



*Gabrielle Obrist* The work of the artist Agnès Wyler is entirely devoted to the medium of painting; she unreservedly indulges her passion for the crafted surface and – as she readily admits – for her insatiable urge to confront and interpret the visual world that surrounds her. For it is not the endless realms of the intangible that fascinate Agnès Wyler, but the essence of the real. Her goal as an artist is to take hold of tangible reality and to grasp its immanent structures. At the same time, she is engaged in a constant quest for new modes of artistic expression – be it through the superimposition of various thematic levels or the penetration of different layers of paint; thus, her paintings are made to tell stories, embracing both lyrical and prosaic scenarios as well as chains of association in her motifs. Such visual devices mean that it is not unusual for Agnès Wyler to speak in riddles. The interpretation of reality in her painting shifts away from objective depiction to become a vehicle of thought-provoking irritation.

### **The concrete and the intangible**

Agnès Wyler's paintings are often characterised by emblems and stereotypes: the creation of her pictorial truth is achieved by means of representative motifs standing for objective reality. To this end, Agnès Wyler often employs set pieces borrowed from mass culture, pasting standardized images such as black silhouettes of birds into her compositions, drawing attention to fragmented illustrations and diagrams from scientific books, even underlaying her pictures with criss-crossed lines reminiscent of a dressmaker's pattern, or taking a photograph as the substratum for her abstract and allusive layers of paint. Whilst the structures applied to her works in this process tend to blur their inherent realism, at the same time they allow the true significance of the concrete to emerge from its hidden context and take the beholder by surprise. In this way, stories are told without words, using paintbrush or paste; the narrative lies between the different layers of the painting, and the compositions resemble snapshots in an ongoing storyline. It is up to the beholder, however, to supply both the prologue and the epilogue.

On occasion, Agnès Wyler chooses not to employ concrete pictorial motifs at all, but instead applies paint to the canvas in purely abstract forms; even then, however, there remains a tangible link to the concrete world, as she endows such compositions with structures that directly call to mind things one has seen and experienced. Her experimental paintings on transparent plastic sheeting, for example, may recall the unfathomable interplay of form and hue in coloured

marble; or the brushed trails of paint on canvas invite associations with landscapes that blend into the distant horizon. It is not unusual for one of her compositions to resemble an extreme close-up, rather like a macro-photograph which presents an object familiar to us from our technologically-oriented everyday life – such as window-blinds or the structure of a building's façade – in such detail that we are unable to recognise it.

Considered in this light, hardly any of Agnès Wyler's works can truly be said to be 'non-representational', and it would be inappropriate, some formal parallels notwithstanding, to assign her abstract compositions to the realm of non-objective art. Agnès Wyler has no desire to perform the act of painting for its own sake, and the gesture of abstract expressionism or of lyrical tachism is not what she understands by painting. On the contrary, her application of paint is much more an attempt to lay bare the immanent structures of the real, objective world and to lead the beholder to a varied and possibly surprising perception of the tangible per se.

### **The obvious and the hidden**

In Agnès Wyler's compositions, the materials on which she paints assume an importance equal to that of the paint medium itself. Plastic sheeting and architect's paper are favoured for their transparency and are regarded as 'foundations' for her multi-layered artistic compositions. Experiments in combining sometimes unorthodox materials are vital to her, for every new picture is also a vehicle of her unending quest to extend the boundaries of painting.

In her additive application of paint, lacquer and pasted-on elements, however, Agnès Wyler is not primarily guided by criteria of aesthetics and technical innovation, but sees the superimposition of divergent pictorial levels as a means of achieving greater density of content. For example, she places portraits of long-dead individuals or photographs of private life behind a veil of paint, so that the subjects themselves acquire a nebulous aura. Rather like a patina, the layers of paint seem to make visible the passage of time since the original portrait was created, and the search for the background underlying so different a surface intensifies the veiled presence of the person whose likeness is depicted. The disconcerted eye is captured and follows the patterns, striving to penetrate the foreground layers in order to retrieve the concrete from the depths of the picture.

Sometimes, Agnès Wyler develops these pictorial layers into true reliefs, using a broad brush or spatula to apply the paint to the substratum like a paste, in order to create a structured surface topography. In such 'paint-landscapes', she allows light to play a significant part in the final effect; the textural appearance is determined by shadows and elevations which become essential elements in the composition, so that one and the same canvas can be made to undergo startling visual transformations without any material change taking place. Often, these paintings surprise the beholder with the oscillation they embody between modelled surface and underlying material. The result is a never-ending interplay between foreground and background, which resist all efforts to place them in a hierarchical relationship.

### **The present and the past**

The concept of 'time in flux' – the past, the future and their interface, the present – occupies an important place in the motif-world of Agnès Wyler's art: "After before is now". Whereas her reworked portraits employ more or less transparent layers, and occasionally surface encrusta-





ve size simply adds to the bizarre nature of these patchwork compositions. Taken individually, these little tondi are, on the one hand, like very personal, fragmentary souvenirs – rather like medallions; on the other hand, their bright colouring and the cheerful simplicity of the assorted subjects suggests that they have a clear message to convey, an impression which is, not least, underlined by the fact that their round form is also shared by the majority of road signs.

By mounting them in this fashion, Agnès Wyler relieves such popular, trivial stickers of their ephemerality and places them in the context of lasting tributes to the spirit of an age. Here – as in the case of other works in which she employs portraits, alludes to landscape painting or cites pictorial concepts from religious art – she shows reverence for traditional themes and principles of composition and pays tribute to traditional art. At the same time, however, her stickers are intended as a manifesto for the levelling-out of the standards by which art is judged, since her inclusion of kitsch and popular art expresses her rejection of the hierarchical ordering of genres and postulates an unregulated diversity of artistic expression. From being mere representatives of our superficially stimulating, consumption-oriented everyday life, Agnès Wyler's sticker-pictures undergo a process of artistic refinement and are thereby alienated from their original purpose, notably that of freely interchangeable, all-purpose decoration. Instead, they are placed centre-stage as empty shells of noncommittalism, devoid of meaning; thus, an undertone of gentle irony permeates the brash colourfulness of these bonbons.

Agnès Wyler's art explicitly invites us to respond in our own way and to produce our own, individual interpretations. Thus, what is at first glance felt to be light-footedness can, on closer examination, prove to be a catalyst for our own imagination and associative urges. This, together with the aesthetics of her art, is the secret of the fascination that Agnès Wyler's paintings exert on us.