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The Colour of Cola

Liquid substance is in every respect a highly volatile entity. As a subject for still lives it neither figures as a form nor an object. Manet's liquids, praised for their beautiful hues cannot be distinguished from their vessels. The crystal flower vases, whisky bottles and beer mugs are as important as the liquid they contain. Consequently, we do not perceive the colour of the substance in its pure form, for although the glass in Manet's work is wholly transparent and colourless the true nature of the liquid – its amorphous shape and gradual translucency – is somewhat misinterpreted by the vessel.

in Stephen Prina's 1989 "Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet" is the sum of Manet's output. Tumi Magnusson's series of liquid substances can be seen as the opposite; a particle of represented fluids. This sense of detail has always been with Magnusson, right from the beginning of his career in the early eighties. No matter how rough his paintings were – variable emulsion on cheap paper or burlap – there was always a spot, a detail or a part that caught the observer's eye as a syntactic twist around which all the rest of the canvas revolved. It was as if Magnusson were able to persuade the sight to search for a hidden treasure in a field which seemed not to possess any such thing.

Ten years ago Magnusson was obviously heading for a more sober, yet far more enigmatic kind of expression. The grotesque style of the early works, full of mocking nonchalance and raw laugh, which made him the least accessible of all Icelandic trans-avant-garde painters in the early eighties, became the solid ground for a finer research into the medium of oil painting and the paradox of painterly representation. What had been a landscape of surreal apparitions situated midway between Miró's distorted utensils and Kippenberger's loony repertoire gradually became an indefinite space of blurred horizons and gradations with everyday objects floating about it.

The enigma was introduced by rigorous aesthetic means which suddenly turned Magnusson's paintings into a subtle play of dualistic tension between complementary zones of colours. The gradation which brightened up a part of the canvas in contrast with its darker side was an atmospheric novelty of a romantic nature. Had it not been for the objects which kept floating in the foreground a perfect rupture would have resulted between the burlesque early paintings and the highly sensitive expression in the nineties. The illusory effect which was virtually inexistent in the early works now became a major feat, introducing a perfect persuasion into Magnusson's antinomic play of rapture and repulsion.

Before the background which seems to depict a profound lake by a mountain-side in deep blue hues – but it is in fact a simple geometric abstraction – a vertical row of saucers and a cup ascends the middle of the canvas like a multiple mirage disturbing the atmospheric calmness while intensifying the sense of distance beyond. Those who longed for a pure landscape, the most persistent of all modern Icelandic genres, saw these absurd utensils as an annoying addition to the happy effect of the cherished subject matter. It would nevertheless be too simplistic to take Magnusson's contradictory representation as a one-sided attack on Icelandic landscape painting. Without the particular tension between background and foreground this particular picture and related paintings from the end of the eighties would have lost a good deal of their power of seduction – it would be appropriate to speak of "aura", since the effect produced managed to plunge into infinite distance the nearest of elements. Although it may seem paradoxical the absurd encounter of landscape and kitchen utensils opened up new possibilities which would have been largely reduced had these inconsistent elements not been put together. It was the cup and the saucer which created the illusion of a landscape. Without the utensils the background would have succumbed to a mere abstraction of flat colours.

Brueghel's mischievous dichotomy, THE FALL OF ICARUS, where the idyllic Adriatic landscape nearly kills off the mythological accident by submitting it ironically to a narrationless agricultural

panorama has already been mentioned in connection with Magnusson's fervent resistance to a reifying trend in Icelandic painting in the late nineties. Looking back on it perhaps his attempts were more in line with Holbein's *AMBASSADORS*, where the portraitist introduced his signature in the form of an anamorphic skull floating above the floor in front of the diplomats – 'Holbein'; the hollow bone – wherefore introducing a startling riddle in an otherwise conventional representation. In this way the painter's wish to activate all possible means at his disposal finds an affirmation in a supplement to what otherwise may seem a complete, self-sufficient work. Elements which cannot be said to be technically indispensable but point nevertheless to new and exciting orientations suddenly find their way into his pictorial vocabulary.

The next step in Magnusson's evolution came with a series of paintings where the atmospheric effect of former works receded and the spatial intensity of the colour scheme was brought right to the surface. His chromatic choice now precluded any possible reference to nature. Instead a perfectly abstract division between two or three complementary colours made up the background, creating an ambiguous play between the floating elements and the ground surrounding them. Instead of depth flatness now prevailed threatening to engulf the figurative elements. These however managed to affect the background, e.g. where three flashlights cast a yellow shape onto the opposite half of the canvas where the flames of three candles cast a reddish shape onto the half where the flashlights are placed. Where the colours met and blended a beautiful zone of blurred, even gradation helped melt the shapes together. Fried eggs, a frying pan, pencils and potatoes were among the objects depicted in these paintings which were the last figurative works Magnusson made.

This was a logical conclusion provided the diminishing in size of the figurative objects in the early nineties and the growing importance of the colour scheme. The gradation became the centre of attention, whereas the public suspected Magnusson of using air-brushes in order to arrive at his even blend of hues. In a solo exhibition in the mid-nineties he showed a dazzling series of abstract paintings where an even blurring of concentrated spots, depicting three types of substances, was carried to optical extremes. Shortly before a binary combination of painted substances superseded the optical paintings, bringing together in equal proportions the colours of such matters as bubble gum and cod-liver oil, red vine and marmelade, porridge and heroin. These were drawn together in the middle of the canvas where the saturation of the compound melted together two hues with a classical smoothness worthy of Ingres.

In some instances Magnusson has extended his technique on to the gallery wall, creating an environment out of his combinations. In one such 'fresco' the subject matter, based on two different compounds, each composed of two distinct ingredients, beginning with the letter 'h' in Icelandic – porridge and heroin, and handsoap and chicken, - determined the colour which was like a vague, delicate shade of the actual colour of the wall. The difference may thus reside in a slight degree of warmth, or a diffusion of two nearly indistinguishable shades of the same hue. This is representation carried to its limits, whereas without the indicative title of the work – the enumeration of its substances – the public would be lost over its true identity. In a way Magnusson has transcended the limits dividing abstraction and figuration. His recent works can either be considered according to their titles as hyperrealistic rendering of the colour of a particular substance, or as subtle abstractions in ignorance of the subject matter. These paintings show how futile it may be to rely merely on perception when it comes to recognizing the initial content of a work of art.

And yet, here is where Magnusson's identification play reaches its limits and representation is threatened with an implosive collapse. In all other kind of conceptual media there wouldn't be a doubt as to the true identity of these works. The rule is: we must abide by the title and observe that the work be in accordance with it. But here is where the art of painting takes its revenge on the exact media which have been threatening to render it meaningless right from the invention of the Daguerrotype in 1838. Since painting gathers its force exclusively from the handling of the medium its title is always secondary to the meaning gathered from the technical mastery of the artist concerned. We do not say: **This painting is not up to much since it does not seem faithful to its title.** We contemplate the work and judge it from the quality of its execution. A portrait can even be an excellent painting although it doesn't follow the likeness of the model. By

contrast a photograph which eschews the likeness of its model is considered worthless and thrown away.

This is a paradox at which Magnusson has arrived, determined to explore it to the end. The double identity of his binary, and recently his monochrome works, where only one kind of substance is displayed, escapes all conventional scrutiny and matter-of-fact categorization. Who is to evaluate the likeness of the actual colour of heroin and the shade on the wall which the artist maintains is its spitting image? How can we be sure whether the colour of porridge we see in the gallery corresponds to the cooked oats we get for breakfast? It is not enough to have the signified on the wall and the signifier in the catalogue in order to verify the fidelity of the representation. But who cares as long as these paintings are up to our judgement? No-one is going to fetch the original substance in order to compare it with the painted result. No-one is going to reproach Magnusson for an alleged sloppiness.

In his recent series of THE COLOUR OF COLA, Magnusson carries on with his investigation of amorphous substances, here taking into account the depth and the shallowness of the fluid contained before his eyes. The darkness and the brightness of the cola are reminiscent of the binary colour scheme of earlier works. The contrast is determined according to few basic hues, of which raw and burnt sienna are the most important. It takes the painter a considerable time to divide these colours into applicable proportions in accordance with the unequal amount of light which penetrates the cola, blend them adequately in order to achieve the necessary gradation across each canvas, and apply the layers evenly in order to get an even drying of the whole surface. As always the act of painting depends on a delicate balance between patience and observation. Speeding up the process is out of the question.

With his amorphous subject matter Magnusson pays tribute to the expression of the informal, the last phenomenon of common perception to be exploited by contemporary artists. His approach is based on a synecdochic method where a part is taken for the whole. In this sense he is closer to a metonymic trope which relies on relational connection with the thing represented rather than metaphoric resemblance. This is probably the main reason why his paintings guard their freshness against any reifying threat in the guise of symbolism. The enigmatic factor is neither revealed nor represented by substitutive figures of symbolic origin. Not even in his most figurative works during the early period did Magnusson rely on metaphoric language. What appears to be reduced to a narrow margin devoid of all expanding possibilities, is more extensive than it seems.

Consequently whereas he is not forced to rely on symbolic vocabulary Magnusson's paintings can be modified at a short notice. Their openness in every respect grants them life beyond particular styles and methods. Yet they don't suffer from a lack of faith in the medium as so many paintings do nowadays. Neither do they betray the pompous language of so many painters who believe they can still paint as if the medium had not gone through any reductive crisis. Magnusson is well aware of the precarious situation in which the art of painting finds itself, but he is convinced that his works can gain a lot from such a situation. Art has never been sound in periods when it was free of troubles and crisis. It has always found its finest hour when it had to fight for its rights of survival.

What seems to be Magnusson's guiding light in his artistic endeavour is his genuine interest in other media, which means art in general. He has never stuck to the belief that painting might be self-sufficient as an activity. As can be seen from his recent series a good deal of criticism of his own medium closely follows each step of its execution. We are meant to ponder on the paradox of artistic representation and all the contradictions which it entails. But as an honest post-structuralist he doesn't accept the possibility of reduction by elimination. He is the first to welcome a new media, but not at the expense of another before it. Observing the facts of development Magnusson has seen how new inventions which were intended as successors of the former stranded as mere supplements. The photograph was to succeed painting in every way; the film was supposed to supersede the theatre stage; and now the pages of a book or a review are expected to be supplanted by the computer matrix.

This is the dramatic fiction of progress. The fact is that inventions come to us the smooth way, calmly and noiselessly. Traditional media can even be louder than the new, as can be seen each year during the Oscar nomination in Hollywood. Video and television do not arouse such excitement and fanfare. For us to pronounce the obsolence of a traditional media can easily turn us into fools, for painting done with light-hearted conviction has a long future before it. Magnusson's works are far from being allegorical remains of a past deplored. On the contrary, they point to future possibilities in every direction without trumpeting it. That is precisely how actual evolution behaves.