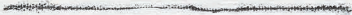


Ernst Caramelle

A Résumé

30 November 2018 – 28 April 2019



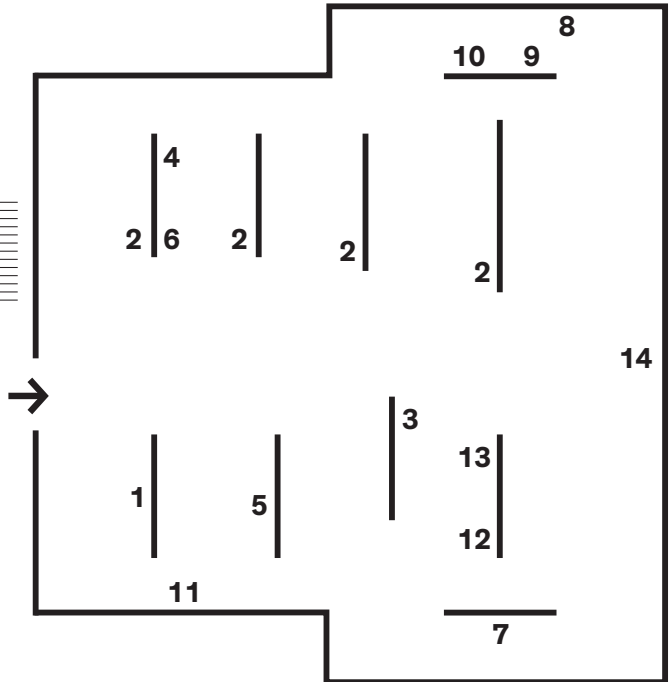
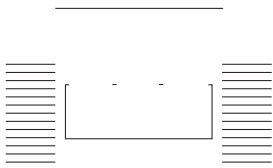
Introduction

mumok is showing the first comprehensive retrospective of the work of the Austrian artist Ernst Caramelle, who was born in 1952 in Hall, Tyrol. The exhibition gives an overview of the artist's entire oeuvre from 1974 to the present day—from early media works, drawings, watercolors, and the Gesso Pieces and Sun Pieces, to site-specific wall paintings in the exhibition space. Also on view are artist's books and silkscreen prints, which form an integral part of Caramelle's conceptual approach.

The show is designed to vividly unfold Ernst Caramelle's work phases and multi-faceted conceptual methods in all their reciprocal entanglements, revealing subtle strategic convolutions. Rather than proceeding chronologically, however, the retrospective demonstrates in reverse, so to speak, that Caramelle already laid out his themes and artistic strategies in his early work, which paradoxically began with the *Resümee* (Résumé) that concludes the exhibition. The circle closes.

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Viewers are welcomed in a restrained and friendly manner by a large three-dimensional object on casters with two small monitors resembling eyes and a slightly irregular line drawn underneath like a mouth (1). This childlike, “primitive” face is a silent observer not unlike a sphinx—and perhaps just as enigmatic—with a somewhat robotic facial expression. *Untitled* (1986) is an object that combines a painterly surface (painted with wine) with a media work: monitors that broadcast a television program. With its massive size, it also forms a kind of wall, a built element in the exhibition space.

Faces are everywhere in Caramelle’s work. When moved into his studio in New York in 1979, he already surrounded himself with companions: stucco moldings frame a face and tiny televisions blink and flicker where the eyes would be. Taking various dimensions, Caramelle’s “Faces” are either plainly visible or tucked into hidden places as small observers and guardian spirits. These silent sentinels also found their way into Caramelle’s Gesso Pieces around 1980. On the white, irregularly applied chalk ground that gives the works their name four drawings can be seen—two squares and a line, which we spontaneously recognize as faces after the fact (2). They return our gaze—animated symbols that perspectively diminish or enlarge in each of the four works, depending on which of the images we look at first. Caramelle uses picture puzzles for eyes, and the narrow, slightly irregular, line of the mouth vaguely recalls the emphatically simplified forms of expression of non-European or antique art. The faces are shown head-on, and yet despite their extreme reduction they do not appear rigid but instead quite animated, because the eyes contain different motifs and the painting surface and mouth area seem to vibrate optically due to their slight irregularities.

Already with these Gesso Pieces, Caramelle investigates subjects that are still vital to his work today, such as the function of symmetry and doubling through the mirror image, which constantly reflects back on ourselves and our own experiences. This also entails exploring how the picture relates to the wall and to the surrounding space, which it reflects in the materiality of its surfaces and in its illusionary space. How the exhibition space as well as the public built space or private studio are perceived is also a frequent point of reference in Caramelle’s work. The early Gesso Pieces with their complex interlayering of image and space already hint at the idea of an oscillation between the categories of picture and wall. In *Ansicht* (View) (3) and *Anschnitt* (Section) (4), for example, both from 1984, the color planes in the images can be read as walls that obey a central perspective, set in parallel layers one after the other, and in our perception they thus jump back and forth between pure colored surface and perspectival effect, often alternating between receding and advancing perspectives.

Caramelle uses unusual materials for his Gesso Pieces, a strategy that allows him to repeatedly break with artistic traditions and bring together seemingly irreconcilable elements. Here it is watercolor painting on a chalk ground, which creates irregular, iridescent color fields. The picture surface itself is thus reminiscent of faded painted walls and the pastel shades found in the atmospheric pictorial spaces of the Early Renaissance or in the Bauhaus in the early 20th century. In this way, Caramelle’s work frequently interweaves art-historical traditions with abstract color spaces,

associative richness with calculated non-representation. Color fields that are able to create visual depth can already be found as early as 1979 in works that likewise pursue an unusual technique, one that Caramelle will repeatedly take up and develop further as one of the basic principles of his work: working with sunlight. He exposes parts of a sheet of colored construction paper to sunlight for a length of time, causing these areas to fade, as seen for example in *House for a Chinese* (1979) (5) and *Untitled* (1991) (6). This mode of painting without using a brush creates subtle gradations of tone with a perspectival effect. In these Sun Pieces, as in the Gesso Pieces, the idea of a deliberately simplified spatial illusion is once again contrasted with the pure flatness of the picture.

In the course of the 1980s, Caramelle's Gesso Pieces moved away from their initial geometric austerity, rigid frontality, and symmetry and started including layers of color that hint at intricate spaces, with walls broken up by views penetrating through them, and different forms that can become windows, doors, or wall fields in which faces may once again be spied. Caramelle's works subtly explore shifts in symmetry, interrogating the "balance" of pictorial elements that can either be maintained or brought off-kilter. Figure-ground and other optical illusions, along with instilling a feeling of spatial uncertainty in the viewer, are among the strategies involved in this precarious pinning-down of an image and then losing it again, which never allows for an exact definition and always permits a multitude of readings. In Caramelle's work, this back and forth is rooted in his handling of symmetry—whether in drawing or painting—as he uses translation, rotation, spiral axes, mirroring, and inversion to interweave pictures and wall-based works into complex spatial situations.

Sometimes playful twists that provoke uncertainty are also Caramelle's method of choice in his sculptures. *Sculpture MMIIIRROOIIIR* (1984) (7), for example, confounds the viewer's expectations. When you pull the string, a bell sounds, but not the one you can see. Our perception is fooled: the bell is not moving and yet we hear ringing somewhere in the room. There is another bell hanging on the other side of the wall, connected by a string. The mechanism only becomes comprehensible when a second person on the other side responds: a non-verbal dialogue across space, a playful mirroring of one's own actions that maintains a balance between action and reaction. Caramelle is concerned here not only with the viewer but also with the balancing act involved in his own cognitive process: the pondering and evaluating undertaken by the artistic subject, made palpable in works that show the artist trying to avoid clarity and dogmatic decisions.

Caramelle's drawings from this period likewise deal with constructed spaces, although in this case they are not made up of rigidly layered color planes but rather quickly sketched yet clearly conceived nested constructions that reveal the artist's interest in the role of the architect as designer of three-dimensional spaces. In these architectures, too, windows and other openings often turn façades into faces, a theme that runs through Caramelle's oeuvre, where the image ground and the real wall are frequently activated as a projection surface for associations. In the works on paper, his approach is freer and more playful than in the Gesso Pieces. Even a later work, *IBRAUCHASTUDIO* (INEEDASTUDIO, 2013) (8), is a wild confusion of box-like constructions, colorful and

stacked on top of each other to form a metropolitan, collage-like all-over pattern displaying different perspectives, ground plans, and cross-sections. The title IBRAUCHASTUDIO is emblazoned like a giant advertisement, but in between there are also spatially indeterminate color areas that recall the motifs of the Gesso Pieces.

Graphic links between different levels of reality turn the wordplay in *household* (9) from 1980 into a comical caricature of modern (American) urban planning. Similarly subtle humor can be found in *the Architect, prost!* (1984) (10), which features a motif that looks like an evidently huge robotic machine, cartoon figure, and house on wheels all wrapped up in one: a Trojan horse that is raising its glass—but to what exactly? In other drawings from the same period, Caramelle takes inspiration from geometry and perspective to sketch free-flowing forms. Sweeping lines, scribbles, arabesques, and serpentine lines summon the idea of digressions or mental leaps and fast about-faces. Confusion is incited by allusions, ambiguities and double meanings, pictorial and linguistic wit. Caramelle's drawings are an endless flow of associations in which there are no consistent, completed actions but rather simultaneous events, splinters of realities that no longer permit clear points of view, a never-ending field of infinite referentiality and newly gained insights. *O. T.* (Untitled, 1982) (11), for example, frames the features of the constantly recurring face with spidery brushstrokes resembling curls and expands the frame of reference of picture plane versus spatial depth, reminiscent of surreal picture puzzles, by adding writing and collage. Pasted over "Ernst Caramelle" is the word "special" in typescript, "face" is pasted over with "visual," and "sculptures" with "moment"—announcing a special visual event (between New York and Paris).

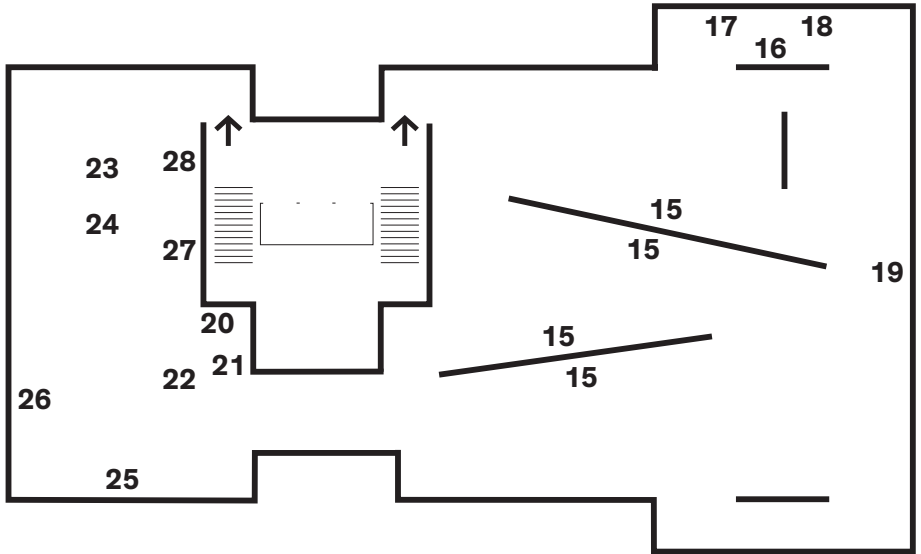
Caramelle looks for antitheses not only in material form. In addition to his interest in architecture and urban planning, he also depicts interiors in which the homey and familiar surroundings of the studio stand in contrast to fantastically surreal constructions. The cozy private domestic sphere can be found for example in the drawing *Design* (1978) (12), a copy of an older sheet showing a tiled stove and corner bench, which the artist has reworked here in a hastily sketched rendering. In Caramelle's multifaceted image-space interrelationships, the step from painted space to painting in space, from the wall in the painted picture, from the picture on the wall to painting on the wall is inevitable. The springboard for his site-specific paintings in the exhibition space was a small study, tellingly once again an interior: *Vino Dramatico* (1980–82) (13) launched a new work complex. Again he opts here for an unusual material, this time red wine. Wine fades; it is a volatile, unstable material, suitable for a permanent painting neither on paper nor the wall.

Unlike Caramelle's recurring motifs, *Vino Dramatico* is a unique piece. In contrast to his otherwise rapid execution of drawings, he worked on this sheet for two years. Painted in red wine on paper using a particularly fine brush, it depicts a fictitious, largely symmetrical, interior seen from above and frontally. A fullness in the lower area of the drawing contrasts with empty walls in the upper gallery. Within this intricate picture, Caramelle has spatially arranged the inventory of his mental world, a kind of disciplining of his thoughts—which often take off in a variety of directions in his works on paper—in order to allocate them here to a fixed place in an architectural

ensemble. On the lower floor of *Vino Dramatico*, the walls are divided into vertical panels and covered with a profusion of ornament. The room looks as if it has been reclaimed by nature and overgrown, yet it is also reminiscent of Baroque wall designs. The rigid structure of the upper part disappears under the decor in the lower section, and the boundaries of the room dissolve—perhaps an allusion to wine, which stands for drunkenness and irrationality but also for the expansion of consciousness. The interior includes, among other things, an image of a seahorse, which, along with “Tel” and “Josef Troma,” is one of the alter egos that already started appearing in Caramelle’s earliest works. Sigmund Freud’s couch can also be seen—alluding perhaps to the artist’s analytical self-questioning—as well the entrance to a lower corridor leading to a room for wine and another for cigars. In *Vino Dramatico* the urge for spatial organization and a tendency towards temporariness and dissolution inextricably contradict one another. Caramelle presented *Vino Dramatico* for the first time in Milan in 1982 and then in Bern in 1986, as a wall piece painted in a loose and rapid gestural style. In contrast to his otherwise rather small-format works, the ecstatic quality of this painting on the real wall with its instable medium and ornament that seems to dissolve the boundaries of space represents a search for aesthetic formulations of ambiguity, transition, and tentativeness, decisive driving forces in Caramelle’s work (14).

Ebene

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In the 1990s, Caramelle moved away from the almost auratic character, or one might say the modernist symmetry and centrality of his painting in the 1980s, towards zigzag mirrorings and convoluted spaces, undertaking experiments in between with abstract color fields, as well as “excursions” into ornament. In the 2000s, different perspectival conventions are then increasingly found within one and the same pictorial space. They no longer mesmerize the viewer through infinite recession into depth but instead through the juxtaposition of different viewing angles and sight axes, making it impossible to discern a single perspective (15). Conversely, this method also allows seemingly incongruous things to exist side by side. Caramelle incorporates motifs from other works into these pictures: the zigzag of the Sun Pieces, for example, which now increasingly appears as a veering motif. The coloration also changes: the harmonious pastel tones with their slightly washed-out surfaces are replaced by brighter, less balanced shades, bringing space and plane together in sometimes confusing constellations.

Caramelle’s interest in representing architecture and three-dimensional structures in the image field, in construction and at the same time instability, comes to the fore in several works. The *i.h. (imageholder)* (2011) (16) shows architectural forms that open out of a sheet as if from a folded postcard, interlocking with planes in the background. Within these layers oscillating between three-dimensional and planar impressions, a hand reaches into the illusionistic picture space and holds up the “built” construction. The contradiction between the fixed, the built, and the illusionary character of painting is also the theme of *Landscape (Passing By)* (1985) (17). The drawing paradoxically reverses the usual relationship between movement and stasis, suggesting that an architectural and scenic backdrop could pass by like a film before the eyes of the man on the terrace with his oriental-looking hat. Just how consistently Caramelle pursues and continually revisits his pictorial themes is demonstrated by a watercolor from 2002 in which houses also pass by like a filmstrip. The houses once again have faces here: *Untitled (four in one)* (18) consists of a row of four rectangular color fields. Like houses on a street, this block of buildings has eyes that stare back at us in the form of small light-blue rectangles, a somehow humorous street that has come to life and parades past before us. Nothing is as it seems.

Like the Gesso Pieces and the works on paper, the wall paintings begin to become more dynamic in the 1980s and to intrude more on the space rather than merely occupying it as a self-contained composition. Space and image react to each other, and sight axes are extended, manipulated, brought off balance (19). The wall paintings become larger and more dominant, obscuring the architecture. Their movement in space draws viewers into this playful unsettling of perception, as real space and the illusionary space of painting interweave and comment on each other.

The *Blätter* (Sheets) series, which began in 1973 and continued through the early 1980, pursues a strategy of confusion and relativization using other means. The drawings are a kind of loose stream of thought on fundamental themes of artistic identity and work, examining the pitfalls and circumstances of the art market and the question of how art is defined. One sheet simply bears the programmatic statement *Schon zu viel* (Already Too Much, 1976) (20). Too much what? Too much art? Too much

pretension? Expectations and any ideological content are thwarted as artistic creation is reduced to the question: What is it all about anyway? Schnellwerke (Quick Works, 1975) **(21)** fits in well in this context, a list of artistic tasks with the amount of time they take. Flashes of inspiration and thoughts in living color are to be rated differently in this catalogue—from max. 10 seconds to up to 20 minutes. According to the list, Caramelle assigns titles to his works in just five seconds. Part of this ironic attempt to make artistic thinking quantifiable is the blatant proclamation of value: DM 500 für dieses Blatt – ohne Kunst kein Preis (DM 500 for this Sheet – Without Art, No Price, 1976). The commercialization of art is a recurring theme, for example in the fictitious invitation by the Coca Cola Castelli Gallery (1976) to a show featuring artists such as Bruce Sony Nauman, Robert Rauschenberg BASF, and McDonald's Andy Warhol. With their playful back and forth, from *Das Wichtigste ist der Inhalt* (The Most Important Thing Is the Content) to *Das Wichtigste ist die formale Erscheinung* (The Most Important Thing Is the Formal Appearance), both from 1976, the drawings, too, express the artist's constant shifts in position. In every sheet, drawing or typescript is put to trenchant use. As witty and self-deprecating as *Die Kunst hat schon Nerven (oder nicht?)* (Art Really Has Some Nerve [Doesn't It?]) **(22)** from 1976 is, Caramelle has undeniably combined text and drawing here in carefully calculated fashion. The writing is integrated into the composition in winding lines executed in different styles that represent the diversity of graphic expression—almost like an ironic potshot taken at the idea of a free, uncontrolled artistic gesture. Other sheets show the artist's alter egos, which will later reappear in *Vino Dramatico*: the seahorse and the characters of Josef Troma and his son, named Tel in some works. But it is not only by way of his alter egos that Caramelle delights in slipping into different roles; he also presents himself as a painter, architect, or constructor and even as the subject of a fictitious biography, for example in *Zwei Arbeiten* (Two Works) **(23)** from 1978. His interest in constructing alternative "truths" is also evident in the work *Forty Found Fakes* (1979) **(24)**, a compilation of photographs from newspapers and magazines that vaguely resemble the style of famous artists and are presented as bona-fide works by them. Photos of alpine hotels are declared to be works by Bernd and Hilla Becher, and stacked cartons are labeled as Minimal Art objects by Donald Judd. This humorous undermining of authorship naturally also raises the question of the relativity of art in general—especially when there is a prestigious name behind it.

Caramelle began working with video at the very start of his artistic career, in 1974, for the 9th Internationale Malerwochen (International Painting Festival) in Graz. His installations for the show were not devoted to showing self-contained films as works of art but were designed instead to allow the medium to interact with reality and thereby challenge familiar modes of perception. In his *Video-Landscapes* **(25)**, Caramelle toys with the relationship between reality and its duplication. The photos of the installation show a monitor on whose screen we see those parts of the body, objects, or parts of the room that are obscured by the monitor at any given moment. We experience mediated reality. The monitor completes our interrupted visual experience, and we involuntarily trust it to really show us what it is at the same time hiding from us; we trust the media image and grasp it as reality.

Caramelle delved in more depth into the medium of video that same year as a research fellow at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. This is where he created *Video Ping-Pong* (1974) **(26)**. Caramelle puts up for discussion here as well the relationship between reality, image, and perception. There is a shelf with a monitor placed at either side in front of a ping-pong table. They show two ping-pong players in profile exchanging shots. The sound of the bouncing ball is audible. But there is no ball to be seen between the two monitors. The game is consummated only in our imagination. We stand between the players and with the help of our imagination we can follow the invisible ball and complete the artwork in a kind of afterimage. The back and forth between real and virtual unsettles the observing subject, because our consciousness must constantly switch back and forth between what is really there (the table), the media image (the players), and the sound (the ball). Once again, our expectations are not met but can only be compensated by our imagination.

In 1976 Ernst Caramelle concluded his studies at the University of Applied Arts Vienna with the final project *Resümee* (Résumé) **(27)**. After having previously done an apprenticeship in glass painting, the artist now took up work as an advertising copywriter in Frankfurt. He rented a studio in New York in 1981 and later held teaching posts in Frankfurt. In retrospect, the work with the then-paradoxical title *Resümee* represents the provocative prelude to his artistic career. It is a box of works in different media: a total of 23 drawings and collages, 12 photographs, a Super-8 film, an audio cassette, and a bottle with a blue airmail sticker. Individual image elements, lettering, letters of the alphabet, words, or sentences appear again and again in the drawings, photographs, and film. There are already doppelgangers to be found here, alter egos of the artist, like Josef Troma, Tel, and the seahorse, which Caramelle still holds onto today. On one collage it says: "Josef Troma's son, TEL, plays with dice." The sentence "Tel is better than Ephon" appears several times in combination with the seahorse. Clarity is provided by a collage titled "Aufstellung der Symbole bzw. Textauszüge bzw. ihre Herkunft" (List of Symbols and/or Text Excerpts and/or Their Origin), on which Caramelle describes his doppelgangers. On a sheet of paper and on the lid of the cardboard box there is a detail of a drawing of a table with a telephone on top of it along with several books, piles of paper, a pen, a ruler, and other office items. A *Zeichnung aus der Erinnerung* (Drawing from memory) (1976) **(28)** reveals that this drawing in fact shows the room in Brixen im Thale where the artist spent his childhood and so it therefore goes back to the beginning of his private biography.

The media and alter egos listed in *Resümee* form the foundation for Caramelle's universe of imagination, which will go on to open up for him virtually endless doors to unknown realms, figures, and stories, full of new experiences and inscrutable but enchanting abbreviations and ciphers, ornaments, spirals, and labyrinths. But *Resümee* also laid the groundwork for the self-reflection and shifts in perspectives, mediums, and formats with which Caramelle, as a virtuoso constructor of intricately interwoven image, text, and space, continually challenges anew our perception of reality.

Imprint

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Exhibition

Ernst Caramelle
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Exhibition Booklet

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