Mondo Reverso. Christian Achenbach

by Alan Meller

If we had a device to reveal past lives, we could prove, beyond any doubt, that Christian Achenbach is the reincarnation of the Qing dynasty painter Wang Hui. This fact has gone unnoticed by critics of his work, who tend to describe it as postmodern. Nothing could be further from the cold and mental creations of postmodernity than Achenbach's joyful and musical work.

The pictorial reincarnation of Wang Hui is not only evident in the perspective that Achenbach adopts in his landscapes, identical to that of the Chinese painter, but in how both aspire to achieve a communion between their creation and the history of art. It is easy to be tempted to consider Achenbach's borrowings from the different currents of Western art as a postmodern attitude; however, his gesture reproduces that of Wang Hui, who synthesized in his work the different currents of almost a millennium of Chinese painting. The synthesis they both make is precisely their innovation. Their sources are recognizable, but they depart from their model because they do not limit themselves to imitating the past, they reinvent it and make it their own. Both choose themes that have a long tradition -such as landscapes- to nourish themselves with a greater number of references from the past. Achenbach and Wang Hui descend from the lineage of Dong Qichang, for whom "copying a style is easy; spiritual communion with the ancients is the difficult part".

Now, Wang Hui lived in 18th century walled China and, in contrast, Achenbach lives in 21st century cosmopolitan Berlin and has at his disposal the artistic explorations of the Romantics, the Fauvists, all the artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century, postmodern art and what came before and after. He also knows his own work as Wang Hui. Thus, in Achenbach's paintings we find surrealist trees or cubist mountains; sometimes he brings to canvas Paul Cézanne's maxim: everything "is reduced to the cube, the cone and the cylinder" and adopts the fierce coloring of Joan Miró or takes from the Op Art tradition the rigid and controlled form of Victor Vasarely's black and white grids, on which he adds the opposite, chaotic and out-of-control technique of dripping used by Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionism. Achenbach, like Wang Hui, uses art's past as a repository of materials to bring his own mental landscapes to life.

The main difference between Achenbach and Wang Hui is undoubtedly that the latter never played drums in a punk band. Achenbach did, and he played jazz and experimental rock. Perhaps that's why, for him, combining colors is not unlike putting together the notes that create a chord. Moreover, Achenbach not only explores the parallels between musical and pictorial creation but also, in his words, "I try to make my paintings sound. It's an intuitive thing. I listen to the colors."

This ability - to hear colors or to see the color of a musical note - is called chromastesia and is also part of the tradition of art. Vasili Kandinsky, for whom colors were the sound of the soul, wanted to create a painting as if it were a symphony that, when viewed, would not only stimulate the eye, but also the ear. The mountains, trees and rivers in Achenbach's paintings vibrate and undulate like sound frequencies; the effect is reminiscent of the visuals of a psychedelic trip and is heightened when, along with the vibration of geography, Achenbach installs Vasarely's optical games. In the video Terra Incognita, Achenbach sets the lines and shapes of his works to music, in an act of deference so that, like him, we can hear the colors.

Wang Hui, through Achenbach, frees himself from realism to construct a reality governed exclusively by pictorial principles. Each element in the German painter's work, whether a river or a cube, are archetypes whose function is none other than aesthetic enjoyment. Achenbach, like Wang Hui, continues to explore the materials of tradition to construct the landscapes of his mondo reverso, a world that does not exist outside the canvas.