

Juxtapositions, Slides, Breaks, and Junctures

Characteristic of Jon Arne Mogstad's new paintings is a kind of liberated feeling that one experiences when seeing these works. He is continuing to build up a synthesis of the visual languages and means which have interested him throughout his career while simultaneously adding new layers of perception and marking traces of the painter's presence in the working process.

He has experimented with photorealism, application of photographic techniques straight on the canvas, different kinds of background materials, different paint materials, distances, manners of applying paint or brush strokes on the canvas. He is a rare painter in his readiness to experiment, to start everything anew, to put his craft man's skills and knowledge of painting to test. At times, you can detect an almost destructive attitude to his earlier work. Whenever, I hear this appearing in his speaking, a memory of a scene from a visit to the studio of the Lambretta group in the 80s comes to my mind. He was showing the group's works together with the painter Erik Evensen. The off-handed way they handled the large canvases made me panic of each and every painting being in danger of destruction. Undoubtedly many works also were damaged or totally destroyed as a consequence of this rough treatment. They seemed to have a need to physically convey the visitor a feeling of that this is not so important; we take it really cool.

When Jon Arne Mogstad got the PS1 scholarship to New York two years later from the time of this scene, I happened to visit the city about a month after his arrival. To my great astonishment, he was doing something that looked totally confused. It did not take long to understand that what he was actually doing was abandoning his Romantic and materially orientated landscapes and embarking on something new. A rare and courageous, perhaps even bold trait in an artist, but one that in varying degrees seems to colour his whole painting project even today.

In New York he adopted new forms of visual rhetoric. One of the first and clearest was his way of combining precise geometric patterns, stripes and grids, through which one was to see the atmospheric background scene. A growing interest in abstraction starts also to manifest itself in his work. His colours get brighter and during this period strong, almost insolent tone of Cadmium yellow dominates.

After a relatively quiet period during the late eighties and early nineties, he started a new phase in his painting. In a way, this period still continues. Now we see a mature artist aware of his means of expression, but still ready to test and experiment with any aspect of the work. He has abandoned the somewhat heraldic composition with its fixed position view and become more and more aware of the rich traditions of visual languages and started to focus on possibilities of developing paintings that are more like events. He also seems freer and more relaxed, playful, in his painting. He does no longer to feel any need to separate the abstract and the representational; they can well appear in the same work.

A new aspect distinctly much present in this exhibition is his interest in beauty, the painterly kind of beauty that we see in colours, materials, surfaces, forms and gestures and in the very presence of the painted object.

Juxtaposing different visual languages, speeds of observation, formal traditions and combining paintings into meaningful series, into a kind of visual sentences are typical elements of his recent work. He chooses what is interesting for him from the point of view of an individual work to be able to convey what makes visual sense in this specific painting. The sense or meaning of the painting is generated between the different elements, fragments of tradition, visual cultures. The space of encounter, the space of break in a juxtaposition, varies in its quality of being mutually contrasted or related creating either a wide or narrow in-between space for new meaning(s) to arise. This is the zone for the individual onlooker who enters the void but is simultaneously aware of the path of meaning being clearly staked.

The new works also tell us about how it is possible to let different viewpoints, minute tonal differences, ideas, and scales slide into one another and how to create smooth transitions, or passages between the elements or parts of the painting. Sliding is also seen in his use of the grading flows of colour fields with their subtly or abruptly varying tonal modalities. The earlier works were often based on the presence of a singular, signal colour that dominated the whole scene. In the new paintings we see suave variations; a gentler message.

There is no story with a beginning and an end that he is trying to tell us. Rather we are led to ponder and free our gaze follow visual events which flow both horizontally and vertically or from one section of a multi-part work to the next. In a characteristically contemporary way of approaching painting, Jon Arne Mogstad does not define the painter's perspective of looking, observing, constructing as a specific, a singular position. Instead, in the manner of a novel, his paintings are like chapters in a book which together make a scene reminiscent of a polyphonic novel where all the participating voices bring their milieus, traditions and localities with them into the overall scenes. This quality can also be met in his most complex single paintings where the internal juxtapositions, slides, breaks, speeds, distances, and scales create eventful symphonic scenes which have to be discovered part by part before one is able to perceive them as entities. A painting seems to lose its position as an autonomous, clearly delimited area and starts to extend its dialogue both backwards in time, to the surrounding contemporary visual culture, to the social space around us as well as to tradition of the sublime but also to popular and high cultures. We are in the middle of these visual encounters, points of juncture. We look at them aware that this is the contemporary scene of painting which also shows possible directions toward future.

Painting at a time when both video and photography seem to make the central areas of visual experiment offers also interesting challenges to these new media. The critic

Howard Halle has come up with an interesting opening in this discussion, when reviewing Andreas Gursky's exhibition of photographs. According to Halle " 'painting' is a philosophical enterprise that doesn't always involve paint." Halle saw how Gursky applied of a painterly way of building his photographic compositions and it led him to "reformulate his understanding of the ontology of painting in order to suggest that it is 'a way of organizing the world that represents neither truth nor fiction exclusively but rather a little of both. Whether an artist uses a brush or a camera to achieve that goal scarcely matters.' " (Quoted and commented in Douglas Fogle: *The Trouble with Painting*, p. 18, in the catalogue *Painting at the Edge of the World*, Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, February-March, 2001.)

This is an interesting position at a time when photography is adopting compositional models we recognize from painting or its qualities of lighting, relies on staged or performed scenes and events while still trying to maintain its documentary credibility, and often also playing with the mixture of these elements. Video, on the other hand, is investigating different speeds of images to achieve painterly qualities and in the same way as photography is engaged in atmospheric pictures, intensive close-ups in its manner of unfolding of psychological events in its narration. The lack of simple temporal sequence in painting that sometimes has been felt as a defect now seems to be a goal to reach within their specific media for some of the artists working in video and photography today. They seem to strive to make moving images which if not still are at least stiller.

In this kind of mutual approaching, it is easy to agree with Howard Halle's argument that painting is actually a philosophy which is capable of containing both fictive and factual elements. The difference that still remains is the specific craft process of painting, which, however, can be combined with photographic techniques or other technical means of applying images or surfaces, but perhaps it is time to let painting free of orthodox demands of the craft tradition and instead accept it as a certain kind of imagery. In this it

has resemblances to musical scores but completed with the immediacy of its completed presence.

Painting imagery – although basically iconic - also contains the possibility of indexical marks or gestures, one-to-one dialogues between the painter and the canvas and certainly this tells more about the intrinsic possibilities inherent in this visual language than about its limitations. The long tradition of painting makes it into a dense field of references and the fact that some parts of the tradition are now covered by technical means just confirms this.

This aspect of Jon Arne Mogstad's work is at its most manifest in the monumental work he completed for the Telenor building in Fornebu in 2002. Here is combining the age-old technique of stucco lustro with its sensual surfaces and mellow colour fields with photographic techniques and free hand painting. The complex scene or a painted environment lets the outdoor glide into the indoor and vice versa. The scale is monumental but still able to convey a feeling of intimacy through the choices of very low-key subject matters (skiing) and the delicious surfaces of the painted areas inside where one certainly is tempted to let one's hand glide over the silky areas of the stucco lustro areas.

It is uninteresting to define the specific quality of a painter who is very intensively working, exploring new modes of working and using scales, dimensions, and techniques in such complex and experimenting ways as Jon Arne Mogstad is doing. I think it is just really interesting to see what is doing, where his journeys and discoveries have so far led him and to follow his ways forward.

Maaretta Jaukkuri