

ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS, DRAWINGS, AND SCULPTURES OF HELLA BERENT

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Egyptian Blue – Cosmic Color of the Orient

As early as the third millennium B.C. the pigment of Egyptian Blue was artificially produced from calcium-copper-silicates and used in painting. The precious pigment, which once adorned the magnificent crowns and sarcophagi of the Pharaohs, could only be obtained through elaborate synthesis procedures. Egyptian Blue was considered both a symbol of immortality and a source of life. For this reason the color was reserved for the cult of the gods and the dead. With the decline of antiquity the knowledge of these secret formulas was lost. It is only in our time that the production of Egyptian Blue has been scientifically researched on the basis of original historical samples and been explored by artists as well.

In her work, the artist Hella Berent, who lives in Cologne, is searching for the legendary Blue. In the years 1999 to 2003, she traveled to the ancient formulas' places of origin in order to find evidence and answers in the ancient cultures in Egypt and the Near East. To her surprise she found hardly any indications until she eventually discovered faïences of the Pharaohs and old Ottoman tiles in mosques and museums in Cairo, which inspired her to experiment with the pigment's ancient formulas.

Ultimately, the artist attained far more understanding about Egyptian Blue in the animating context of nature that surrounded her. In *مطروح مرسى* Marsa Matruh and *أسوان* Aswan, in Esfahan and Persepolis in Iran, in Lycia and Antalya in Turkey she was impressed by the intense, magic color of the sky and the sea. It is this experience of nature that enables Hella Berent to have a *feeling* for the Egyptian Blue that opens her perception to the "tenderness of this material." In one of her poems she writes:

*the blue fire of light
spreads across the skies of the seas
plays with the mouth of the emeralds
I must ask you
is the orchestra gone?
brightly shimmers the distant horizon
leaning over
from the zenith's incline
after play
- the blue light rises steadily into the dense color*

Berent's photographs, drawings, and ceramic sculptures reflect the entire color spectrum of Egyptian Blue, which is rich in its range of color hues. Thus a cycle spanning from cobalt to copper blue evolves from her artistic exploration, which investigates the special fascination of man with air and water, the original elements of life.

During her travels in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey a series of landscape photographs emerged which attain an abstract character through manipulations such as concrete details and double exposures. By means of these compositional strategies of alienation the real places melt into the background. The artist directs the viewer's eye specifically towards the subjectively experienced color spaces, elevating them to metaphors of Egyptian Blue. We see lucid Turkish waters melting softly into the infinity of the sky, mirrored in the water in intriguingly varied shades or enhanced the continuously moving waves and the reflections of light.

In her double exposures architectural spaces superimpose with blue spheres, expanding the picture space through unfamiliar depth dimension enabling startling fields of vision and evidence of new content. Through visual synthesis with Lake Geneva, for instance, the Syrian ruins of Palmyra are transformed into a mystical place. Thus the artist not only extracted a peculiar poetry from the landscape but realized the original meaning of photography (Greek) *phos* = light and *graphein* = write meaning "light drawing" emblematically.

Art for Berent means expanding the entire potential of a human being; art "flows in her body" as exemplified in particular in a series of self-portraits. In some of these photographic portraits the artist uses the alienating effect of double exposure and blue flooding. These photographs correspond with a series of large-format portraits, which originated in Cologne and show the artist in anonymous back view, surrounded by May-green nature. The viewer's eye is directed towards the artist's long blue-black hair whose soft flow alludes to the rhythm of water and sky. For thousands of years, hair has been considered a symbol of vitality and life force. In that sense these photographs testify to the wisdom of Far Eastern philosophy: Man's unity with nature.

Since the completion of her formal education, Berent has explored the issue of space in her drawings. The recent color pencil drawings, too, are to be interpreted as a subjective dialogue and intuitive reaction to reality, or as the artist herself puts it: "The goal is to recognize and describe the inspiration, to open the consciousness to the perception of the gestalt of feeling and thinking in space." Titles like "Antalya," "Mediterranean Sea" or "Nile" indicate that the drawings originated parallel to the photographs during her travels. However, the motifs are abstract. Fine sweeping lines on glassine or handmade (Bütten) paper build up a field of tension between stillness and dynamism that is reminiscent of colorful traces of energy. The flow of the drawing not only alludes to the flow of the sky, sea, and hair but lets the spaces flow: here drawing dare to go beyond borders.

The change of dimensions, the sensual experience of concrete and immaterial spaces is condensed in the presentation of her ceramic sculptures. In 1998 Berent began to devote her artistic exploration to the medium of ceramics. At the European Work Center .ekwc. in 's-Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands, she found ideal conditions to experiment with the material in many different ways. During this time the idea emerged to experiment with the spectrum of turquoise blue: "And then suddenly the idea arose to bond heaven and earth with fire. Glass, glaze – coating clay with glaze and bonding the Blue with the earth by exposure to heat."