

BASEL

## Heike-Karin Föll

ELAINE

“Now, / About what to put in your poem-painting,” John Ashbery suggested, in a neighborly fashion, in an old poem: “Flowers are always nice, particularly delphinium.” And so he gave Elaine Scarry part of the subtitle, if not the seed, for her ravishing essay “Imagining Flowers: Perceptual Mimesis (Particularly Delphinium).” I found a photocopy of the essay underneath a window in an exhibition of Heike-Karin Föll’s subtle, disarming works at the (aptly named) Elaine project space in Basel. Across the room from numerous spotlit white tables carefully laden with the Berlin-based artist’s open handmade books was yet another incarnation of Ashbery’s line: an enormous bouquet of bluish purple delphinium, spilling out of a turquoise plastic bucket. At the pedestal’s foot casually sat a six-pack of Evian water bottles wrapped in bright pink plastic with the word HOME emblazoned across it, a kind of poetic fragment encapsulating the strange familiarity of this beautifully hued *mise-en-scène*.

Accented by wavelike shadows spraying against the white wall behind, this piece—*Delphinium-Bouquet and Elaine Scarry* (all works cited, 2012)—read (and felt) like a poetic image come miraculously off the page, or out of the mind. As such, it suggested Föll’s more customary medium—those aforementioned volumes—in which she uses the white page as an affective approximation or architectonic equivalent of the literary imagination. *Delphinium-Bouquet*’s expert employment and convergence of color and writing—the brilliant stains and impressions they both leave—thus pointed to Föll’s larger literary-minded practice, most often embodied in affecting, collage-filled books or singular drawings in

Heike-Karin Föll,  
*Delphinium-Bouquet  
and Elaine Scarry*,  
2012, foam, plastic  
sheet, pack of Evian  
bottles, plastic  
bucket, water, wire,  
fresh delphiniums,  
70 7/8 x 31 1/2 x 31 1/2".



which both color and its lexical equivalents pop up with alacrity.

Take the volume *n° 55 the writers / the imaginary as the right to lie*, here opened to a spread that reads (verso): “I went / to / see / L / and took a dozen / large shaggy flowers / like / purple / and white cat’s fur.” The recto page features a black-and-white photo of Föll’s face emerging from shadow, a yellow sticky note scrawled with the word *KISS* underneath it. On another table nearby, *n° 68 fame* was open to a page reading *FAME*, with bloodlike red spots splattered coolly around it, while others offered scribbled litanies of female writers’ names or more obscure accounts. A complicated feminism emerged: There was Föll’s oblique embrace of feminine signifiers (flowers, pastels, handcraft, female forebears) in works that nonetheless resisted the personal-confessional “female” narrative the spectator-reader might (embarrassingly) expect. It amounted to a kind of “bathing in the no,” as Clarice Lispector once put it.

The effect of the show was at once ambient and specific: the larger and diffuse idea of books, writing, and imagemaking versus the actual material specificity of the volumes, words, or drawings. Dabs of color on certain pages articulate the “frames” (that is, the page margins) that hold them. Thus emerged the idea of the book itself, as a series of frames that one might flip through, as one normally moves through the pages of a book. But Föll refutes this idea by taping down the pages. The book becomes unusable in its ordinary sense—there is no reading forward. Equally subversive, but in the opposite manner, was the book that Föll scanned, printed out in a vast grid, and hung on a gallery wall. The entire volume’s pages became visible, electrifyingly, at once. “The flower has the feature of forever shattering into scores of specified surfaces,” Scarry writes in her essay. So it goes with Föll’s works: one book (and the imagination behind it) “shattering into scores of specified surfaces,” and then another.

—Quinn Latimer