

In Manuel Stehli's paintings, life-size figures appear in largely empty spaces: a male figure is reclining on a mattress, his white shirt blending in with the wall behind him, extending the space. A keyword here is flatness; there is hardly an individual touch or expressive gesture in this way of painting. As characters, the people in Stehli's work also remain flat, at least to a certain extent. Even though their appearance and posture convey a certain impression, there is no sharply defined individuality. The figures appear slightly absent, open to interpretation, and yet in formal terms, they are firm placeholders of active color constellations.

Stehli does not paint from life, but instead collects images from digital sources such as computer simulations. He is fascinated by the way human figures can be moved around and digitally manipulated. In his paintings, a leg from one found image is combined with a torso from another, and from a third source he takes the head. This way of composing affects the proportions, the coherence, and ultimately the (un)realness of the figures, who appear slightly awkward, not fully at home in their bodies. They are the product of a digital age, translated into a centuries-old medium.

A man in a bright red pullover, seen from the back, stands in front of a door opening. At his feet is his shadow, solid as stone. Even though the dominant color shapes are clearly defined with hard lines and edges, there are also spots of uncertainty in Stehli's compositions, or parts where the paint is only vaguely applied. Feet remain unfinished, or the artist has moved the head of a figure a little to the side. These less-defined areas contrast with the flatness and clean perfection of the rest of the scene. Traces of change remain visible, allowing a different access into the painting. "Things always move on the canvas," the artist says, as if the painting is giving him directions and looking for its own balance once the basic outline of the composition has been established.

Reduction is what binds the different works together. Objects, spaces, and figures are stripped of ornament and individual details until there is just enough visual information to read the situation. Stehli likes to think of the scenes as in-between states. Apart from digital imagery, the history of painting informs his work. He is inspired by the early Californian paintings of David Hockney, or the work of Kerry James Marshall. Early Renaissance paintings are also an important source. Stehli is fascinated by how Piero della Francesca forms the human body and makes it part of a geometrical order. In Stehli's own work, this translates into the simultaneous importance of human features and objectifying abstraction.

*--Jurriaan Benschop*