IM DUNKEL SCHAUEN

Fotoarbeiten von Pernille Koldbech Fich

Jens Asthoff © 2012

Translated from German: Leila Grey.

„The dark had a distanceless shape. The room's ceiling might as well have been clouds."
- David Foster Wallace, Infinite Jest

A Black of uncertain depth, lightless and dense. Another, extremely shiny surface and yet also strangely elusive. A blunt and muted Black. Another, which the light first turns grey in soft shadowing and, finally, swallows up completely. Black shimmering, that in a diffuse reflection lets you guess at an image and visually transforms wide surface into space. Black as opaque, empty, constructed, diffuse space.
In the images of her 13-part photo series Black Pernille Koldbech Fich frequently places almost abstract variations of Black before the eyes, that non-colour that encapsulates an absence of light and visibility. Yet to this group of images, that are at once picturesque and sober, also belong five portraits. The artist has made portraits of four different women in the classical half-length or bust representations, dressed in black and photographed against black backgrounds of flat spatial effect.
The very light-skinned faces and the blonde or grey hair of the women stand out clearly, nearly luminous against the areas of darkness. They seem almost as though cut out from the atmospheric black, marking a clear relationship between the fore- and background, between figure and space. The other motifs in Black appear predominately two-dimensional and abstract: Some of them are also representations of strange, darkened, ambiguous, only rudimentarily visible spaces – for example in Black (double screen), Black (double screen, second) or Black (backdrops) – obviously arrangements of the elements of the set in which the portraits were also photographed. Indeed, even those black images which appear to be flat, like Black (table, cardboard, light) and Black (pedestal #1), are actually representations of space, a kind of inverted interior.
Often it is only after the second glance that one recognises those elements which, as it were, allow one to decode the spatial dimensions of the image – such as a table top bleeding into the edge of the image or objects like a pedestal or an armchair which, camouflage-like, vary the surrounding darkness and sometimes seem to virtually overlap and disappear into it. Koldbech Fich here fuses the object and the background within the two-dimensionality of the image surface. In Black (wall II, chair) a stool with a black seat pokes out from the lower frame into the photo, just making the cut.
The background, a black lacquered partition wall, is aligned parallel to the images, which makes the space between object and wall optically barely definable. So it is just the distorting reflection of the glossy lacquer, dried in blisters, a picture within the picture then, which gives a fictionalised distance and spatial orientation – and thereby portrays the atelier of the artist as a precisely blurred interior. Moreover, in the context of the portraits this image can be interpreted as a consciously empty space: In counterpoint, the portrait titled Black (left, light), a photo which shows a bust representation of a seated woman in front of an equally reflective surface – which however focuses on another part of the space. And her position allows one to assume that she has taken her seat on that very stool visible in Black (wall II, chair).
Even the initially oddly flat and fuzzy-looking Black (table,board, light), once again shot through with painterly dynamics, proves to be a complex spatial arrangement: The greatest part of the photo shows the space as a reflected surface, blurred, once again a picture within a picture and a fictionalisation then. In the photo's lower frame a diagonally sloping black surface is recognisable, which unobtrusively and with succinct gesture creates a spatial relationship of the first order. The black edge of the table – with bright strips of tape marking the position of the people photographed – is spliced just narrowly enough to deliver the coordinates of a real space between the observer and the black lacquered wall.
Visually however it merges so flush with the composition of the black image elements in the reflection

that the photographic difference of 'pictured real space' and 'pictured image space' almost dissolves here. These forms of approaching, mixing and breaking of the levels of spatial representation are the ones with which Koldbech Fich is experimenting, composing here – and with which she creates fictional, stage-like abstract spaces that give the women portrayed great presence, but also make them seem out of reach, transported to a time outside of time.

Koldbech Fich has developed the departure point and core interest of her photography from portraiture towards experimenting with stage-like settings and a more open relationship of the real and the pictorial space – and yet with a view towards an enlarged concept of portraiture. Koldbech Fich hit upon these more abstract, painterly constructions of pictorial space for the first time in the group of works Introducing Viola (2005-07), which she then refined in Black and still further in Delays on a Screen (2011).

That her starting point began in the portrait genre can be easily seen in her early series of works such as Søstre (2002–2003) for which Koldbech Fich made portraits of the inhabitants of a deaconess house in Copenhagen. Here she took portraits of women in their sparse and nonetheless highly personalised living space, thus turning the environment created by the women themselves into the stage. Only later did she begin to construct the pictorial space as an atmospheric agency in the portrait and thus to make it abstract. As done by Koldbech Fich, taking the photographs in prepared studio situations aims at an emptying of the pictorial space and also increases its ambivalence. The people in the representations are all as much anonymised as they are stylised as timeless and interpreted as individuals.

"I wanted to minimise my expression," says the artist of this stage of development, "and was interested in how much narrative I could tell by portraying people without a visible sense of belonging." To this end, she followed an unusual approach: She first created a setting – "a lot of painting and other practical work, creating a space that is not part of the reality" – and then invited a group of people to her studio, people whom she wanted to make portraits of but didn't know personally in any detail, and with the help of this spontaneous interaction, developed ideas for a pictorial dramaturgy. It's only in the second session that the individual shoots take place, a complex process using a large-format camera. "It's a challenge to work with people I don't know. And it means I avoid too many preconceptions about their personalities," says Koldbech Fich, "seeing them 'fresh', so to speak. I still have this excitement. For me it's important that none of us gets used too much to the situation of being photographed."

It is these equally contrived as authentic encounters, in which strangeness and spontaneity are mixed and for moments or phases produce an extraordinary atmosphere, in which the artist, now with a feel for the right moment, succeeds in creating images such as: The insistent, and apparently casual and still portrait Black (right, ladder) or the absent and yet at the same time seemingly very concentrated, inwardly focused expression of a woman in half-profile in Black (centre, earring). Beyond the capture of a single moment of inner focus, the portrait Black (right, ladder), for example, also shows the subtle treatment of surfaces and material, which is typical of Koldbech Fich's photography. The velvet black of the coat, as though covered with a whitish, fine material shimmer, is precisely captured in this work; the tone that corresponds so closely to the grey of a ladder which stands reflected in the right-hand side of the background cuts the diagonal steeply and frames the figure on the right. But, with a similar nuancing, the opaque, softly fuzzy grey of the reflection gives out a different material quality to the sharp presence of the coat material. While one element is almost palpable in the foreground, the other is removed with a shadow-like quality similar to an after image. So it is that the artist produces, here in the medium of photography, with an almost painterly means a subtle stratification and differentiation of pictorial space. Koldbech Fich works with such minimalistically produced, colour-defined spaces as independent elements of interpretation and formation. In her work, even such more abstract perspectives on the space have a core psychological moment. In Black, for example, Koldbech Fich develops the female portraits in an aimed ambivalence between timeless archetype and concrete individual.

This ambivalence she succeeds in creating with the stage-like settings, which she also photographs as constellations devoid of any human presence, as abstract interiors that is, in order to combine and confront them with the portraiture of people. In Black, she has reached a high level of abstraction in this way – a level albeit, that she further enhances in her most recent series of works, Delays on a Screen (2011): In this series, she does without people altogether and further increases the abstract aspects of Black through strongly contrasting black surfaces, almost completely illuminated with shining white but producing dark zones around some edges. And yet, Black and also Delays on a Screen are still about reduced spatial representations that, in the context of Koldbech Fich's work, can always be read with a psycholog-

ical subtext and in terms of an atmospheric ambiance: In their artistic attitude, these images are possibly related to the empty rooms of the painter Vilhelm Hammershøi and to her confusing array of intricately graduated rooms – and to a feeling of emptiness consequentially enhanced.

Thus Koldbech Fich, increasingly re-interpreting the photographic image into the abstract, painterly and also timeless, executes perhaps the compression of her original idea of the portrait – up to the pure construction of the image space itself. In Black she has aimed at the tension and changing relationship of portrait and room: "The sitters make the abstractions of the space in the 'empty' images more concrete and the other way around, the empty ones make the story of the sitters more complex", she says.

The sequence of the single images is not fixed so that in exhibition settings the artist can always create, with ever-changing constellations, other interpretations. Even the order of images in the available catalogue represents such an interpretation, one that the artist has subtly constructed through the sequence, the rhythm and the relationship of the portrait and the object/space presentation.

The relationship of object and space is often virtually abolished in Black – in the vast darkness the motifs seems almost planed and parallel to the level of the image of the photo itself. In Black (pedestal#1) the relationship between the foreground, background and object is obscured in a confusing manner. It's almost as though the levels merge into each other here. The black lacquered wall with its distinct colour gradient takes up nearly all the image space, flattens it, deprives the photo of its three-dimensionality. A circular reflection of light in the upper middle of the image, which diffusely and foggily radiates on to the porous veneer, dominates the setting in such a way that one only perceives the object embedded in the dark in the lower frame later: A wooden pedestal rich with ornament, which clearly gives the photo its title. In the area of the image abstract, shadowy forms have been reflected, but this area is also harshly broken up by reflections of light, so that it appears almost completely abstract. Only the hidden object at the bottom of the photo still preserves an impression of a 'real' image space, while the 'fictitious' image space of the backdrop and of its setting literally outshines it.

Unlike in Black (left, light), Black (double screen) or Black (table, cardboard, light), in which by means of light and reflection the space lying behind the camera is pulled into the picture and so also transposed, in Black (pedestal # 1) the space and surface area fall almost into one, as if this were gestural abstract painting. Only the object precisely placed in the dark marks that breaking point at which a smooth transition in the fictionalising expansion of surface is still recognisable. It is also a kind of optical illusion between pictorial space and area, which allows Koldbech Fich to precisely place a picture in its ambivalence and thereby to open its space.