

**“Portrait of the Earth”** by Gerald Felber

Frank Rödel says of his pictures:

“Landscape is ambivalent. It is chaos und structure at the same time. It is the co-occurrence of opposed elements: beauty as well as violence and an indifferent, cold and terrible lack of empathy.” The view of the landscape from an aeroplane window might remind us of highly polished stones or microbes under a microscope or the arteries of a river delta, the flower patterns of frost on a window pane, rarely seen in our urban world. These are moments where the large and the small in our natural environment, the macro and microcosm, become transparent and pictures of becoming and passing provoke in us more than purely scientific interest. The Berlin artist, Frank Rödel has been on the hunt for such interferences and interpenetrations since the 1980s, when he made painting and also art photography into his media for understanding his experience of the world.

Rödel, born in 1954, belongs to that group of artists interested in science or scientists interested in art whose encyclopaedic knowledge of the worlds of animals, plants and even city life attempted, in the pre-photographic age, to bring the richness of the world to the attention of the curious of the time. They used long, polyphonic motifs and series of interpenetrating pictures of a particular natural space – deserts of ice or sand, deep canyons, or the microscopic aquatic life teeming around some stone formation – to achieve this.

But then he fuses this sort of empirical zealotry into something which he himself calls “landscapes of the soul” – a concept that could hardly be more romantic. It is perhaps the transformation of a sort of emotional excess, beyond the merely factual, that comes about when the individual sees himself as part of the natural whole: sometimes safe and embedded, sometimes exposed and endangered along with everything else.

For Rödel – surely one of our furthest travelled and experienced artists, familiar with all topographies and climate zones – this is not just a hypothetical model, but lived praxis. The pictures show him in his canoe paddling along the broken edges of polar ice bergs as high as church towers. Others document how he risks balancing above a lava stream at more than 1000°, separated from the deadly, glowing mass only by a thin, fragile and untested crust.

“To be alone in the grandeur of nature”, is his ideal, “but that is only bearable when I can rely on being together with someone and on human warmth in some other place.” The last continent that remained closed to him was the Antarctic. He travelled there as “artist in residence” for 10 weeks on a research icebreaker.

It is always about subordinating himself, not only in an emotional sense, but in an immediate physical one too, so that the transformation into a picture that can be shown in his home studio is only achieved with distance. It is here that the “leaps” are revealed that turn real experience into a surreal dream landscape.

“Layer upon layer,” – the artist’s own description – “by adding, subtracting and adding anew an independent world,” like one experienced in dreams where one’s own being is freed of its own spatial and temporal restrictions, and goes over into a different world of being. In this world, to put it more concretely, one finds, for example, sudden, strange and disruptive parallels between the “anatomy” of a landscape and those of the living body.

In these series of pictures we see the carbonised bones of the crust of lava mentioned above, shrunken, leather-like skins and raw, hot, gaping wounds; or find intestinal sand dunes with rippled or honeycomb structures. Similarly, we also find, as in the pictures above, an elastic swinging ribbon above a scarcely imaginable deep gully. This could be abstract, connective or neuronal tissue, or maybe a fungal culture, or maybe liquid suddenly frozen in place and which, as if strangely, removed from space, appear to move outside of instead of inside the picture.

Just as puzzling is the second picture: is it a mountain ridge or a wave? Maybe we see floating strips of mist, silty sandbanks or light reflections, emanating from who knows where? Clear horizontal lines, which would make orientation much easier, are entirely missing.

Rödel’s titles point us towards Iceland, which he has visited many times. On his website (where colour versions of these pictures can be found) we encounter pictures of moraines of mud, frozen

waterfalls and steaming geysers, often taken from a drone. These become the source material for the paintings, which, however, go further and deeper than before. In contrast to his earlier series of paintings, we do not find an unambiguous use of topographical features, but abstractions. It is the picture of transformation, of a self-enveloping search for itself.

Rödel himself says that "enormous volumes of ice ground down the mountains and undressed the earth, then erosion wore down the rocks, which themselves were soon covered with moss and lichen. These, in turn, were washed away by the next snowdrifts to seed a new generation of life."

This is also the case in the landscape format pictures that are more lyrical in form than the memories of Iceland, which betray an ambivalence between mineral and vegetable, between overgrown and fragmented structures - perhaps there is even the hint of an iridescent insect wing?

This is carried over into the titles of the pictures themselves (top: "they could almost be flowers" and bottom: "flora defeats the rock") which are here dissolved into a sort of dynamic harmony. It is the beauty of imperfection, of the constantly changing, that speaks to us in its freedom to play.

Frank Rödel's work has always displayed change and transformation and maybe this step into associative abstraction is not his last, by any means. "By becoming one with the landscape", he maintains, "I return to the vulnerable and unprotected state from which we all emanate, to one of namelessness and insignificance."

The only thing made for all eternity is eternity itself, and who would know that better than someone who works alongside the very real formations of the history of the Earth?

In his paintings and photographic series, Frank Rödel is searching for landscapes across all continents and climate zones.