

The material rules
On Toni Wombacher's fabric paintings

by Isa Bickmann

In attempting to characterize Toni Wombacher's *Shades of White Series* in terms of commonly used art historical categories, we may think of different media, techniques, terms, and historical antecedents. With a view to genre, terms such as painting, installation, environment, object, and relief spring to mind. The artist presents us with several lengths of fabric hung on walls, their lower edges touching or resting on the ground. The fabric employed is unprimed cotton, which is otherwise frequently tautened over stretcher frames in order to be used as a painting ground. The paint, applied to the fabric in horizontal stripes of varying hues and heights, reveals these works as paintings first and foremost despite their not taking the traditional form on a stretcher, and the lengths of material instead being hung by tacking the top end of each piece directly into the wall using just a few nails. Nothing has been stretched here: the textile still folds and buckles from being transported and stored.

In addition to the traces it shows of having been crumpled up, the fabric takes on a life of its own as the paint applied to it dries. Wombacher has used gouache across the entire lengths of the fabric panels, leaving only the uppermost stripe *untreated*. The lower edges of the lengths have been painted in water-soluble black varnish to create a rich, saturated coat of paint that flattens the material out; these sections appear smooth and more or less shiny depending on the amount of water that has been mixed in. The higher up, lighter bands of colour executed in gouache appear duller and highlight the fabric structure and the creases in the material. When using stretched canvas in a painting, artists usually seek to avoid having the fabric buckle, even spraying water on the back and adding wedges into the frame to straighten it out. Toni Wombacher by contrast seeks out the creases, her work placing emphasis on the sculptural, relief-like aspects of the material. This, and their extension of the pictorial space onto the floor, allows for the pieces to be read as objects that incorporate chance. The canvas functions – far removed from any notions of perfection to be striven for – as a found object in the sense of a *poor material* that stands only for itself. When the artist mentions *Arte Povera* in conversation, she takes this to mean a simple material receiving a new complexity through being treated as part of her artistic concept.

The artist, who always works site-specifically, has brought painting into a spatial situation here once again. The varnished ends of the lengths of fabric invoke the black floor, and in this way connect to it; Wombacher speaks of them *absorbing it*. A diptych even appears to be drawing the black paint up into itself through threads hanging out of its bottom edge. The room thus plays a crucial part in the formation of the work, which in turn would allow us to speak of an environment, in the sense of a spatial arrangement that can be walked through. This was preceded by a happening of sorts, albeit one performed without an audience, during which the work was created on site as the artist temporarily turned the exhibition space into her studio before the show. Alongside the large pieces in the exhibition, she presents the *colour tests* that bear witness to her painterly research process: these shorter and narrower strips of canvas again feature painted stripes of colour, with the darkest at the bottom. In previous experiments the artist had found gouache, which dries quickly and can be applied in thin layers, to have advantages over watercolour, oil, dispersion paint, ink, and acrylic.

The blocky stripes vary in height, announcing in their reduction and their concentrated form a proximity to Minimalism and geometric abstraction. However, in contrast to works of Minimal Art – the awning stripes of Daniel Buren come to mind – the seriality Wombacher's

fabric panels suggest is anything but monotonous in nature. In this respect they may be closer to the fabric paintings of Blinky Palermo. Nevertheless, Wombacher's practice is rooted more strongly in the former, anti-illusionistic, non-narrative presentation of colour and material. Donald Judd famously turned to sculpture after remaining dissatisfied with the residual spatial illusion in his own strip painting *DSS 24* in 1961. Wombacher eschews illusion altogether by placing the focus on the characteristics of the crude fabric. At the same time, she recognises that we have internalised the horizontal and that this could lead us to connect the works to landscape references. It remains debatable whether Wombacher does not indeed set a narrative hierarchy by leading the gaze on a downward movement and having the eye read the fabric webs from top to bottom, i.e., from light to dark.

The picture proves to be a material object. *presence* and *place*, terms introduced by Robert Morris and Carl Andre respectively, are apt to explain the impact these installation pieces have on the viewer. They exude a calm that creates an almost sublime effect in the viewer and affords us a powerful experience of the space, the colours, and the haptic qualities of the fabric.

While the medium – painted fabric – may bring to mind its use in sacred art works, this connotation seems un compelling with regard to Toni Wombacher's oeuvre. In a trans-cultural sense, we could also be reminded of rolled-up painted scrolls from Asia or indigenous textile art, yet the artist does not seek to enter into exchange, translate, or appropriate such work. Rather, she draws on an intensive engagement with the minimalist meditations on the colour white by the American artist Agnes Martin, whom Wombacher professes to admire. In addition to applying the paint as thinly as possible and keeping a close eye on the finest nuances, both artists separate their painted bands of colour with a recognisable pencil stroke. More crucially, they share an emotional approach to colour linked to a highly subjective, almost existential attitude.

The changing colour effects caused by shifts in the incidence of light on white paint aroused Wombacher's interest. The raw top section of the lengths of fabric always shows the material's proper colour. White can take many varied nuances. Sometimes it is close to cream, at other times it has hints of rose, sometimes it appears greenish or has a blue tint. All the colours of the colour wheel are contained in white, but they are not *achromatic*, non-colourful, as for example Pietro Manzoni tried to show with plaster. We could also cite Robert Ryman or Sean Scully at this point. White is the essence of painting. White has a metaphysical presence. Black is its counterpoint. As mentioned earlier in this essay, the artist references the black floor paint of the exhibition space. Drooping onto the floor, painting thus takes a place in the room where it is less expected. Would it be audacious to draw a link to Malevich and his Black Square, which also exists outside of our customary notions of modern painting?

At the heart of Toni Wombacher's *Shades of White Series* is the quiet beauty of colour and the delicate variance it can unfurl, which the artist traces in an intensive process of watching and recording through paint. The installation required experimentation with paint colours, their application and consistency, and in her sustained experimenting, revising, painting, over-painting, and allowing to dry, Wombacher stands in the tradition of a conceptual and minimalist painting that has liberated itself from up-to-dateness and instead finds an almost meditative approach. With Wombacher, this meditative aspect is expressed also in the fact that she extends her lengths of fabrics by painstakingly sewing extensions into them. The artist's devoted exploration of her material is always geared towards transforming the space.

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Projekt

2021 / Idee / Es gibt kein Weiß / Weiß erscheint in allen Farbvariationen / das Weiß der Wände in geschlossenen Räumen mit Fenstern ändert sich mit der Intensität des Lichteinfalls, der Tages- und Jahreszeit, der Himmelsausrichtung der Räume und der Witterung



2022 / Raumidee / Ausstellungshalle 1a mit glänzend spiegelndem, schwarz lackiertem Boden und weißen Wänden

2022 / Entscheidung für Malerei / Materialtests / es entstehen die kleinen Arbeiten *shades of white s* / Experimente mit Öl, Acryl, Lack, Dispersion, Aquarell, Gouache und Tusche auf ungrundiertem Baumwollgewebe

Ende 2022 / Anfang 2023 / Erste große und mittelgroße Arbeiten in Gouache und Lack *shades of white b und m* entstehen

2023 / Atelier auf Zeit in der Ausstellungshalle 1a / 26. März 2023 bis 27. April 2023 / Herstellung der übergroßen Arbeiten

Ausstellung der Arbeit / *another kind of light* / 27. April - 7. Mai 2023 in der Ausstellungshalle 1a



Project

2021 / Idea / There is no white / White appears in all colour variations / The white of the walls in closed rooms with windows changes with the intensity of the light, the time of day and season, the celestial orientation of the rooms and the weather



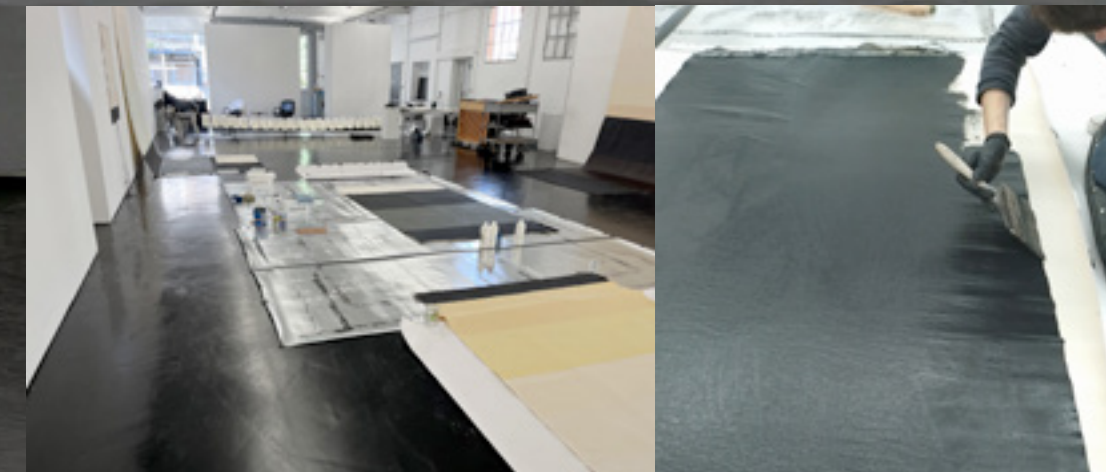
2022 / Room idea / Ausstellungshalle 1a with reflective glossy, black varnished floor and white walls

2022 / Decision for painting / Material tests / Small works *shades of white s* are created / Experiments with oil, acrylic, varnish, dispersion, watercolour, gouache and ink on unprimed cotton fabric

End of 2022 / Beginning of 2023 / Creation of first large and medium sized works in gouache and varnish *shades of white b and m*

2023 / Temporary studio in the Ausstellungshalle 1a / 26 March 2023 to 27 April 2023 / Production of the large-scale works

Exhibition of the work / *another kind of light* / 27 April - 7 May 2023 in the Ausstellungshalle 1a



another kind of light

shades of white series

toni wombacher |



Another Kind of Light
An installation by Toni Wombacher

by Edwin Schäfer

Upon entering the exhibition space of AusstellungenHalle 1a in Frankfurt-Sachsenhausen, one of the first things you notice is the black floor. Shiny and impenetrable, it defines the room. Toni Wombacher has devoted herself to studying this floor and conceived her work series entitled *Shades of White* for the space. The series consists of seven conceptual painted artworks. In it, the artist negotiates questions concerning the conditions and possibilities of current Minimalist painting. The formats vary between 160 cm and 215 cm in width and between 245 cm and 520 cm in length. They are hung on all three walls of the exhibition space, each of them nailed directly onto the wall without framing. Hung at different heights, they end at the floor or spread across it, extending into the space.

Common to all the works, besides their execution on un-primed and un-stretched fabric, is the subdivision or composition. Each piece is subdivided, organised into several horizontal zones. The upper zone is always left unpainted and shows the fabric in its raw state. This is followed downwards by several zones showing blends of different colours with white in different gradations. The lower part by contrast features several zones of colours mixed with black. Looking at the individual pieces next to each other, what is striking besides the varied orchestration of colours is the change in the way the fabric itself behaves. Depending on whether watered-down or thick paint has been used, the textile develops a life of its own. It curves, undulates, folds, and ripples in various ways. This can be seen especially well in the uppermost, empty zone and in the edges of the material. The term of a *painterly act* could be applied in this context. Toni Wombacher is not interested in painterly subtlety expressed in an idiosyncratic, elaborated personal style, but in a detached, objective painterly execution of an action, a purely objective application of paint, which precisely through its restraint is able to allow the qualities of painting per se and the material effect of the image as such to emerge all the more clearly and intentionally. Painting is not celebrated here but is reduced, in clear language, to its absolute essence. This is manifested in a monumental, yet at the same time very subtle effect in the large-format works.

What is striking is that each of the works has two parts. The lower part is executed in variations of black varnish, the second in white paint tinted with gouache to create subtly different hues. In these two areas, two different dynamic processes begin to take place as we look at them. The black area seems in each case to be absorbing the black colour of the floor, diffusing it upwards. At the same time the painted-black surface of the fabric appears to almost be sinking and dissolving into the floor. The upper, brighter part demonstrates the respective opposite movements; the tinted white rises upwards, spreads across the wall, while the gentle gradual downward darkening gives us an impression of the colour sinking down and settling into the dark area. The two parts connect, yet visually appear to move away from each other, which creates an enduring dynamic tension in the pieces. What we are witnessing is a continuously changing light process, which animates the works and makes them appear almost alive. Of course, all the dualistic interpretations of light and shade, day and night, earth and sky suggest themselves. Yet what is more compelling is how Wombacher gives rhythm to the respective light and dark areas through minimal colour deviations and, by leaving the upper segment empty, inserts a third aspect into the works that eludes dualism. It is in this upper segment that the material comes into its own and creates an openness that frees the artwork up to a variety of interpretations. The part that is left untreated thus becomes the maybe most important part of the piece. By taking the detour via painting, Wombacher manages to get to the heart of things, to allow objects and materials to appear as they are and their inherent dignity to come to the fore. And this movement of thought and perception can be extended to the space as a whole: The black floor and its physical appearance were probably never as much part of

shades of white b01 / 2022 / 250 x 160 cm / Gouache, Lack, Bleistift auf ungrundierter Baumwolle / Gouache, varnish, pencil on unprimed canvas



shades of white b07 / 2023 / 480 x 160 cm / Gouache, Lack, Bleistift auf ungrundierter Baumwolle, Nähgarn / Gouache, varnish, pencil on unprimed canvas, sewing thread



shades of white b04 / 2023 / 460 x 215 cm / Gouache, Lack, Bleistift auf ungrundierter Baumwolle / Gouache, varnish, pencil on unprimed canvas



shades of white m01, m02 / 2022 / je / each 115 x 80 cm / Gouache, Lack, Bleistift auf ungrundierter Baumwolle, gefärbte Baumwollschnur / Gouache, varnish, pencil on unprimed canvas, dyed cotton string

and point of departure for an exhibition as they are in this installation.

The paintings employ two very different types of paint, varnish and gouache, a somewhat unusual combination. The gouache is applied in very thin, watery washes, creating hardly more than a hint of colour. The colour pigments seep into the material without changing its surface structure. All folds and ripples in the fabric are preserved, and, crucially, the edges of the weave also remain visible: It is here that we can trace the lively play of the fabric and the changes created in the material through wetting it with thinned paint. The varnish used in the lower part of each piece acts quite differently to the gouache: The fabric here is much more heavily strained, it is entirely covered, sometimes in several layers of paint. Its pores are completely closed, creating the impression of spatial depth. We look into the material, into the paint, and the notion of the abyss imposes itself. An infinitely deep space opens up before us, we are drawn into the ground.

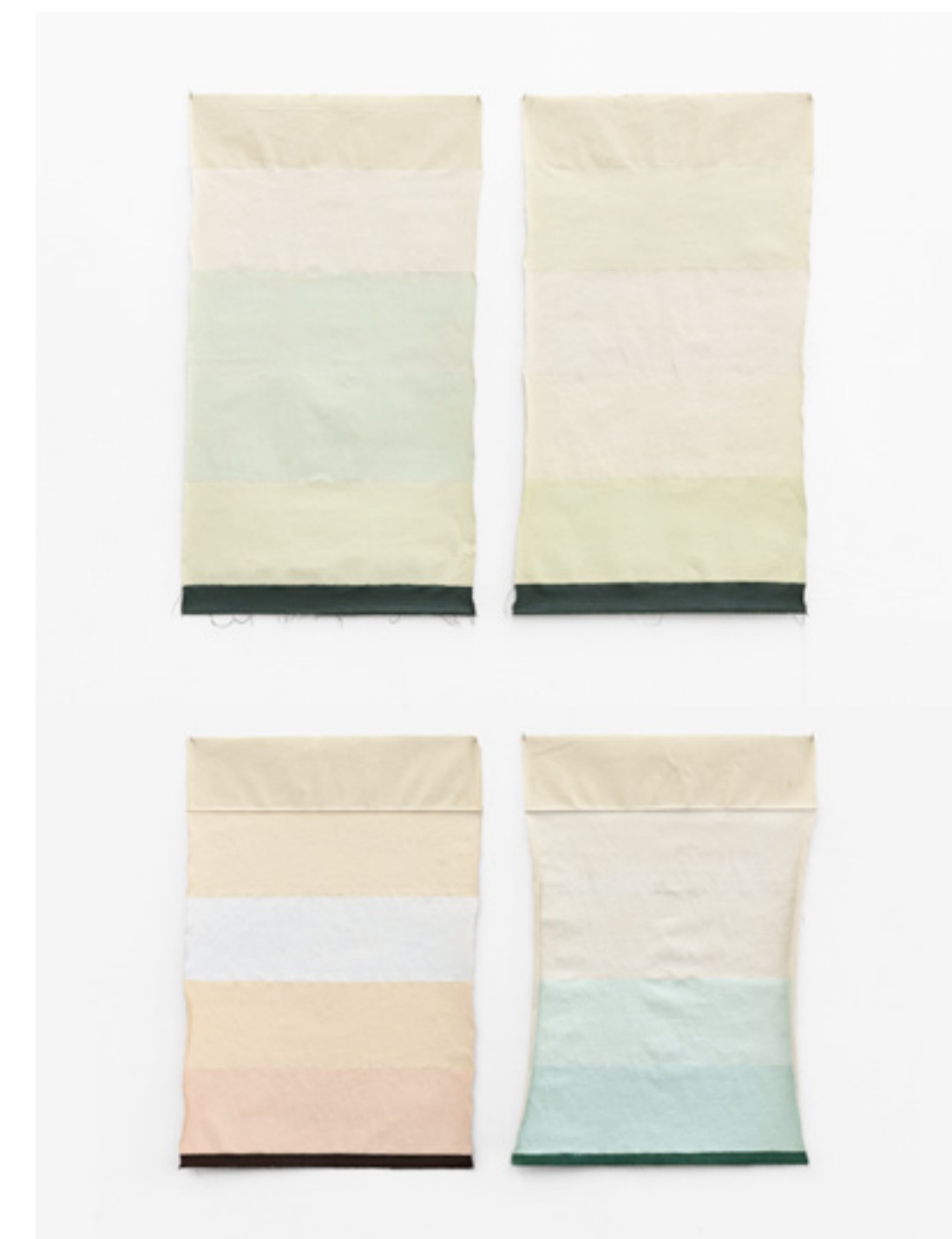
At this point, we must look at the overall character of the work: There is a sense of the sublime to the installation as a whole. It creates a sacral atmosphere, turns the viewer into part of an unfamiliar cult. Yet by contrast the works also have a provisory, nomadic aspect. We can imagine them being rolled up in no time at all and brought to be hung in a different place. This gives us the impression of being confronted with a call to action, a call that leaves us reflecting on ourselves and that opens up a multitude of interpretive possibilities to act. The simultaneous conceptual Minimalist clarity and material openness of the works thus reveal a sphere of meaning that allows viewers to become participants.



shades of white s05 / 2022 / 57 x 40 cm / Aquarellfarbe, Lack, Bleistift auf ungrundierter Baumwolle / Watercolour, varnish, pencil on unprimed canvas
shades of white s06 / 2022 / 56 x 40 cm / Acrylfarbe, Lack, Bleistift auf ungrundierter Baumwolle / Acrylic paint, varnish, pencil on unprimed canvas
shades of white s07 / 2022 / 42 x 40 cm / Tusche, Bleistift auf ungrundierter Baumwolle / Ink, pencil on unprimed canvas



shades of white b03 / 2023 / 245 x 160 cm / Gouache, Lack, Bleistift auf ungrundierter Baumwolle / Gouache, varnish, pencil on unprimed canvas



shades of white s01, s02 (oben links und rechts / top left and right) / 2022 / je / each 70 x 40 cm / Gouache, Lack, Bleistift auf ungrundierter Baumwolle / Gouache, varnish, pencil on unprimed canvas
shades of white s03 (unten links / bottom left) / 2022 / 57 x 40 cm / Ölfarbe, Lack, Bleistift auf ungrundierter Baumwolle / Oil paint, varnish, pencil on unprimed canvas
shades of white s04 (unten rechts / bottom right) / 2022 / 57 x 40 cm / Lack, Bleistift auf ungrundierter Baumwolle / Varnish, pencil on unprimed canvas