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Shila Khatami | Incidents

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There is nothing wrong with being unambiguous [...] Ambiguities, on the other hand, are discomfoting because further observations, analyses or reflections seem necessary before a decision can be reached.¹

I am sure Shila Khatami is aware that ambiguities are discomfoting and that she makes deliberate use of them. There is no point looking for bite-sized facts, because her paintings fight tooth and nail against being crammed into a single category. At a close look, seemingly arbitrary patches of colour can become an arrangement of minimalist compositions, and the traditional, natural canvas can just as quickly evoke a graffiti-covered house wall. The title *Incidents* reflects the ambivalence of the form and the responsibility lies with us viewers to either think of avoiding disruptions in incident management, to picture a series of individual actions, or to wrap the word in the global political context of Violent Incidents.

Acrylic paints, glue and paint rollers act as Khatami's accomplices, informed by accurate compositions, but always in autonomous action. However well she may know the behaviour of her material, glue and paint themselves decide the outcome of her work. Through the speed and accentuation with which she guides the paint rollers, the artist provokes reactions from the paint, yet the medium has a will of its own. Sometimes glue and acrylic crawl sluggishly across the canvas and sometimes they explode into splashes or a curtain of drops. Somewhere between a tense struggle for control of the medium and a synergistic pas de deux lies the nature of Khatami's relationship to her material. At the same time, she plans to avoid uncontrollable incidents as well as to let them happen. In contrast to the emotional charge of the brushstroke as an indexical connection to the body, Khatami inserts a distancing entity before the gesture. The paint roller serves as a means of control, translating the physicality of abstract expressionism into the controlled impression and a geometric form that emerges from it. Directions, rhythms and sequences take up central positions on the canvas. Loops and swirls of action in space seem to be rolled flat. Each direction describes a course of action, each layer its sequence. The minimalist geometry, which is left at the end and refers to the composition of classical painting with inherently corresponding lines and exact centres, is the relic of an earlier movement. Over two-metre-high canvases demand immense physical exertion, and, in its spontaneous aesthetics, the application of paint is the first performance of a rehearsed series of actions, the accuracy of which is presupposed by the drying glue. The marks of the roller attest to the extent of the

¹ Hoffjann, Olaf: *Die Flucht in die Ambiguität*, Wiesbaden 2022, translated from the German.

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physicality and the individual drips on the canvas allude to the time that has elapsed between the steps of the choreography. At the same time, Khatami's use of paint traces the permeability of the boundaries of cultural spaces. Mixing the pure colour pigment with white is a means of setting street art apart from the background of a dirty wall, as well as a gesture of approximation towards the colour culture of Persian mosaics. These points of contact play into Khatami's hands and she uses them to build bridges between different cultural and political meanings, made out of the conformity, overlay and contradiction of subjective perceptions. Which path we take and whether we are aware of this proximity depends on our personal backgrounds. It is only at particular points that the titles of the works actively guide us to an author-based view on artistic or socio-political influences of the artist with Iranian roots. What we make of work titles such as *Violet Incidents* - where we find visual connection points - how the colours correlate with our viewing habits - that is the discomfort of ambiguity that compels us to explore Shila Khatami's painting further and to go on pondering when we are already back home.

Lucy Degens