

Roller coaster rides through complex visual spaces

The conversation between the artist and Thorsten Platz took place in Berlin on the occasion of her exhibition “Liquid Sky.”

THORSTEN PLATZ The title of your exhibition, “Liquid Sky,” reminds me of the eponymous film by Slava Tsukerman from 1982. How does your exhibition relate to the film?^[1]

EVA CASTRINGIUS The film makes use of a fantastic visual idiom. I liked the garish neon scenes and the morbid plot. “Liquid Sky” also fit well with the neon motifs in the photographs I was showing in the exhibition. My enthusiasm for colored light is based on the nocturnal “neon hunts” I went on with friends in Los Angeles and Orange County. We discovered brightly lit diners from the 1950s which stood like fossils amid the modern tract homes. Large neon signs for Bob’s Big Boy, Fatburger, or Johnie’s Restaurant would suddenly loom up before our eyes at night.

THORSTEN PLATZ In 2001 you photographed the series “The Big Sky” in Los Angeles at night. At the time you focused on so-called Googie architecture, which is famous for its neon signs in particular.^[2]

EVA CASTRINGIUS In “The Big Sky” I was fascinated by one particularly striking example of Googie architecture on Miracle Mile in Los Angeles: Johnie’s Restaurant. I got excited about the idea of experimenting with “rolling architecture”—I installed a model on my car, including the mannequin Johnie as a bartender. At night I would run the model’s chain of lights off the car battery. The car took me to all sorts of different places: the ports of Long Beach, to downtown L.A., or the coast at Pacific Palisades.

THORSTEN PLATZ Colored neon has a long tradition in West Coast art. Mike Kelley used it as a central element in his installation “Kandors.”^[3] It also makes me think of Jason Rhoades, whose “Black Pussy Party” was a fetish and per-



Everett Place [The Big Sky], 2001, Cibachrome on Alu-Dibond, 89 × 111 cm

with small characters like a flamingo, a cowboy, or a skull. The strong colors and the painterly aspects of the individual shots appealed to me.

The desert becomes a projection screen for my imagination. Reality often seems unreal in these places. More and more, I ask myself what is truly real and what visual worlds



Drift [Point Brake], 2003, oil and acrylic on canvas, 170 × 298 cm

formance space in which neon signs, colorful spotlights, and black light played a big role.

EVA CASTRINGIUS Yes, several West Coast artists have made neon a regular feature of their artistic work. Jason Rhoades’s “Black Pussy Party” was held in his studio in Culver City. The party and its numerous actions—a culinary feast combined with Jason Rhoades’s music performance and his fake penis wax action—were sustained above all by the lighting. It was great to dive into the murky atmosphere and become part of this excessive performance.

THORSTEN PLATZ What do you find fascinating about working with light?

EVA CASTRINGIUS For me, neon light has a special magic, since the colors seem to glow on their own. In the photo series “Liquid Sky,” I constructed a set from colored lights and made double exposures of it using medium-format film. Reflections, distortions, ruptures, and superimpositions resulted in abstract visual spaces that I then filled

THORSTEN PLATZ Your paintings create the impression that giant fluorescent tubes are breaking through the visual space. Powerful perspectival elements produce an extreme sense of depth that is reinforced by the motif of landscape. Viewers find themselves at enormous heights or in great expanses, looking down into the depths from a bird’s-eye view with a kind of high-altitude euphoria. In your paintings, not only gravitation but also any sense of time seem to cease to exist. Enormous floating blobs of paint become creatures that glide weightlessly over the landscape and are penetrated by tapering, almost architectonic rays. What inspires you to create these visual worlds?

EVA CASTRINGIUS I have traveled through the southwestern United States many times and been impressed by geological phenomena such as the giant sand dunes, the Pinnacles, and the San Andreas Fault in California, Shiprock in New Mexico, and the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. Driving along the Sierra Nevada through Owens Valley makes me feel like I’m floating. When you drive through these enormous desert valleys, you feel so tiny and incredibly slow.



Liquid Sky, 2008, Exhibition view

we can still trust. In my paintings, landscapes become fictive spaces. They are roller coaster rides through complex visual spaces. Spilled paint suggests a rate of flow that doesn’t follow any rules. Spatial perspectives get lost in the lack of connection and lack of orientation in relation to external space.

THORSTEN PLATZ In your earlier series “Point Brake,” you also juxtaposed landscapes with architectural elements. In that series you referred to the channel system of the Los Angeles River. Industrial buildings also play an important role in your painting, as does architecture in the International Style. The dovetailing of landscape and architecture produced remarkable results in the work of architects of the “International Style,” especially on the West Coast.^[4]

EVA CASTRINGIUS The protagonists of the “International Style” knew how to fit their houses into the landscape in such a way that the interior and exterior dovetailed. They made their houses transparent by working with lots of glass and few walls. They nestled their buildings into the environment. The image of the landscape became part of the experience of the interior. I visited several of these houses and found they were located in fantastic landscapes. Julius Shulman captured this brilliantly in his photographs. L.A. is located geographically so beautifully; the city is wonderfully framed by the Pacific to the west and the Santa Monica Mountains and the Hollywood Hills to the north. Some of these homes are located high up. Looking down into the valley from there makes me feel like Caspar David Friedrich’s wanderer—except that the view is of the Pacific.

THORSTEN PLATZ You have devoted yourself to “staged photography” rather than documentary-style illustration.

[1] Slava Tsukerman’s film *Liquid Sky* (1982) is an homage to the new wave era. Young “posh punks” celebrate New York’s night life to the sounds of minimalist synthesizer music under glaring neon lights. The androgynous model Margaret becomes a medium for extraterrestrials who are trying to populate the earth. Much as it was at Andy Warhol’s Factory, the focus in the film is on sex, drugs, fashion, and music. The female lead, Anne Carlisle, seems like a reincarnation of the superstar Edie Sedgwick. The film ends with the suicide of the fragile and psychological

unstable character she plays. [2] *Googie* is a kind of “unofficial” architectural term that derives from John Lautner’s 1949 café of that name on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. Sweeping forms, large neon lights, and unusual combinations of materials are typical of these futuristic buildings of the 1950s and 1960s. Most are cafés, diners, restaurants, bowling alleys, motels, or gas stations. [3] The Galerie Jablonka in Berlin showed Mike Kelley’s *Kandors* in fall 2007. In it, Mike Kelley translated several Superman comics into three-dimensional sculptures. The glass

bells for the *Kandors* were mouth blown in a Czech glass factory. In the myth of Superman, Kandor, the capital of Superman’s native planet, Krypton, is the only surviving remnant after the planet exploded. Superman keeps the miniaturized city under a glass bell. [4] The *International Style* was an architecture and design movement that began in Europe in the 1920s and was principally influenced by the Bauhaus. In the 1930s, this style began to spread through California. It became popular there thanks to the Case Study Houses Program (1945–66) and evolved into a

Originally you came out of studio photography; for example, you once made a table-sized model of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor catastrophe and photographed it, staging the disaster for the camera.

EVA CASTRINGIUS Yes. I still remembered the accident perfectly. Staging it based on historical photographs was something I found very disturbing. It helped me to come to terms with this theme. I loved directing the lighting on my set.

THORSTEN PLATZ Scales and spaces separated from reality seem to be a thread running through your oeuvre. To what extent do chance and experiment play a role in your painting?

EVA CASTRINGIUS When I spill paint on my paintings and let it take its course, chance comes into play as a result of the complexity of that process. I enjoy combining chance with experience and intuition. Over time I have learned to integrate chance into my work and use it to experiment with new approaches to solutions.

THORSTEN PLATZ You try to achieve a complex visual space composed of as many different elements as possible, almost like a collage.

EVA CASTRINGIUS Architectural elements play an important role for me and provide a stark contrast with organic-looking spills produced in connection with the theme of water. The series "The Great Thirst" also takes water as its theme, or more specifically the water supply for Los Angeles.

THORSTEN PLATZ You have also photographed open-pit mines in Saxony using a telephoto lens and then made extreme enlargements of certain details from the negatives.

EVA CASTRINGIUS That region was quite depressing. I created an atmosphere of large mountains that turn out on closer inspection to be artificial formations and shimmering coal dust. The enlargement produces a graininess that gives the illustrations a painterly cast, which also explains the title, "Alpine Glow."

THORSTEN PLATZ So painting provides an impetus for your photography.

EVA CASTRINGIUS For the photo series "Gondola Suburbia,"



Gondola sublima (Gondola Suburbia), 2004/5, Lambda print on Alu-Dibond and Diasec, 51 x 77 cm

sublimity we feel when standing before a fantastic landscape. There is no space more abstract than the universe. In his "2001," Stanley Kubrick celebrated weightlessness and grappled with coming into existence and fading away. The white room of dying at the end of the film is removed from any spatial context. This room is often cited, for example, in the movie "Matrix." There reality is revealed to the protagonist as virtual and nonexistent.⁽⁶⁾

THORSTEN PLATZ To go back to your experiences traveling in the southwestern United States. Does the desert play the same role for you as this white room?

ing continues day and night throughout the year. The play only ends when there is nothing more to extract. Often the pits are then filled with garbage. It's horrible.

THORSTEN PLATZ Because you have lived in the United States as well, your oeuvre has American motifs as well as European ones. How does it feel to work in two so very different cultures? Do you miss the European context when you are there?

EVA CASTRINGIUS No. When I return home, I discover places I had never noticed before, which opens up new sources of inspiration for me. But then after a few months

I led a remote-controlled model of a gondola through the canals of Little Venice in the Spandau district of Berlin. The reflections in the water looks like streaks of paint. I like to transport elements of painting to photography. Paradoxically, I think of the concrete, more tangible aspect of photography to be a weakness. Painting is a physical process, and the painted image has an immediate, haptic presence.

THORSTEN PLATZ What feeling do you try to reproduce in your painting?

EVA CASTRINGIUS I use strong, clear colors and perhaps that is also a provocation. In truth, I am a romantic and want to float away, taking the viewers with me. In painting, I usually work in large formats, which enables me to bring myself and the viewers into the action more. I try to visualize acceleration and deceleration, the weightlessness and



Blue channel (The Great Thirst), 2003, Lambda print on Alu-Dibond, 103 x 180 cm

specifically Californian variant. Important contributions to the movement were made by architects such as Charles and Ray Eames, Pierre Koenig, Richard Neutra, A. Quincy Jones, Craig Ellwood, Raphael Soriano, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe with his Farnsworth House, Frank Lloyd Wright with Fallingwater, and Philip Johnson with his own home in New Canaan. **(5)** *Matrix* (1999) is an American science fiction film by the Wachowski brothers. The hacker Thomas A. Anderson, alias Neo, learns from

EVA CASTRINGIUS Yes. When there I feel like I'm moving in the void. It's like being in slow motion: everything around me seems to slow down incredibly. That makes the moment so long. Two hours by car from Los Angeles, in the Mojave Desert, lies the town of Twentynine Palms, near a military restricted zone. To the east there is a salt mine where I took photographs at night. The place is totally strewn with mines where all sorts of metals and minerals are being extracted. To the south is Joshua Tree National Park with its beautiful trees. Industrial areas collide with the landscape and are sometimes right next to protected national parks. To the north there are hundreds of isolated shacks, known as "homestead houses," most of which were abandoned. Artists like Andrea Zittel have settled there.⁽⁶⁾

THORSTEN PLATZ In your photo series "The Great Thirst" you show L.A.'s water supply. When you lived in Santa Monica in 2006–7 you also took photographs of garbage dumps and mines. What is about such landscapes that interests you?

EVA CASTRINGIUS Organized human intervention in nature. These acts of violence in which we try to subjugate nature. But in the process we destroy ourselves. When I stand above the Bingham Copper Mine and stare down into this enormous hole, with its high-tech infrastructure, I feel like I am watching a play in which everything is reduced to the absurd. Automated excavators as tall as a house rumble along ramps arranged in terraces like an arena. The min-



Stationary excavator (Alpine Glow), 2004/5, Lambda print on Alu-Dibond, 123 x 162 cm

I'm happy to go away again. In the mid-1990s I studied at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, which at the time was a real stronghold for painting. I loved the directness of gestural painting and Art Informel. My education and artistic practice have given me the aesthetic and analytical tools that enable me to find my way around complex situations without getting lost.

mysterious rebels that the so-called reality in which he lives does not exist; rather, people are connected to a highly complex computer program known as the Matrix. While they are prisoners of this virtual world and spend their lives there without suspecting anything, they are being used as a source of energy for machines in the real world. The agents pursuing Neo turn out to be programs to protect the Matrix by preventing escape from the Matrix. Neo manages to leave the Matrix, making him

destined to save humankind. **(6)** *Homestead houses* are the remnants of a failed settlement project that dates back to 1938, when the government tried to settle the high desert by offering potential settlers land at a ridiculously low price if they would build a house on it. But many settlers later left the area.