

# **“I use a ‘baroque-like’ principle in my work”**

**A Conversation between Sibylle Springer and Wolfgang Ulrich**

**Wolfgang Ullrich: How do you know if a picture is finished?**

Sibylle Springer: If there are no longer any brushstrokes that need to be moved.

**Do you “move” things around a lot to finish a picture?**

I move things and fiddle with them because I only roughly define the pictorial structure and colors when I begin an artwork. My photographs and sketches set the stage for how a picture will develop, but these models need to be corrected and directed toward a certain dynamic and dramaturgy when I begin structuring and composing the picture. All this happens directly on the canvas.

**So your working process is based on continuously trying things out, balancing things against each other—and looking for mistakes?**

Yes, that is right. On the very first day that I begin working on a picture, a discussion is initiated that lasts until a solution is found. This dispute is then incorporated in layers on the canvas over weeks or months until finally a delicately balanced, well thought-out result becomes visible—while the story and multitude of thoughts behind it remain palpable.

**This sounds as if it would actually not be a good thing for the finished picture if its development were too “smooth,” too uncomplicated. Because then the narrative behind it would be brief and harmless.**

Once in a while I make paintings that are fast and swift—these are the sprinters. They are quicker on their feet. But mostly I automatically end up with pictures that require a longer period of time, because visually these tend to grab my attention more. While working on such pictures, any event is welcome: the picture is allowed to play tricks on me, mistakes can occur, and surprising turns can present themselves. Thanks to my working method I am basically able work on a picture for an extremely long time and still produce a good result—either with a story that is a dramatic roller-coaster ride, or one that is short and concise.

**Do you set the speed with which a picture is created or does the picture do that? Does it only play tricks on you when you want it to, or does it also eventually take on a mind of its own?**

Most pictures have a mind of their own, and I can never really calculate in what way and how fast a work will be created. But I can let a picture run a little wild on a long leash, so to say, to increase the chance of something happening that is unexpected and surprising. Or, I can keep it on a short leash and work with more focus and speed. But, for most of the pictures it is more enriching if I let myself get caught up in a kind of game with them, because I could not have intentionally conceived what eventually evolves. However, this means that, during the painting process, a certain amount of trepidation about the resulting picture—the waywardness, the unpredictability, and the “mistakes”—is very often part of my everyday work, but everything I do with the picture turns out to be constructive in the end.

**Does this mean that something new also often develops out of the waywardness and the mistakes? And does it also mean that the amount of risk you are willing to take as an artist is decisive for the result? How exactly do you experience this risk while painting?**

It is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is exciting and beautiful when I achieve surprising results by approaching my pictorial idea in a roundabout way. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that something good and new will actually emerge. It is possible that I will not have any success after weeks of work. But, unlike in my earlier working process, I can now spend a long time thinking through and working on a picture if necessary. I find it reassuring to have realized that failure is, in principle, actually impossible, as long as the basic idea of a series of works is sustainable.

**What does it mean for you to mostly work with series? Are the individual pictures variations on a theme, or are they parts of an overall narrative?**

They are both. I make paintings that are variations on a theme—and I think they are especially important, or can be explored further. But at the same time the individual works in a series always shed light on a certain aspect of the narrative. Some pictures are better at revealing the initial experience that prompted me to do the series, while others are more distant from it, meaning they become more understandable when the narrative pictures are placed next to them. But each picture is autonomous and can stand on its own without its “siblings.” Still, I think that the interaction between all of the pictures together is what makes a series richer than a singular work.

**Do you know beforehand how large a series is going to be, and when do you know if a series is finished? Does the initial experience you mentioned here need to be exhausted, so to say, before you start a new series?**

Most of the time I can sense rather early on whether a series is going to be large or whether or not it has a lot of potential. Sometimes a domino effect occurs when I work and the pictures come tumbling one by one, each logically following the other. Then it seems as if I could continue in this way indefinitely and keep painting new and different pictures for the series—as if I could develop a very long narrative out of it. I place and combine the pictures in fictive exhibition spaces and then try to imagine the “missing” works in order to paint them. Bit by bit, I work through each theme until it is exhausted, at least for the time being, and I become interested in doing something new and different.

**Are the fictive exhibition spaces always the same, or do they vary according to the series? The way you describe this sounds similar to how installation artists work with a particular space. What is the relationship between your pictures and the space around them?**

I actually designed the series for my exhibit *Gleam* in the Kunsthalle Bremerhaven based on the spatial situation there. I painted the pictures with this space in mind—in order to allow the best possible succession and alternation of the works in this location. Maybe this approach is similar to that of an installation artist, but my fictive spaces are usually rather ideal exhibition possibilities, which I am then able to fill in my imagination. In reality, these spaces are rather rare, as we know. And that is why I use imagination as a support to find a precise order of my paintings and the “perfect” series. Although the pictures themselves do not reveal this spatial relation, my intention is to elegantly initiate a transition between my pictorial spaces and the space of the viewers. I want the audience to feel as if they could walk right into the picture. That is why the size of my pictures is “body-related” and the surface is matt and not shiny like oil paintings, whose surface makes the separation between the viewers and the picture visible and even palpable.

**This sounds as if you position yourself in the tradition of illusionistic painting. Are such historical references important for you? Which movements or figures in art history do you feel you have an elective affinity to when it comes to your work?**

I grew up in a household of people who were extremely fond of Baroque—Bernini and Bach were favorites. That definitely plays an indirect role in my artworks. What I like about Baroque is that the viewers, or listeners, are not excluded from the work, but instead are taken along for the ride. In Handel's operas, for instance, you experience an exuberant ecstasy of sound before the content is revealed and the crystal-clear composition becomes perceptible down to the smallest detail. Each individual part is in itself a small, complete musical piece and serves as a part of the entire order. Through exuberance and ornamentation, a Baroque opera can evoke a narrative that also adheres to a strictly structured system of composition. This could not work in the same way in Romanticism, and that fascinates me. In my own work I use a "Baroque-like" principle. The picture becomes entirely overgrown with structures and ultimately splits into separate parts, details, and pictorial planes. Tracks are laid for the viewer to follow, and bit by bit these lead toward the underlying narrative— toward a connection to the real world.

**I find this comparison to Handel's operas extremely interesting. Your pictures seem indeed to be ecstatic at first glance—beyond borders and form. But then you realize how exact, multilayered, and detailed their composition is. That is why I think it is really important to see the originals, because reproductions in a catalogue hardly allow viewers to comprehend this double-edged experience of exuberance and order. Does this mean you are not one of those artists who design their pictures to be photogenic and dazzling as reproductions?**

Ideally I would like both! But that is true—my works show the most and are able to realize their potential best when they are seen in the original. For them to be reproduced in a catalogue, a special way has to be found to convey an impression of the paintings to viewers. But I find that absolutely gratifying and I deliberately use this method to give the picture a chance to be "multi-effective"—to arouse the viewer's desire to look at the picture more closely or to see the original. In my earlier artworks, I used to work with concise foregrounds and backgrounds, which made the paintings easier and quicker to read, and they also worked better as reproductions. But now I am more interested in how different levels interlock and how a picture is "encoded."

**What do you mean by "encoded"? Do your pictures actually hold secret messages? Ones that can only be revealed if we pay extremely close attention to details that are perhaps even invisible when the picture is reproduced?**

Yes, in some of my pictures there are inconspicuous, hidden "notes"—sentences, for example, or objects that do not really play a role in the picture's appearance. These notes have something to do with the context in which the painting was created; they refer to something particular, or they are a personal commentary on the respective artwork. They are like marginal notes, or a watermark, and whoever chooses to look at a picture long enough is going to discover these things—in the original and also in the reproduction. But this only works if the painting has a kind of woven structure in which these notes can become entangled. "Encoding" therefore refers to this woven structure, among other things. I would rather have a picture into which I can integrate, or even "smuggle," different kinds of information than a picture that is easy to read in just one look.

**And do you think that the viewers are really able to identify and decode the messages bit by bit? Or is that not even very important for understanding your pictures adequately?**

Viewers do not need those hidden notes. Rather they are a little bonus that comes as a surprise when they are discovered, or they are something that refers back to my approach. For example, in my latest work Pink from the graffiti series, I added the sentence: "**Dies ist erst der Anfang**" (This is only the beginning). These hidden things have something to do with the pictures' origins. I did not notice the graffiti hidden in the tunnels for weeks, but it was there the whole time! Sometimes you

see something much later, although it has been right in front of your eyes all along. And that could also be the case for the hidden messages in the picture.

**This sounds like you hope viewers will look at your pictures long and often. But this is more the case for collectors who live with a painting and who see it daily than for the average gallery visitor who passes by rather quickly. What is your notion of the ideal viewer?**

I would like a viewer who is interested in taking his or her time and in looking in peace. But how can you motivate someone to do this? How can you influence this? This is a rather difficult issue in my opinion. I try to design my pictures in such a way that they convey the idea that there is something to be discovered in them from the start. They are able to make viewers pause, to demand the time they need to be viewed. Thomas Huber once wrote that the artist is responsible for the behavior of his or her audience.

**I find this a great idea. But it is also a very demanding idea. It refers to the idea that art is not just entertainment without any consequences, but it is also able to change—reform, educate, elevate, improve—the people who let themselves become involved. Schiller’s demanding idea of the aesthetic education of humankind comes to mind here. What do you think of such expectations about art—including yours?**

First of all, I do not want to force anything on anyone or to extort anything from them. That is why a picture is the ideal medium for me—it lets you choose whether you want to look at it or not. On the other hand, I do expect viewers who are willing to engage with my work to also be willing to delve into it, to explore the different layers in it. My pictures evolve out of an experience and an observation, and this experienced situation—this atmosphere—is what I am trying to paint. I want a spark to jump over to viewers so they can participate. For me, art is about the viewers being offered the chance to enter into a dialogue with the artwork, like reading a book, going to the opera, or watching a movie in the cinema. Good entertainment is ideally capable of grabbing the recipients’ full attention and enriching them, educating them, raising their awareness, and changing them.

Wolfgang Ullrich was born in 1967. He is a writer and a professor of art and media theory at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design. His main interests include the history and criticism of the concept of art, the sociology of art, and consumer theory.