints applied to the canvas in an unending variety of ways create rhythm, harmony or dialectic tension.

Over time, Bartell developed a repertoire of forms and patterns as repetitive elements – lines, waves, cells, systems, grids – that can be recognized and which always continue to be developed. They trigger associations with leaves, carapaces, skin, grids, etc.

Even when the paintings of a series often resemble each other, they are never repetitions. Each painting reflects its own universe, is a consequence of the previous one and of its own development, following its own laws, which again vary from painting to painting. Bartell works on a series until its theme – finally – lets him go.



*Off the Coast*, 1989, pigment and acrylic on handmade Indian paper, 76 x 56,5 cm



*Charmer and Snake*, 1989, pigment and acrylic on handmade Indian paper, 76 x 55,5 cm



