

Maria Christine Holter

Where I can think with my whole body

Christine Gutgsell's work with textiles and paper

Our first encounter takes place far from the little village of Girlan in Southern Tyrol, where she lives and works. Christine Gutgsell travels with art in her luggage. Carefully, she removes a folded piece of fabric and spreads it out in its full dimension on the floor of the bright Vienna apartment. Another one follows, and another. The colors of the fabrics – terra verde, rose, brown and white – are reflected in the surfaces of the improvised exhibition space, exuding a summery warmth and the scent of damp earth, even in February. It is astonishing how well the textiles fit into the setting of a living and dining area: the original functions of the household linens that Gutgsell has selected as the material of her art become readily apparent, and no further explanation is needed.

The unpacking and spreading out, folding and stowing of the work does not take place in an atmosphere of reverent silence. All the while, Christine Gutgsell's activity is accompanied by an easygoing narrative that flows spiritedly in German that is rounded and softened by a tongue accustomed to Italian. She mentions how happy she is to be back in Vienna, a city that she is indebted to for the wealth of education, inspiration and friendship it has brought her. Reminiscing about the years spent at the University studying history and communications during the 1980s, she tells of hungrily taking in the many things she wanted to read and know. Beginning in 1982 her activity increasingly turned toward the visual arts, whereby she also made important contacts in the Viennese art and literature scenes – many of them lasting friendships that over the years have been a continuing source of inspiration and gratification. Gutgsell maintained her studio in Vienna until 1999, although she had already returned to Girlan in 1992 for family reasons.

There she has lived a life marked by periods of intense artistic activity as well as by the equally devoted pursuit of various other occupations. Work in art education and language teaching, as well as coordinating functions in the South Tyrolean library system (the book as a lasting passion), have often denied her sufficient time for her artistic projects. Thus her enthusiasm is all the more pronounced when it is again time to prepare an exhibition or design a catalogue, as in the current project for Bomporto near Modena. Gutgsell's joyful energy in making her art is contagious, and one wants to dive in and become a part of the process.

Day and Night is the title that Christine Gutgsell has given to her newest textile works for Bomporto. The artist has selected her material with great care and with attentiveness to the occasion and the exhibition site: the red terra cotta pathways before the exhibition building, the sky, the river... The large pieces of fabric are three and one-half by two meters in size, ticking in rose and light blue that served her grandparents' generation as the covering for duvets and pillows. Little bits of down still stick to some of them, reacting with motion to every breath of wind and imparting an additional liveliness to the cloth. Every

piece of fabric has its own history, its necessity. The pigments used each carry a long chain of associations and memories. For Bomporto, the fabrics matured over the course of an entire year: from the first stage of the work, the application of egg white and egg yolk under the autumnal sky in a garden in Trentino, through conceptual work in the snowy Alpine valley Ötztal, to the impregnation and coloring (involving repeated application and ironing of pigments) done this June. The final stage of the work, in which the textile surfaces are abraded with sandpaper, was carried out in the summery heat of the artist's studio and residence in Girlan. Gutgsell seeks out places where she can think with her whole body. Generally they relate to points in her life history or their significance derives from current issues, as is the case in her work in the midst of the innovative prefabricated houses designed by architect Roland Rainer in 1964 in the Ötz Valley, which are dilapidated and in imminent danger of being torn down. Back in Girlan, Gutgsell works the pigment and binder with her bare hands, rubbing and stroking the fabric, also going over it with a stone, and then putting great physical exertion and mental concentration into fixing the pigment layers with a hot iron until burns begin to appear.

Christine Gutgsell can rely on experience that she has gathered over the course of many years spent perfecting a technique involving textiles, egg, natural pigments and the application heat, whereby she is continually varying and refining the "ingredients" in order to realize the effect desired for her current endeavor. The different densities, weaving structures and surface textures of the various fabrics (linen, cotton, burlap and felt) each demand special treatment: rough linens need ironing and folding, while the tightly woven cotton ticking only needs to be hung out. The latter is so fine and smooth, says Gutgsell, and she doesn't like working against the material. While comparable male artist colleagues (such as the American Morris Louis or the Austrian Hermann Nitsch) generally aspire to achieve dramatic effects using poured paint and then present their textile materials on the art market's usual stretcher frames, Christine Gutgsell has opted for an unspectacular, typically female (?) approach. Her fabrics remain fabrics. They are shown folded and stacked in the exhibition space, or they are spread out, or hung in a way that allows them to be viewed from all sides. When not in use, they are folded or rolled and stowed in drawers and wardrobes befitting their domestic origin. Consciously or unconsciously, Gutgsell is paying tribute to the labor and the way of life of country women in past generations, without putting into question the emancipated lifestyles of the present.

Textiles accompany the human being from the cradle to the coffin. They become saturated with body fluids and are stained by food and drink. They clothe, cover, enshroud in secular and ritual contexts, and they are religiously venerated in shrines attracting streams of pilgrims. Before this background, the work's beholders cannot help thinking in familiar (and for the artist desired) categorizations and associations. The titles she chooses, like *Tear Cloth*, *Rainy Night* or *Rose Skin*, soften resistances to emotion and poetic thoughts. Delicate, as if soaked by the rain and dried by the wind: such metaphors are also evoked by Christine Gutgsell's work with paper. Minimal interventions, often amplified with pigment (e.g. rubbed into the marred area left behind by tearing off a piece of adhesive tape) or achieved through the brief application of a

candle flame, are made on pieces of paper with hi(stories) of their own: brown bags, blotting paper, sheets from school notebooks or household notepads.

Gutgsell ties the bands of her graphic portfolio, and then reaches for the last piece of cloth, stowing it for her departure. Before she goes there is time for cooking and eating together. After the door has closed, the room retains the atmosphere of our conversation and the scent of the fabrics. As they have here, Christine Gutgsell's works will also transform the exhibition space in Bomporto into a pleasant sojourn, enchanting visitors and doing justice in every way to the name Bomporto, the "good harbor".

Translation: Christopher Barber