

Dr. Renée Gadsden

## Dostoyevsky for a Day

The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.

-- Hans Hofmann

Beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man.

-- Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Cornelia Caufmann is not only an ally of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory and time, the poem *Mnemosyne* by Friedrich Hölderlin has also been persistent in her thoughts over the years. As in the poem, the idea and the experience that lightning-fast illuminations, insights and intuitive perceptions can occur in special situations of life are thematized in her work. Continually inspired by literature and music, Caufmann uses visual means to inform the viewer of her search for universal content that stems from form itself. Like radical calligrapher Inoue Yuichi, Caufmann wields ink and brushes to mediate between primitive impulses and the revelation of an internal state of creativity. Yuichi concentrated on the writing of logographic *kanji* characters in order to directly express the unchained development of his inner power; Caufmann does the same, using a personal and individual strategy. She “writes” with forms, not with an alphabet, and obedient to her own tempo, following an “inneren Antrieb” (internal impelling power).

*Blue Notes* (2009-11) is a series of 50 notebooks, painted with industrial blue paint originally used to cover her garden fence, a prime example of her philosophy to use what is at hand (“Alles kommt aus was vorhanden ist”). She worked on 10 books at a time, waiting for them to dry at their various stages of development, progressing through the leaves of the books using dynamic, slightly varied and constantly recurring patterns. The work was presented in an exhibition that featured a performance by the jazz trumpeter and composer Franz Koglmann, who also suggested the title for her project. This work is not unsimilar in approach to Jan Fabre’s 2011 installation in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, *The Year of the Hour Blue*, which Fabre described as creating a fascinating discourse between the present and the past, the transitory and the eternal. This description could also fit *Blue Notes*, which Caufmann has characterized as an attempt to reach a timeless state of being (“einen zeitlosen Zustand zu erreichen”). Caufmann is particularly familiar with Jan Fabre, whom she appreciates for his intensity, through participation in an international workshop. She has also taken part in master classes with artists such as Gunter Damisch and Milena Dragicevič.

Working as a professional artist since 1998, she originally concentrated on drawing as a medium, employing only lead pencil until the year 2000. Since then, Caufmann has augmented her palette to include colored pencils, ink, India ink, paint, shellac et al. Her goal: “mit einfachen Mitteln immer exzessiv zu arbeiten” (using simple means to work excessively). Caufmann postulates that her deep interest in colored pencils, ink and India ink might be related to her job as an art and German teacher; those tools are the ones she most commonly uses at school. Caufmann’s artwork is often characterized by repetition, series and rhythms. These can be seen as metaphors for the rhythmical patterns of everyday life, as well as being reminders of the periodicity of the cosmos.

The triptych *The Sky's The Limit* (2012) is comprised of three boxes in collage technique, with references to bull's eyes, helicopters, trees and Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Helicopter String Quartet*. Here Caufmann demonstrates that she is as comfortable with sculptural expression as with her primary area of interest, working on paper. In the *Dots* series, traditional canvas paintings, Caufmann grapples with Pointillism. She created the pigment paint herself, another expression of her interest in manual skills and crafts, and depicts prototypical shapes (stars, crosses and circles) using what she calls "symbolic colors". She has experimented with installations, and is currently working on a sound sculpture with musician Tobias Leibetseder; she has made sculptural objects that are utilized by Gerorg Pruscha in spoken word performances. Caufmann has also made forays into performance art herself, with pieces such as *ze(h)n kilometer* (z(t)en kilometers, 2002) and *Schweiß und Tränen* (Sweat and Tears, 2004).

The lines and points in her works on paper, as well as in her paintings, are for Caufmann reminiscent of musical scores. She refers to her work as sheet music for an imaginary orchestra ("ein Notenwerk für ein imaginäres Orchester"). Her interest in electroacoustic music (*Neue Musik*) greatly assisted her in reaching expanded levels of abstraction in her own art. Likewise, Caufmann readily acknowledges the interplay between literature and her art. She has generated works on the topics of the oracle and of the muse, inspired by the writings of Lou Andreas-Salomé and Rainer Maria Rilke. When drawing her *Nomad Lines* (2012), she often thought of the lyrical narrative *The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christoph Rilke*. The rhythmic escalation implied in that work parallels the dramatic feelings that arise in her as she is immersed in creating her lines. In her visual manner, Caufmann produces poetry as a bard does with words, recording experience in a way as telling as a written chronicle is. With a nod to Le Corbusier, it can be said that deciphering her compositions is a task for eyes that can see.

The *Nomad Lines* are works on paper in a relatively small format, mounted behind glass. They are comprised of fine blue and red lines, made with ink applied with a fine brush and pipette, and pencil. These delicate sheets evoke comparison with León Ferrari's *Mod* series, especially *Mod 1* (2008) and *Mod 8* (2009), and also echo Bauhaus textile designs. Caufmann has experimented much with textiles: sewing her own cloth, weaving tapestry and tangentially, making her own paper. Looking at her oeuvre, it is clear that Caufmann has examined the writings and works of Agnes Martin in detail. Like Martin, Caufmann strives to create work that is subtle and highly reduced, the hand-drawn vertical and horizontal lines elegantly precise without being perfect. She expresses spirituality, and conjures up memory, through the active and deliberate repetition in her work.

The title *Nomad Lines* has less to do with Caufmann's actual travels as with her long-year exposure to a multicultural environment through her teaching activities. She has dealt intensely with students who come to Austria from far away, many from conflicted regions. Animated by her contact with these young people, whom she considers to be nomads of fate, Caufmann bundles her energy to generate quiescence and harmony in her artistic production. Instead of making socially critical art, Caufmann prefers to create serenity by example. The ideas contained in the play *Nathan the Wise*, the words of Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi and Bertha von Suttner have motivated her to actively support *Friedenserziehung* (peace education) through her drawings, paintings, books and objects.

In her studio, immersed in the self-described “Sisyphus task”, Caufmann travels much – through time. The *Nomad Lines*, as with most of her production, must dry after each layer is applied, a process that consumes much time. Her creations make the viewer distinctly aware of temporal unfolding. Time is also an abiding theme of the *Inks* series (2012), which she calls her first truly calligraphic works. Fascinated by the mechanism of time, which she boldly evidences in the processual approach to her work, Caufmann reminds us to keep our eyes on the future. The gestural forms she creates are ongoing and consecutive. They lead into the future, suggestive of unanimity and resonant of serendipity. Another aspect of the factor time in Caufmann’s oeuvre is that of speed. In order to achieve the consistency and surety of the forms on the paper, she must work extremely quickly, and with tremendous concentration.

*Experimentelle Kalligraphie* (Experimental Calligraphy, 2013) is a spontaneous and intense series which displays several of Caufmann’s recurring interests. As sheet music is for a musician, so are the leaves of *Experimentelle Kalligraphie* for her; she sees this series as a continuation of the *Blue Notes*. The profound black of the India ink contrasts vibrantly with the white of the paper, much as the letters do on the page of a book. Thus is Caufmann able to combine her passion for literature and music through this self-chosen means of expression. Franz Kline insisted that all areas of his canvases were equal in weight: “I paint the white as well as the black, and the white is just as important”. Kline fully intended his images to evoke the known or recognizable while avoiding literal references. Caufmann strives for the same. Elisabet Goula Sardà has interpreted Robert Motherwell’s *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* (1949-91, ca. 170 works in the series) as a vehicle representing the artist’s desire to connect with society, combining individual with collective sensibilities. She claims that Motherwell not only considered the role of aesthetics in his work, but also included moral decisions that indicated the values of the artist in relation to society and the rest of the world. As Sardà says, “in emphasizing these values, the work of art acquires an ethical dimension because it suggests a certain attitude (spiritual, moral) towards life”.

Even so-called art for art’s sake has social ramifications: Cornelia Caufmann follows this path. She affirms that creative activities faithful to universal human experience (love of harmony, beauty, form and color) can contribute to a renaissance of latitudinarian and humanistic values, and can thereby constitute an instrument of intermutual metamorphosis.