

Text: Peter Schmid, Regierungsrat BL, Abt. Kultur. Laudatio (translated)

Cultural Prize 2000

Laudation by Peter Schmid member of the government of canton of Baselland.

Head of the Department of Education and Culture. On the occasion of the Kantonalbank Prize ceremony, Thursday, October 19, 2000

Color – Movement – Play

Ladies and gentlemen,

Where does the proverbial "gray mouse" feel particularly gray?

In the beautiful Art Nouveau house with its generous grounds on Rüttigasse in Frenkendorf. And where does the magistrate clad in statesmanlike gray — currently supported by the fashionable trend toward color restraint — feel pretty much the same as that gray mouse? Naturally, also on Rüttigasse in Frenkendorf, in that house where Claire Ochsner lives and works since 1986. No — nothing is gray at Claire Ochsner's. On the contrary, colorfulness is a hallmark of her work as an artist. She herself radiates color in conversation. In the recently published book about her, with the almost programmatic title *"The Magic of Color"*, it's even pointed out that not a single gray hair adorns the artist's head!

Claire Ochsner herself says: "Colors must shine with power." On the back cover of the book is a text that captures her artistic program perfectly: "Perfectly staged color symphonies, paired with delicate form and lively lightness, are the outstanding characteristics of the artist's comprehensive work." One critic apparently said that Claire Ochsner's work is *too colorful*. I honestly don't know what to make of such criticism. I know well what colorlessness is — but what exactly is *too colorful*? My fantasy fails me here, not least because I associate fantasy with a colorful vision. One last quote from the book: "New commissions and purchases keep her, constantly at work, having already her head full of colors, shapes, and visions."

Claire Ochsner's objects emerge from a world of fantasy. We encounter snake women, shell women, three princesses, and finally the mythical creature "*Giraffalla*." In the midst of all this sits a fat crocodile — a work from earlier times. Her core materials are canvas, metal, and polyester. The scale of her works ranges from small, delicate pieces to monumental sculptures. Above all — or perhaps one should say, floating above all — are joyful colors: rich tones, glowing yellows, ultramarine, fiery red, and serene white. Here, joy in life is expressed artistically. Art doesn't have to, but may, express joy in life — as one of humanity's many strategies for living and surviving.

Claire Ochsner's works have names. Her mobiles are called "*Verdalla*", "*Scharalla*", or more neutrally "*Doppelspirale*" (*Twin-spiral*) or "*Das Blatt*" (*The leaf*). Her sculptures are called like "*Violotto*", "*Voletta*", "*Der Waldmann*" (*The woodsman*), "*Das Ginkoblatt*" (*The Ginko-leaf*), or "*Ein Gesicht*" (*A face*). Her paintings are titled "*Geheimniss der Nacht*" (*Mystery of the night*), "*Fliegender Fish*" (*Flying fish*), "*Symphonie in Blau*" (*Symphony in blue*), and "*Mit Schwung*" (*With swing*). The names are either precisely chosen or, conversely, precisely artistically translated. Anyone engaging with Ochsner's work can, by listening closely to the titles, easily imagine the painting, sculpture, or mobile.

If a painting is titled "*Mit Schwung*" (*With swing*), then it must, inevitably, be one that extends beyond the edges of the canvas, swinging out into space.

Her world of small sculptures is also full of surprises — like the delightful venomous snake, cleverly designed as a parasol stand. Or the large sculpture: "*Giraffalla*," the dancing giraffe —

how fitting that it stands in front of the headquarters of the Zug Cantonal Bank, tying beautifully into this occasion.

Her guiding principles — “Movement, Color, Play” — clearly resonate with the world of children, too. She has contributed to children's books and designed playground elements like dragons and sunbirds for climbing and sliding.

In recent years, her kinetic sculptures have emerged — artworks so precisely crafted that even the lightest breeze sets one or more parts in motion. Where wind is not enough, she turns to solar-powered sculptures.

One particular work defies categorization: is it a fantasy object, a mythical creature? No — it's a large animal from the world of realpolitik: a painted wooden portrait of my former colleague, Government Councillor Werner Spitteler, framed with symbolic elements — which, again, involve color and imagination. The piece hangs in the portrait gallery of former government members in the government building — publicly accessible.

I can only offer a fragmentary overview of Claire Ochsner's versatile artistic output and numerous exhibitions in Switzerland and abroad. Likewise, her life story is more complex — perhaps I should say *more colorful* — than I can summarize with a few dry facts:

Born in Zurich, the daughter of an engineer and a painter. Grew up with three brothers — one of whom became a stonemason. She was educated in Switzerland (mainly in Küsnacht, at the lake of Zurich), the Netherlands, and France.

She recalls her childhood in the Netherlands and her first encounter with Van Gogh's works, which had a lasting impact due to their color — though fortunately, not due to his temperament. After school, she studied mathematics at the University of Zurich, then attended the Zurich School of Applied Arts and the Amsterdam Academy of Arts, where the decision matured to choose painting as her profession. She later returned to the Zurich School of Applied Arts, studying under Max Bill, among others. In 1971, she married Peter Ochsner. Together they had three children: Karin, Stefan, and Philipp. In 1986, the family moved to the house on Rüttigasse in Frenkendorf — and believe me, you don't need the house number. You'd have to be blind not to recognize the right house.

Every artist follows a winding path before reaching a distinct, independent style — often secured only by a fragile certainty. And always come the inevitable comparisons:

Do Claire Ochsner's works remind one of Niki de Saint Phalle? Maybe to a fleeting observer, in terms of color — but her forms take completely different directions. Her *three princesses*, for example, are flat and minimal, the opposite of Saint Phalle's voluptuous figures.

Bernhard Luginbühl? Entirely off the mark — where's the rust?

Jean Tinguely? Again, no — the color choices and the quiet, graceful movements of her sculptures point in a different direction. Such comparisons are about as useful as trying to explain a person's nature solely by referencing their parents. That approach ignores the possibility of true, independent creation. Claire Ochsner has developed entirely on her own. She works hard, with many sketches, and often returns to her first draft. For the technically demanding tasks — sanding, mold-making, mechanics, welding — she works with highly skilled craftsmen. In 1998, her already spacious home was expanded with a new atelier, a true workshop in every sense of the word.

Claire Ochsner receives the 2000 Cantonal Bank Prize for her independence and colourfulness. We congratulate her warmly.