

Iulia Nistor

paintings and propositions

13 September – 26 October 2024

Opening 13 September, 6 – 10 pm

[Please click here for the German translation](#)

Galeria Plan B is pleased to present *paintings and propositions* Iulia Nistor's third solo exhibition with the gallery. In her work, Nistor explores processes that analyze and question the pre-existing concepts shaping our perception. Through painting, text, and spatial interventions she probes the conditions and boundaries of perception and representation.

Like the display of a study, painting and writing are placed side by side. New works from Iulia Nistor's ongoing series of *Evidence*-paintings are presented next to related text-works. In the paintings, she aims to depict the contingent properties of objects, which leads to the exclusion of the image of the object itself. This empirical process does not result in a common aesthetic, as it is intended to capture the phenomenon in question. "Paint has been applied to wooden supports with a precision and formal variety that implies accuracy to ulterior subjects, which yet remain undefinable," Mark Prince describes in his text for the show, also suggesting that "It is consistent with this cultivation of paradox that, although Nistor's paintings are riddled with illusionism, they question its workings rather than attempting to conceal them." Painting does not serve to communicate contents, but is rather used by the artist as an opportunity to observe the mental processes inherent to the act of representation.

The text-works are working sheets on which Nistor formulates propositions that describe and question the concepts related to this process. A typed version of several sentences written underneath each other is commented on and corrected by hand, which gives insight into her process of thinking and doubt. Furthermore, it suggests a sedimentation through revision and redefinition, paralleled in the paintings. Both painting and writing are presented as processes that formulate and challenge how we think and perceive.

Extending this inquiry into the physical space, Nistor's interventions mimic architectural or structural elements that are typically taken for granted. These additions seamlessly blend with their surroundings and are not mentioned on the exhibition's floor plan or the list of works, thus concealing their artistic origin and exposing our assumptions about what is given and what is made. By inducing uncertainty and doubt, these spatial manipulations further expose how our perception is informed by our concepts and expectations.

Iulia Nistor (*1985, Bucharest) is a visual artist and philosopher, living and working in Berlin and São Paulo. Nistor graduated in philosophy and completed her doctorate at the University of Regensburg. She received a Meisterschüler in Fine Arts from Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main. She will participate in the 2024/25 Whitney Museum Independent Study Program (ISP).

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13. September – 26. Oktober 2024

Eröffnung 13. September, 18 – 22 Uhr

Galeria Plan B freut sich, *paintings and propositions*, die dritte Einzelausstellung von Iulia Nistor in ihren Räumen zu präsentieren. In ihren Werken ergründet die Künstlerin die Mechanismen und Konzepte, die unsere Wahrnehmung formen und erforscht Prozesse um diese zu hinterfragen. Nistor bedient sich dabei der Malerei, des geschriebenen Wortes und räumlicher Interventionen, um die Grenzen und Möglichkeiten von Perzeption und Repräsentation auszuloten.

Wie in der Präsentation einer Studie, werden Malerei und Schrift nebeneinandergestellt. Neue Arbeiten aus Iulia Nistors fortlaufender Serie der *Evidence*-Gemälde werden zusammen mit Textarbeiten präsentiert. In ihrer Malerei stellt sie die kontingenten Eigenschaften von Objekten dar, wodurch das Objekt selbst aus dem Bild ausgeschlossen wird. Dieser empirische Prozess führt nicht zu einer gemeinsamen Ästhetik, sondern soll das betreffende Phänomen erfassen. „Die Farbe wurde mit einer Präzision und formalen Vielfalt auf die hölzernen Träger aufgetragen, welches die Genauigkeit des Bezugs auf Referenzobjekte nahelegt, die jedoch undefiniert bleiben“, schreibt Mark Prince in seinem Text zur Ausstellung. „Es steht im Einklang mit dieser Kultivierung des Paradoxen, dass Nistors Malereien, obwohl sie von Illusionismus durchdrungen sind, dessen Funktionsweise in Frage stellen, anstatt diese zu verbergen.“ Die Malerei dient der Künstlerin nicht zur Vermittlung von Inhalten, sondern als Gelegenheit, die mentalen Prozesse zu beobachten, die dem Akt der Darstellung innewohnen.

Bei den Textarbeiten handelt es sich um Arbeitsblätter, auf denen Nistor die mit diesem Prozess verbundenen Konzepte formuliert und hinterfragt. Eine maschinengeschriebene Version von mehreren untereinander geschriebenen Sätzen wird von Hand kommentiert und korrigiert und gibt so einen Einblick in ihren Denk- und Zweifelsprozess. Dies deutet eine Sedimentierung durch Überarbeitung und Neudefinition an, die sich in den Gemälden widerspiegelt. Sowohl die Malerei als auch das Schreiben werden als Prozesse dargestellt, die unsere Denk- und Wahrnehmungsweisen formulieren und in Frage stellen.

Nistors Eingriffe imitieren architektonische oder strukturelle Elemente, die normalerweise als selbstverständlich angesehen werden. Diese Ergänzungen fügen sich nahtlos in ihre Umgebung ein und werden weder auf dem Ausstellungsplan noch im Werkverzeichnis erwähnt, wodurch ihr künstlerischer Ursprung verborgen bleibt und unsere Annahmen über das Gegebene und das Gemachte offengelegt werden.

Iulia Nistor (* 1985, Bukarest) ist eine bildende Künstlerin und Philosophin, die in Berlin und São Paulo lebt und arbeitet. Nistor studierte Philosophie und promovierte an der Universität Regensburg. Sie erhielt den Titel der Meisterschülerin im Fach Bildende Kunst an der Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main. 2024/25 wird sie am Independent Study Program (ISP) des Whitney Museums teilnehmen.

Fact is richer than diction – Iulia Nistor's representations

by Mark Prince

Last year Iulia Nistor sent me a photograph of an empty room on an upper floor of a building in São Paulo. Enlarging it, I could just make out that the outer walls were coated with a mosaic of small oatmeal-coloured tiles. The detail stood out because of its incongruity at such a height, at which no one on the ground – or even within the building, unless they were at an angle to the windows as acute as that from which the picture was taken – would have been able to register it. It was as if they had been put there for no one. Someone, I imagined, might have worked in the room for years without noticing that they were there.

Familiar objects – like the room viewed by that hypothetical long-term employee of a hypothetical company based there – are only familiar to the extent that we recognise properties they possess which we have come to identify with them. They may have others, like those tiles, which we don't know about, or have not taken the time to notice. Nistor's subjects as a painter are aspects of things from which representing their overall form, which would secure recognition in the form of an image, would be a distraction. She typically edits out such forms – i.e. the apple shape of an apple – as tending to prompt a default into habitual perceptions. Her subject could be the scratched silveriness of a steel beaker, the gradation of light cast onto its circumference, or the sharpness of the overhang of the awning that shades the window that casts it. Using the language of empiricism (she is also an analytical philosopher, who completed her doctorate last year), she distinguishes these phenomena as secondary or accidental (i.e. smell, colour, taste, reflectiveness, sharpness) as opposed to primary qualities (i.e. size, weight, shape), implying a subjective/objective distinction, which commentators over the centuries have questioned, sceptical that an object can be said to exist independently of its subjective apprehension.

When I asked her for examples of the properties she singles out, she admitted that one was derived from the view out of the window of the room in the photograph (which she subsequently rented as a studio). I remembered this when I saw a reproduction of one of her recent paintings and thought I recognised the mosaic pattern I had seen in the photograph. An analogy suggested itself between the mosaic exceeding a view of the building by those occupying it or observing it, and the pattern they formed constituting, in the context of their depiction in the painting, a property of an object abstracted from its given form.

For an artist who questions whether her paintings should be seen as art (but rather as a contingent by-product of a process of empirical research into how representations are conceived), and who claims that she is not concerned with what viewers take from her paintings, and that their subjects are no more than pretexts for submitting herself to a cognitive process of extracting pictorial form from the flux of experience, it is striking that the old modernist discrepancy between the assumptions viewers bring to perceiving art and those they may need to engage with it seems such a pressing issue when her art comes under scrutiny.

Consider the different definitions of 'abstract', as used respectively in the fields of art and philosophy. A standard view of the trajectory of the modernist tradition is that it gained autonomy from the shackles of representation by investing all its means in aspects of painting (the primary modernist art form) most specific to the medium – colour, materiality, shape and the physicality of paint's application – in the process liberating them from the imperative to refer beyond themselves. This was a gross simplification, applying in a literal sense only to relatively negligible forms of expressionism and formalism, but it offers a working definition of what is meant by 'abstraction' in an art context. In contrast, many of the most significant modernists – Paul Cézanne or Henri Matisse, for

example – placed themselves in the position of mediums negotiating the resistance they encountered in their attempt to convert perception into picture. Their paintings incorporate the distortions and adjustments they found necessary in abstracting a pictorial structure from the reality they had before them. Here, abstraction means the sublimation of an image from an unruly mass of temporal and spatial impressions. Painterly forms attest to the tensions that gather in the interstices between perceiving the world, processing those perceptions, and producing paintings of what they represent. The artist mediates between two not necessarily compatible realms (the special case of the picture and the visual world that lies outside its frame) and seeks to effect a reconciliation that does justice to both.

Because in Nistor's paintings you rarely get the shape of the apple or the contour of the figure – they would detract from the partiality of the experience she is interested in capturing – her paintings may be mistaken for the first kind of 'abstraction' when they are an extreme version of the latter. Stéphane Mallarmé issued the instruction to the artist 'to paint not the thing itself, but the effect it produces', a distinction which only serves to expose the impossibility of making it. Does he mean an effect the thing has on us, or one that is a property of the effect's source? 'Effect' points both ways, as the painted mosaic pattern may be a tenacious shard of a memory of a view, a self-reflexive formalisation of the condition of an image (like a grid of pixels), or a formalist statement of a painting's limitation to its surface in the form of an internally coherent aggregate of geometric forms (squares). It is around such discriminations that Nistor's art probes.

The empiricism suggested by the title of her series of 'Evidence Paintings' (2015-ongoing) – all in the same size (50 x 40cm) and upright format – is supported, in its insistence on the role of the works as records of perceived phenomena, by individual sets of coordinates, signs of locational specificity, but without the documentary meaning they imply. These coordinates are derived, according to a private, undisclosed code, from the names of the places at which the subjects of the paintings were encountered. I would argue, however, that the difference between abstraction as formalism and representation is already apparent in Nistor's painterly language, without the supplement of such contextual information, or the A4 sheets of printed philosophical propositions, overworked with handwritten amendments tracking her thinking, which she presents in conjunction with the paintings. Her application is scaled to a degree of detail that allows it to accommodate a multiplicity of pictorial registers, from gestural impasto, to finely worked drawing, to the adumbration of perspectival space. Its teleological quality is comparable to the array of textures a Dutch 17th Century still-life painter would have been trained to imitate using fine sable brushes, and contrasts with what Leo Steinberg, in 1972, identified as 'the levelling of end and means', which he saw as characterising the Greenbergian interpretation of modernist abstraction. The diversity of Nistor's imagery implies that the range of specificities being defined is broader than the means being brought to the task, rather than manifesting a spectrum of painterly modes, in order to emphasise, in the ironic postmodernist vein, the receivedness and relativism of the vocabularies themselves. Indeed, her painting is conspicuously devoid of irony, but not of a mischievous humour which takes delight in observing the quirkiness of the process by which three-dimensional experience is transmuted into a two-dimensional image.

There is another kind of contemporary painting with qualities in common with Nistor's, but essentially different from it. It is the result of using the medium to actively evade meaning, to flout intentions, even the limitations of the artist's predilections, which would, for example, compose an image in a pre-conceived manner. The unplanned, even unintended, direction of the process, and the variety and unpredictability of the forms it assumes, is taken as synonymous with artistic licence. Nistor's painting shares with such work the desire to avoid pat formulations, but its solution to that challenge is diametrically opposed: to be more specific to a subject rather than to throw out subject altogether. Indeed, one way of defining contemporary painting is by whether having a specific subject is seen as confining or defining. In Nistor's work, formal heterogeneity is a sign of the pressure under

which paint is being put to be true to something other than its own interactions; an indication that abstraction, here, is an editing of an excess of primary data. As J.L Austin punned, ‘fact is richer than diction’, demanding a language supple enough to shape itself to a unforeseeable range of complexities.

It is notable how the structures of language tend to crop up as analogies for Nistor’s specifically visual art. A friend suggested to her that her paintings could be the equivalent of coinages: words when first applied to their referents, before they have become part of the common currency of usage. Words, therefore, that are initially limited to the use of a single writer/speaker, as if her way of representing the partial property of an object could, in due course, become commonly recognised. The analogy only takes you so far. The consecutiveness of language naturally accommodates narrative, whereas pictures can only project its potential. Languages, moreover, are learnable codes, requiring a common ability to use them, which makes a coinage, initially at least, a contradiction in terms: a sound in search of a meaning. Marks on a page are only ‘readable’ if they can be deciphered, which requires the existence of rules by which to extract sense from them; otherwise they are drawings. Pictures bypass this qualification. If Nistor has succeeded, in looking at her paintings a viewer is presumably seeing the likeness of what she is attempting to depict, whether or not they recognise it as such. A perception is delivered via the vehicle of painting, without its receiver necessarily being able to identify or name it.

The linguistic analogy is useful because it acknowledges, by association, the relative arbitrariness (compared, for instance, to a photograph’s detail) of the translation of fluid sensations into a static painted structure. As much as Nistor’s painting is aimed at overcoming this disconnect, its simultaneous effect is to expose and meditate upon it. How might coldness or roughness be depicted? As a stack of horizontal blue stripes over a pair of murky black globes around which strings of ectoplasm seep? Structurally speaking, that would be no more or less arbitrary a configuration than the words cold or rough having been applied to those respective sensations as descriptive handles.

Nistor’s ‘interventions’ – her second artistic form – associate the gap between the order we project onto the world, for example by describing it in language, and what might actually be there, and the gap between what we expect to see as art in the spaces in which it is exhibited and what art might actually consist of. They prompt us to question the assumptions we bring to distinguishing content from context, the given of the art occasion from its made substance; and they do so surreptitiously, not only in that they trade in the underhand language of *trompe l’oeil*, but because they are not declared to viewers on lists of works or press releases. The link between these finely calibrated perceptual traps and her paintings is the perceived centrality of representation, less as a tool of description than a means of questioning how we transform what we perceive into what we know. They are designed to expose the partiality and encodedness of cultural expectation, as her paintings draw out the clash between picture and reality by homing in on aspects of the world that representational codes are not readily equipped to translate into pictorial form.

At Plan B in Berlin in 2024, the basis for such a work is a green emergency exit sign – a fleeing figure next to an arrow – above the rectangular outline of a doorway, forming the second part of that sign, its presence architecturally suppressed so as to interfere as little as possible with the art being exhibited. In various parts of the gallery, Nistor has had drywall panels superimposed onto the existing drywall structure, into which incisions that imitate the emergency door have been cut, each surmounted by the same sign, straddling the difference between functional and illusory exits. Although the illusion is designed to be exposed – a modicum of sustained attention is likely to discover that there are too many exits, and some, if they *were* functional, would take you nowhere – in the process of becoming apparent it dissolves distinctions between artifice and its environment, suggesting that decor, in any case, *is* artifice, as art consists of objects inhabiting the same space as the decor that accommodates it. The dysfunctionality of the added doorways emphasises that the interior design’s suppression of the real emergency doors makes them appear as geometrical wall

drawings, aligning the fake ones, as artifice *without* function, with the paintings with which they share the walls, whose role, within the terms of the installation, is ironically to distract from them. An Escher-ish conceit of blind alleys and false leads is drawn from a form – the generic white cube gallery – defined by its predictability. The interior takes on an allegorical dimension, its illusory exits offering deceptive egress: is this not what art, at bottom, traditionally does?

The illusory doorways deploy illusionism to conceal itself in order to make what it pictures more plausible, but only up to a point, and once that is reached, the simulacrum outed, a dialectical relation is activated between material presence and the transcendentalism of a represented object (i.e. the space beyond doorways, which the incisions in the walls can only intimate) that remains outside a viewer's reach. The paintings and intervention complement one another: if the former's picturing of what they are not (in the sense that what they *are* is oil paint on wood) has to be taken on trust, the latter's appeal to be taken on trust is deceptive. They further reflect one another in the emphasis they share on means over end, process over outcome. The former are contingent by-products of a process of abstraction, which Nistor sees as primary. The latter figure this emphasis in a more rhetorical form: as the appearance of something deprived of its function, negating the outcome on which the appearance is predicated. In each of the forms, the given object – given in the sense of being distinct from the process focussed upon it – is located at opposite ends of the process, as either prompt or target. The traditional art object (painting) arrives at an abstraction of an object's property by neglecting the overall form which makes that object recognisable. The anti-readymade of the intervention (which instead of introducing a non-art object into an art context, as Duchamp did, conversely conceals an art object as part of the non-art order of art's setting) is the result of beginning with a given object and abstracting from it the visual cues which make it recognisable.

What the objects of these reflecting but polarising forms share – the accidental properties the paintings depict, the inaccessible space beyond the emergency exits – is that they are resistant to reach or definition. Each form points to what lies beyond what it makes apparent, only to be forced to default to the processes which produce that implication: the act of pointing itself. This also happens to be the subject of Nistor's recent philosophical research into 'intentionality': how a thing is made to be about something else, for example by becoming a description or picture of it, or a thought about it. She writes, 'When we have a thought or feeling it is directed *towards* its object, a thought or feeling *about* something.'

Seen in this light, the obscure derivation of the coordinates, which accompany the paintings, seems entirely logical. Focus falls on the distance the act of representation has to traverse to attain its targets, leaving them as either illusory, or unrecognisable. Yet Nistor's method proscribes evasion. Her forms are precise, their purpose unambiguous, making their dedication to capturing fugitive perceptions all the more telling. The clarity of empirical intent implies how difficult the objects it has in view are to pin down, as a documentary method can better imply the elusiveness of its subject than one based on fantasy, because for the latter anything is possible, its remit unrestricted by fact.

The objects of both forms – paintings and intervention – might be the contemporary equivalent of the 'plotless places' in the historian Simon Schama's description of the out-of-the-way subjects of Haarlem landscape painters of the 1610s and 1620s: 'plotless' both in that they remain unmapped, unplotted, and of being resistant to narrative devices, unamenable to the outlines of a plot. They cannot maintain the contours we require to recognise what we know, although their air of contingency, of being off the radar, makes them seem all the more real, as though objects readily amenable to the grasp of representation are in some way domesticated by that submission. They are signs, not of what lies beyond the reality we know, but beyond our go-to means of attesting to it, like the mosaic tiles in the photograph, which seem to appear in one of Nistor's painting, although they were situated beyond the scope of anyone they could have been intended to appeal to.

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