

It Is Not What It Is – But It Is Always Painting

During the big painting revival of the so-called Neue Wilde (New Wild Ones) in the 1980s, Alois Lichtsteiner also produced an array of large-format, intensely coloured pictures. However, his *Gefäße* (Vessels) series has little to do with the punk attitude and the intentionally Bad Painting employed by many of his successful colleagues. Nor did Lichtsteiner question the technical aspect of painting or undermine the significance of the panel with ironic gestures. By contrast, everything he applies to a canvas, or any other ground, is an ongoing exploration of the genuine potential of painting to point to the depicted subject as well as itself.

This approach is already apparent in the *Gefäße* paintings, in which the title-giving vessels are only visible as enlarged sections that take up the entire surface of the over two-metre-high canvases. The eyes wander and follow the movements in the picture, as well as the gestic, often fiery red squirls, which can be interpreted as the contents of the vessel and as purely pictorial expressions. The vessel becomes a metaphor for the image itself and its “contents”. As in many of the artist’s later works, the figure and the ground are almost indistinguishable and elude categories such as representational or abstract.

Ast (AL1994.018) (Branch) (1994) is different in that the gestic movement takes on the shape of the object mentioned in the title, which once again appears only in part as a slanted vertical axis against the red backdrop. The branch in its carbonised state is also a vanitas symbol and a “reference to the impossibility of representational painting”.¹

As with the *Gefäße* paintings, the dimensions of this picture engage not only the viewer’s eyes, but their whole body and its axis. While the branch also provides a scale in relation to the actual size, the interpretation of the canvas-filling vessels is not limited to over-dimensional receptacles, but also leaves room for other images, such as an imaginary climb up a mountain face.

To this day, mountains, or rather, sections of the Alpine world, play a—literally—expansive role in Alois Lichtsteiner’s work. The landscape formats he started to produce in 2001 differ from previous pieces, not only because of their more horizontal than vertical compositions, but also because his painterly process became more systematised, albeit with room for spontaneity. Lichtsteiner was responding to a trend towards intellectualisation that evolved in the 1990s. The French theorists of Deconstructivism and others had called into question the immediacy and spontaneity of painting as an “unalienated medium”² and thereby strongly challenged its relevance. Looking back, Lichtsteiner says he found the situation very difficult but accepted the challenge by trying to find a free and experimental approach to painting.

Many other painters also subjected their medium to an array of translation processes. The painterly gesture was no longer just evidence of the technical process, but the result of transfers, repetitions, and replications and often proceeded from randomly discovered traces or constellations. Many of the traditional antitheses, such as surface versus depth, became irrelevant. Everything happened on the surface of the picture which became a complex arena for multilayered processes in the truest sense of the word. While Alois Lichtsteiner takes a similar approach, he allows the immediate experience of the painted image to prevail after a passage through various transfer processes.

This is manifest in an extensive series of paintings inspired by an observation Lichtsteiner made during an Alpine hike with the art historian and curator Ulrich Loock. From the Susten Pass he looked down on a largely snow-covered area interspersed with dark patches where crags or swards stood out from their white surroundings. This motif

¹ Message from Alois Lichtsteiner to the author, July 2025.

² Raimund Stecker: *Malerei. Das unentfremdete Medium*. Regensburg 2003.

he had discovered in the external natural environment became an almost abstract composition which he transferred to his paintings in increasingly reduced variations.

After processing a shot of a mountainside with these thawed, snow-free patches with Photoshop, Lichtsteiner projects an enlarged version of the image onto a canvas and lightly pencils the outlines of the shapes. However, their final contours materialise through the respective lengths of the parallel brushstrokes in shades of grey, which give the clifftops peeking out from the snow a sculptural presence despite their planar arrangement.

Lichtsteiner decided to conclude each phase within this ongoing production of mountainscapes with a painting, always with the same dimensions. Hence, he purchased eight canvases measuring 244 × 320 cm in 2006, which he proceeded to paint every one to five years.

“Grey but not too grey, more of a greenish grey verging on brown. A kind of brownish grey with green, brown-green-grey. Maybe with a bluish tinge. As long as its grey. Perhaps a hint of red. Brown red, but overall grey. So, a greeny blue-brown-red-grey.”

What might read like a detailed description of the different hues that become apparent when viewing Alois Lichtsteiner’s mountainscapes is in fact how a husband describes his favourite colour in the television sketch *Eheberatung* (Marriage Counseling) (1977) by the German humourist Vicco von Bülow, better known as Loriot. However, his indecisiveness could also be interpreted as a desire to embrace a complexity that eludes the commitment to “one” colour and its linguistic specification.

At first sight, it might seem that Lichtsteiner reduced the palette for his mountain pictures to greys. But unlike black-and-white photography, there are also nuances of green, blue, and red among the “fifty shades of grey”.

The same applies to the white ground which is interspersed with a multitude of subtle hues. As it represents snow, the variety of terms for snow in the Inuit language comes to mind. While the frequently mentioned forty words might be an exaggeration, the Inuit do have many ways of describing their largely snow-covered environment.

On the one hand, Lichtsteiner reduced his colour palette in favour of clarity because the restriction to black-and-white and shades of grey enabled him to emphasise the contours and the structure of the composition. Hence, he created black-and-white versions of earlier polychrome paintings. On the other hand, his rejection of bright colours was a conscious reaction to the loud, garish and increasingly popular and marketable art of the time: “I found it grossly insulting. Why had we spent so much time thinking about what we should do if this kind of superficiality attracted so much attention? Today I understand that the hedonistic art produced around the turn of the millennium was a reaction to the previous trend towards ‘intellectualisation’. So, I retreated into black-and-white painting. However, it should not be forgotten that white is the sum of all colours.”³

The artist not only reflects on the colour but also on the substance of snow: “I do not perceive the colour as light, it is haptic, both palpable and sensual.”⁴ To Lichtsteiner, the blanket of snow on a mountain is a kind of skin. This concept of the image as skin aligns with the vessel metaphor. And in turn, the colour of the painted surface melts (perhaps in allusion to thawing snow) into the colour of the represented motif and its matter.

3 As cited in: Monika Fischer: *Alois Lichtsteiner, OHMSTAL: Schöpfer der Karten der Heimatvereinigung Wiggertal. Die Bilder werden beim Sehen neu geschaffen*. At: https://www.aloislichtsteiner.com/fileadmin/pdf/deutsche_texte/Fischer_Heimatverein_Wiggertal_16.pdf, last accessed in July 2025.

4 Adrian Dürrwang: “Malerei auf dem Grat – zu Besuch im Atelier von Alois Lichtsteiner”, in: *ensuite – Zeitschrift zu Kultur & Kunst*, June / July 2021, p. 63. See also: https://www.aloislichtsteiner.com/fileadmin/pdf/deutsche_texte/Du__rrewang_Ensuite_21.pdf, last accessed in July 2025.

The skin metaphor is also a direct reference to human skin and the tactile experience, since the perception of a picture is not limited to the eyes but can also be felt on the skin due to the sensory stimuli generated by its material quality.

A group of pictures for which Lichtsteiner returned to a more polychrome approach show how significant different forms of impact, not only on skin, are in his “translations” between diverse media. The painterly method he applied to these works is inspired by the immediacy of woodblock printing, which dominates the artist’s graphic work. He thus transferred a procedure he had developed for his woodcuts almost directly to painting. First, he creates a template for the woodcut with Photoshop. The vectorised image is then cut into the printing plate with a computerised milling machine, which he has since upgraded to include a laser.

For the paintings, he projects the outlines of the shapes onto the canvas and then cuts them—once again digitally—into a piece of foil. After preparing the ground, Lichtsteiner sticks the foil cut-outs onto the parts that are supposed to represent the background. As with woodblock printing, he then rolls the paint onto the remaining areas of the canvas. These sections combine with the previously applied layer of paint to produce complex structures of colours and hues that translate the three-dimensional formations of the rocks protruding from the snow and their light and shadow effects into a planar structure. Likewise, the surface of the picture is flat and smooth. The coloured shapes are spread across the picture in varying degrees of concentration; their outlines are often soft and flowing but can also develop sharp corners and edges. Works by the American Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still might come to mind. The ambivalence between figure and ground and positive and negative form is a recurring theme in his large-format paintings, such as *D No. 2* (1957) in the Kunstmuseum Basel. As in Still’s works, the outlines in Lichtsteiner’s paintings often look torn, and thus recall the ripped posters which the French Affichistes, such as Jacques de la Villeglé or Raymond Hains, turned into an art form around 1960.

The representation of the Alpine world in Lichtsteiner’s pictures could not be further away from the heroization of the mountains as a political symbol of freedom, which is a popular perception in Swiss patriotism. His concentration on sections within a mountainous landscape also sets his works apart from most Alpine depictions in recent art history. Ferdinand Hodler was probably the first artist to “translate” the Alps into a distinct pictorial language. The works he created around 1900 monumentalise the mountains as an expression of patriotic pathos. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, who moved to Graubünden in 1918, went from portraying mountains with large, intense swaths of colour to reducing them to backdrops in harmless idyls (*Amselfluh*, 1922, Kunstmuseum Basel).

Caspar Wolf’s small- to medium-sized pictures are neither heroic nor idyllic. In the 18th century he was the first Alpine painter to reject Classicistic idealisations in favour of realistic representations of nature. Today his works are seen as precursors of the atmospheric landscapes of Romanticism. The compositions of aquarelle-like pieces such as *Zweiter Staubbachfall im Winter* (1775, Kunstmuseum Bern) or *Der Rhonegletscher von der Talsohle oberhalb Gletsch* (1778, Aargauer Kunsthau, Aarau) seem almost as abstract as Alois Lichtsteiner’s paintings.

While Caspar Wolf’s pictures can *also* be viewed as abstract compositions, this perception does not abstract them from the fact that they are representations of the Swiss mountains, the same applies to Hodler’s and Kirchner’s modern depictions. By contrast,

Alois Lichtsteiner's painterly outcomes are so far removed from the—albeit still recognisable—subject that his pictures are ultimately more of an embodiment than a representation, and thus, a complete transfer of the subject into the substance and the reality of the painting. Only in exceptional cases, such as *AL2024.004* (2024), the shape of the mountain motif is still present enough for us to see it, even if “This is not a mountain” were written beneath the image in a nod to René Magritte's famous pipe.

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