

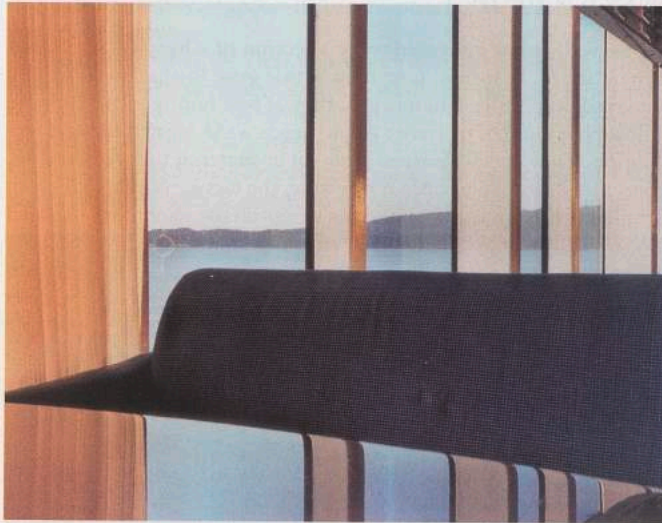
HAMBURG

Gabi Steinhauser

GALERIE DOROTHEA SCHLUETER

An aerial photograph of a glacier that might almost be an abstract composition in somber greens; a deserted airport-terminal hall, its floor and baggage carousels shiny beneath an expansive and oddly oppressive array of round ceiling lights; a bleak river scene caressed by the light of a low November sun; people captured in fleeting moments—Gabi Steinhauser's works hint at established genres such as landscape, architecture, and portrait photography, yet she aims for something else. They are uniformly *Untitled* (all works cited, 2014), prompting us to see them as instantiations of a neutral gaze, and the exhibition's title, "Color Fields," implies that we might read them as works of abstract art.

In fact, Steinhauser's photographic practice would seem more akin to a certain kind of painting: She finds her motifs in the real world, but as she apprehends them through the lens, they register primarily as compositions in color. This approach was already apparent in her earlier works, which captured architectonic ensembles and constellations of objects in close-ups that virtually dissolved into pure pictorial effects.



Gabi Steinhauser,
Untitled, 2014,
C-print, 48½ x 63".

Her new pictures, by contrast, almost always render identifiable motifs, and so the delicate balance between the implied depth of spatial representation and the flatness of pictorial composition comes into view as a much less urgent concern. Steinhauser has always been fascinated by the very ambivalence of this suspended state between autonomous image and likeness, and her work is the richer for it, suddenly allowing us to see both at once. Consider an image in which dry grass and bare trees along a brook pass imperceptibly into a complex texture of

abstract chromatic patterns that recall the roaming gaze back to the surface: The water, rather than revealing depth, stands before us as a structured expanse that takes up almost exactly the bottom-left quarter of the picture. Seen close up, the sun's rays, enmeshed between branches, abruptly resolve into purple and orange reflexes.

This effect—typically produced by a bistable figure in the field of vision—is pronounced in another picture in the show that might be described as composed of bands of color: a vertical field of golden orange on the left is followed by narrower cream bands edged in darker colors. The areas between them are held together by a tapered horizontal bar dividing a field of light blue above from a darker hue below. Farther down, a beaked black shape bursts into the image in a horizontal motion, splitting it in two; the pattern of vertical bands continues almost undisturbed in the bottom fragment. The picture stages the phenomenon of abstract seeing to such powerful effect that one must pause to identify the real setting: What it shows, in an oblique perspective, is the interior of a ferry with a row of windows revealing water, sky, and a strip of land. The compact dark mass of a bench intervenes between the view and its reflection in the polished surface of a table.

Steinhauser's keen eye for chromatic organization goes hand in hand with her precise craftsmanship: She works with analog cameras, primarily a medium-format Hasselblad H1, and makes her own prints, usually in large formats, which allows her to fine-tune the colors, sharpness, and lighting of the resulting pictures. Working with the selective soft focus of analog photography, she creates light-paintings out of the physicality and graininess of photographic film, subtly puncturing the picture as the taut surface of the real to unfold the photograph as an in-between space of the imaginary.

—Jens Asthoff

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