

Opening lecture for the exhibition *Tomomi Morishima L i c h t u n g*  
at the Kunstverein Speyer, on September 25, 2022  
Dr. Bernhard Serexhe

## L I C H T U N G—C L E A R I N G

a tree-free area in the forest, a place that wanderers feel drawn to in the semi-darkness and are able to rest, where all the colors unfold in bright light.

What artists have been fighting against since the 1950s with Abstraction, Action Painting, and Informel, and with Fluxus, performances, and “destruction in art”—the theme of the London symposium of the same name in 1966—is namely the perception of art as an easily explainable, politically harmless, and always beautiful commodity, a well-meaning mediation of art that continues to have an effect today and wanted to bring art closer to as broad a segment of the population as possible: Art should be as easy to understand as possible for everyone, every woman and every child. Art should educate. In this sense, the German term for fine art, namely *Bildende Kunst*, was misunderstood and instrumentalized.

As if verbalization were a mandatory prerequisite for understanding art, the art that had seemingly become incomprehensible to many was to be deciphered with easily graspable questions. What is the artist thus trying to tell us? To this end, the forms, colors, and objects rendered were to be named precisely and described in small portions and correlated with each other with respect to their references. Corresponding to psychoanalysis, the aim was to fathom the perhaps hidden motives in the artist’s life. For example, a traumatic childhood event could aid in definitively interpreting a particular painting or an entire life’s work.

The failure of such efforts, however, can be witnessed every day in art galleries. Visitors wander restlessly up and down in front of marvelous

works of art, or remain standing helplessly in front of a painting until they finally discover the small label with the inscription "Red Stag in the Evening Sun." They then hurry on, joyfully relieved, to the next painting. But then the information "Untitled" can be particularly frustrating.

Obsessively searching for sense thus leads to non-sense.

Obviously, we humans are not satisfied with pure contemplation. In order to make sense of things, everything has to be broken down into its components, identified, and carefully named. In the complexity of life that surrounds us, we need simplification and narratives that serve as clues for liberating aha-experiences. But this does not help in understanding art.

What is a painter trying to tell us? This has always been a nonsensical question. Because painters are not telling us anything. They paint something for us! And often enough, indeed almost always, when painters are asked to say something about their art, they have to struggle for words, which are not readily available to them. It is almost always a torture for artists to have to put their art into words. And if they really need to do so in order for their art to be understood, they would be better off writing than painting.

The situation is very different for the art critic, or the opening speaker, whom one expects to be able to decipher a work of art easily with words and to place it in the context of art in general. And since art, as is assumed, reflects the evolution of society, the critic is also expected to examine and explain a work or an entire oeuvre against the backdrop of the "world" in which we live.

But even if they could, this would not explain the art, and certainly not what "the artist is trying to tell us with it." Because this particular artist does not tell us anything, does not talk, in the best case, incidentally. For what the artist has created hopefully goes beyond words.

This gives rise to questions and conclusions:

- In order to make us understand, does an artist's painting have to be translated into words? The best answer is no. Everyone knows that understanding can also and above all take place without any words - based on sensory experience. That is in fact exactly why painters paint.

- Because the painted canvas is not the image. And the image is also by no means on the canvas. Our language is grossly misleading in this regard. Language is not an objective means of analysis. And it often hinders unbiased perception. René Magritte demonstrated this impressively with his painting *La trahison des images* (1929, oil on canvas, 59 x 65 cm). *Ceci n'est pas une pipe!* This here, this painting is not a pipe, and there is also no pipe visible on the canvas! The image arises in the mind of the viewer. The view arises from looking. Opinion arises from perception.

Just as little as in the painting exhibited here—with the title borrowed from the plant genus *Ixora* owing to the bright cinnamon red—with a tower of televisions with a woman sitting on top. But there are no televisions and there is no woman on this canvas. We see colorful rectangles and rhombuses—bright yellow, green, red, as well as blue—and perceive organic shapes against a bright green background, and automatically on this basis concoct a story that was not intended by the painter in any way. Almost any section on this canvas can be understood as an abstract painting. It is only in the synopsis of all the segments, through the mediation of the female figure depicted with the cinnamon red stockings, that a story can be constructed, a story that each viewer could, incidentally, recount in a different fashion. The painter, however, sought to experiment with reduced abstract shapes and the very particular shade of red of a plant found in Africa and particularly in East Asia, which is also called *jungle fire* in German.

Tomomi Morishima never tells stories, as Hansjörg Fröhlich states in his foreword to the catalogue of this exhibition. The stories in our mind are always our own stories. Morishima's partly representational, partly abstract painting can provide clues for imagining such stories, but no fixed points.

He leaves viewers every freedom to feel a sense of spatiality in his imaginary landscapes and architectures. A path is frequently indicated in them in a bright color, often yellow, which leads into the depth of the pictorial space. Between the vegetal forms and the whirling colors of the blossoms, however, it is impossible to tell where this imaginary road, on which individual humans, with their backs to us, seem to walk into the depths of the space, might lead.

In the movement, frozen as in a photograph, restrained hesitation, slow striding, or great determination seem to be discernible. However, neither waymarks nor destinations can be discerned by viewers or by the people depicted on this path. And the destination and destinies imagined in the mind thus remain forever uncertain. Incidentally, like the people, often children, depicted in Morishima's portraits, the mostly young individuals rendered in the large-format paintings, frequently dressed in swimwear, are as unknown to the painter as they are to us. They stand as a metaphor for humans in general, simply for all humans, and thus also for us.

We all travel this path into the unknown, which is Morishima's theme in many of his paintings. They testify to the uncertainty in the real chaos of life without pathos, neither naïve nor fearful, obsessive nor demanding, but with all the openness that life's paths can hold. If the destination is not discernable, the path is what is then essential. Morishima engages in the progression of things in his painting. He lets us participate in his observations, but consistently refrains from digging for the unbearable darkness within us.

Tomomi Morishima grew up in Japan, more precisely in Hiroshima. He studied art in Tokyo before coming to Europe in 2006 at the age of twenty-two to continue his studies here. In his painting during his first years at the Karlsruhe Art Academy, he explored the dark, the solid, the sharp edges of objects, the earthy heaviness so often found in painting in Europe. In Asia, however, lightness is the fundamental mood and mastery in art, both in the design and in the expression of what is created. It is not the object itself that is significant, but the treatment of light and color from which it

emerges in our imagination. After his second year at the Academy, Morishima returned to his Asian roots. In his paintings since then, he evokes a world in which light and color shine with a weightlessness, as if painted with butterfly wings.

Morishima's painting stands for a friendly, hopeful view of life that affirms the unexpected. This is rarely found in contemporary art.

If one wants to read this as a message that has not been painted, but is inherent in the paintings, Morishima's works can also be understood as a message of peace. Some of my fellow critics will therefore accuse me of overinterpretation and raise the question of whether art always has to be political. No, it certainly does *not have to be* political. Art is free. And it must be free—free, above all, from educational political ambitions.

But like everything we do or refrain from doing, art evolves and stands in a social, and political context that also allows us contemplators the freedom of such an interpretation.

This is, after all, the *Clearing (Lichtung)* into which the painter leads us with this exhibition.