

Between the poles

*Speak, you too,
speak as the last one,
have your say.*

*Speak –
But do not separate the no from the yes.
Give your saying also meaning:
give it its shadow.*

– Paul Celan, *Speak, You, too*

“Opposite” is how one describes a relationship between things that are as different as they could possibly be. Two poles that couldn’t be farther apart. And yet they gravitate towards one another, precisely because they are opposed. The magnetism breaks through the borders of incompatibility and proves the necessity of joining to the opposite of one’s self.

In the second verse of *Speak, You, too* the poet Paul Celan calls for a way of speaking that stops at the separation between affirmation and negation. It is a speech that is located between opposing poles. A speech that is also echoed in the paintings of Manuel Stehli: bodies turn away from and at the same time to each other, eyes remain shut while the lap is exposed, glances gaze past each other while bodies sit close. Manuel Stehli consciously subjects his figures to polarities in order to arrive at the point between them. In the painting *Untitled (?)* (2018) this “in between” manifests itself in the form of a pause. A man sits with his back to the viewer, arms propped on the chair and table, shirtless, his head leaning to the right. The lower body and torso are held together by interior furnishings, but it only takes a minor intrusion, a gentle tilt of the head, to call all the conveyed stability into question. The body, through its passive bearing, gets shifted into a state of impending action. In *Untitled* Manuel Stehli hits the pause button just as something is on the verge of happening. In doing so it’s not only the figure that must remain in the moment between, but the viewer as well. During the Romantic period the figure seen from behind served as a projection surface for the viewer and was bound up with symbolism for desire and longing. In comparison the rear views in the paintings of Manuel Stehli mostly act as an obstruction to the viewer. This is especially clear in *At the door* (2018), in which the figure takes up nearly the entire image. The man is standing literally center stage and the entire composition seems to be built around him, every line pointing to his body, and yet nothing happens beyond the holding of the pose. It is a confident, nearly a dominant posture, and a clear gesture *against* the traditional conception of this painting motif. In other paintings Stehli uses the view from behind to deal with social relationships. In *Debatte* (2018) three men form a group constellation, standing so tightly together that the viewer feels virtually excluded from the situation, in comparison

to *Backyard* (2017) where the viewer just about gets sucked into the ménage à trois. Manuel Stehli uses these strategies of nearness and distance to push the figures in his painting as well as the viewer into a state of limbo between exhibitionism and voyeurism, and through this questions the subject-object relationship of this nexus. The atmosphere of ambivalence that seems to be induced here is what makes his work unique. This ambiguity appears again in *Aldea* (2018), a small canvas in which, at first glance, single, monochrome planes of color seem to be transformed into architecture. The title *Aldea* (in English: village) suggests a correlation between the singular architectural components, yet one look at the image reveals a different reality. The geometric forms do appear on the shared ground of a desert-like landscape, at the same time individual formations break away from the overall structure, resulting in a gradual turning away from the viewer. While the trapezoidal structure in the left foreground allows a full view of the interior, a look at the next one seems to reveal only an exterior wall. With every additional element that Stehli places into the visual space, the three-dimensional bodies lose more ground, until only monochrome, sandy, brown planes remain. It is a reference to the original form. The more high-contrast the constellations in the picture become, the more they reveal themselves as a means of isolating the planes from one another. With this isolation it becomes clear that this painting is not presenting architecture or landscape, but rather a portrait of an in-between space. The eye should wander between the spaces, between the ruin-like architecture and within the emptiness. In taking this walk the eye ultimately arrives at the spot where Manuel Stehli wants it to be: a space between the poles. A space in which illusion asks reality to dance and where a language is spoken that no longer separates “no” from “yes.”

--Carina Bukuts