

(English)

Christina Niederberger  
Resurfacing

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The term resurfacing is one of doubling, meaning both to re-place or re-form a surface – making something old appear new – and for something previously invisible to (re)appear, to rise to the surface. Both these meanings describe processes that characterize Christina Niederberger's practice of painting, which reconsiders how the language of painting is framed by its historical legacy and cultural conditions both past and present.

From a distance, what we see looks like embroidery: images composed of tiny stitches, with the texture and colour reminiscent of textiles. Once we look more carefully, we see that every "stitch" is meticulously rendered in oil paint, and that the images are translations of modernist paintings (in this case by Willem de Kooning), borrowing from both the vocabulary of modernism and of textile arts to forge their own visual language. The relationship between language and textile is an old and complex one, reflected in the shared origin of the words "text" and "textile" in the Latin "texere", to weave. One way to approach Niederberger's work is to read these visually arresting paintings as hybrid texts, engaged in a process of interpretation between languages and therefore cultures – between modernism and contemporary art, between painting and textile, between a culture dominated by masculinity and a feminist perspective.

While Niederberger's practice has long investigated the cultural conditions of painting, and specifically the historicity of "style", her recent work more explicitly engages with translation between cultures of representation, perception and their limits. The concept of *Heimat* is a commonly cited example of a so called "untranslatable", a word so deeply woven into its cultural context that there is no precise equivalent in other languages. "Untranslatables" remind us that there is always an element of incommensurability between the words and conceptual networks of different languages and cultural contexts. Niederberger references Svetlana Geier, the renowned German translator of Dostoyevsky, who addresses this dilemma eloquently\*: while some of the cultural meaning of the original is inevitably lost in translation, something else resurfaces. This "something" may have been already contained in the depths of the original, only surfacing through the lens of the new language. Or another layer of meaning, shaped by the original, may be added by the new language and cultural context. Geier aims for her translations to read like a hybrid language, a sensual fabric that allows the new language to be affected, expanded and deepened by the original language of the text. In a comparable way, Niederberger's paintings develop their own visual language in the act of translation. What is it then, that "resurfaces"?

An important aspect of her work is an investigation of the gendered nature of painting: the ways in which representations shape and are shaped by cultural notions of the "masculine" and "feminine", for example the opposition between the domestic/ornamental/feminine and the heroic/constructive/masculine in modernism. Niederberger's illusionistic citation of embroidery references the historical role of crafts and design as art practices primarily carried out by women, empowering them in these fields but also excluding them from the traditionally male domain of "high art".

Despite its ideology of progress, modernism also reproduced traditional gender roles and presented women as objects for the male gaze. This analysis is frequently applied to de Kooning's paintings, which re-introduced figuration into abstract expressionism with seemingly violent and frightening depictions of women.

This critique of modernism as gendered is often referenced by feminist artists and coincides with the rise of textile as a prominent medium in contemporary art. Textile as a specifically feminine cultural practice is often framed as a form of feminine agency, a corrective to a male dominated cultural history. Christina Niederberger's work references this contemporary reception of modernist painting. She frequently cites the paradigm of Penelope, who stalled her suitors by repeatedly weaving and unweaving a shroud, thereby avoiding forced remarriage and determining her own destiny. Repetition is also a key strategy of modernism, echoed by Niederberger in the repetitive – and consciously slow and meditative – action of painting "stitches". With reference to Penelope's deception, Niederberger's own strategy of using not actual textile, but an illusion of it – appropriating the "masculine" medium of oil paint in the process – suggests a subversive gesture.

While there is a strong element of critique in Niederberger's practice, she eschews the post-modern tool of irony in favour of heightening the presence of de Kooning's paintings to reveal their internal ambiguities. As translations, her paintings are a form of homage that retain meanings contained in the original while adding new ones, maintaining their relevance to contemporary practice.

**Christina Niederberger**, born 1961 in Bern, lives and works in London. She graduated from Goldsmiths College, University of London with a practice-based PhD in 2009. Niederberger was awarded several research grants in the UK and included in the shortlist *100 Painters of Tomorrow*. She regularly exhibits in galleries and public institutions in Britain, Switzerland and Germany. Her work is represented in various public collections, including the British Government art collection, Goldsmiths Collection, Collection Museum for Media and Communication Bern, Art Collection of the City of Bern, Inselspital Bern, Hoffmann-La Roche Collection, as well as private collections in the UK, the US, Switzerland and Canada.

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\* In the documentary film *Die Frau mit den 5 Elefanten*, 1h 33 min, directed by Vadim Jendreyko, 2010