

Tumi Magnússon

I had been waiting for it to appear. Not consciously anticipating its arrival but when I came upon the image I knew I had been expecting it. The motif of Magnússon's vinyl digital print work in an exhibition at Olschewsky & Behm, Frankfurt, 2011 clearly echoed the distorted skull from Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* (1533). The original painting depicting two learned and influential men has, in the foreground, a skull painted in anamorphic perspective. Its lengthened form rendering it obscure when viewed straight on, but standing to the left the memento mori is evident, the skull hovers between the two men. Even when not perceived the inevitability of mortality exerts a presence. In Magnússon's quoting of this element there appears a condensing of a number of his recent engagements with image, perception, meaning and a complexity to the history of painting.

There is a materialistic conviction in Magnússon's work. His practice arose from a conceptual art and fluxus basis but from the 1980s predominately concerned painting. And although he no longer uses that medium the work is still conversant with that idiom. Common across the work has been the pursuit of a form of abstraction of qualities; colour, form, and size. The word abstraction maybe misleading if thought of as pertaining to colour field painting or abstract expressionism but Magnússon's relationship to the term is more literal. He abstracts from reality, the work remains figurative, it depicts actual objects or qualities of objects but in ways in which isolates and intensifies. This mode of working can be seen clearly in his paintings from the mid to late 1990s such as *Coca Cola, Deep and Shallow* (1998-9) a series of six canvases (of varying sizes) which depict the colour of Coca Cola of different volumes and the resultant shift in their hue's. The work quarantines a secondary quality, that is an aspect of the object which is dependent on a perceiver. What we are given is an appearance divorced from its substance. It is painted in such a way as to render the surface almost devoid of evidence of its painted nature. With form and context removed the elegant surface flirts with art historical paradigms of the monochrome but the referenced subject matter anchors it in the commonplace or inflects it with pop associations. The disjunction of the rarified and the ordinary allows Magnússon's work to have poignancy and uncertainty. The juxtaposing of elements is continued in other works of the period such as *Coffee and Urine* (1998-9), a series of eight paintings depicting the changing shades of liquid as they progress from consumer product to bodily waste, an imagined analog to a biological process. Or the earlier works composed of a single canvas but depicting a blend of the colours of two substances: *Communion Wine & Blood* (1994), *Melted Plastic & Melted Butter* (1994) or *Horse Shit and Cigarette Smoke* (1996). The subject matter is not fantastical but often carries an embedded significance that is allowed to remain unresolved. Just as the colour exists without acknowledged substrata so too does the ethical dimensions of the works' subject matter.

From around 1997 distinct material changes occurred in Magnússon's approach: from the introduction of wall paintings – airbrushed directly onto the wall – in that year, to the first photo wall prints - photographic prints on adhesive vinyl – in 2000. This move away from the materiality of painting can be foreseen in the earlier canvases where invariably Magnússon aimed to create as flat as surface was possible without brush marks or other evidence of the artist's hand. In this respect it seems a logical step to further distance the mechanism of production away from the gestural and expressive. Yet consistent through these works was the rigorous view of the material properties of objects. A work such as *Fireexit* (2000-1) occupies a significant point on Magnússon's articulation of spatial engagement and colour function. The work is site specific in its use of the colours of the fire exit and signage which are then used to create a colour field in the proximity of an exit. The work extrapolates a visual component of a marker of usage and function to create a spatial component. Through this reductive approach Magnússon recodes and debases the lexicon of these commonplace ciphers. Importantly this work also represents a specific engagement with the spatial conditions of the exhibition situation. Around the same time as this work Magnússon started to

develop his practice in relation to the use of the vinyl wall adhesive photographic image. Significant in this respect was a work made in 2004, *Pen and Pencil*. It is a two part work comprising of a video pan across the length of a green pen, scaled to fill the frame and a print of a scan of a red pencil that has been stretched to fit a wall nearly 5 by 12 metres. The pencil is not immediately obvious, the distortion of the stretching process renders it much wider relative to its length, its tip hardly recognizable. But, just as with the Holbein image, if one stands to the side of the work, through the foreshortening of this point of perspective, the pencil does come back into a recognizable form. Both of these works, the pencil in *Pen and Pencil* and *Fireexit*, move the mundane into a territory of synthesized painted form. The pencil can resemble a colour field painting, the vertical striations create a modulation in colour tone from a luscious deep red through to sugary pink, it is a seductive experience, which becomes problematized when one realizes the prosaic character of what is actually depicted. Similarly with *Fireexit* that which is designed to warn and advise caution seductively envelopes.

It is notable that Magnússon's work has developed an engagement and utilization of the space in which it is shown. The point of the viewer is neither assumed nor arbitrary but is a functional component within the experiential encounter. This, of course, can be seen as a direct continuity of the artist's interest with the secondary qualities of objects, principally colour, within works such as *Coca Cola*, *Deep and Shallow* or *Coffee and Urine*. Borrowing from the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) these are understood as powers of an object to produce ideas within the perceiver, such as colour, taste, smell, etc. but are not found in an object independent of the perceiver. His attention to the necessary functional position of the viewer is consistent with a scrutinization of the mechanisms that cumulate to enable meaningful perception. In creating a matrix of isolation and obfuscation of the components of experience, the experiential qualities are rendered as distinct entities yet retain a tentative but inexorable connection to the object from which they are derived. Yet with something such as *Pen and Pencil* or the *From the Sea Series* (2002-3) (a suite of digital manipulated photographs of fish mounted on PVC which is then cut to follow the outline of the fish) the corruption of the object's natural form becomes a means for the viewer to reconsider the object. Further, through a process of imagination, familiarity and bodily movement the viewer is able to discern the base form of the object. Magnússon's approach not only isolates aspects of an object, but also aspects of experience, it makes tangible the functions of location and locomotion, imagination and personal history as constituting aspects of perception.

This engagement with spatial dynamics has been furthered by other means in more recent work. *Kassabox*, 2008 and the *Box* series of 2006 both play with the perspectival shifts, using photographs of boxes taken at oblique angles, Magnússon then modifies the picture digitally to 'correct' the image and make it into a regular rectangle. The *Box* works are face-mounted on plexiglass while the *Kassabox* is composed of two vinyl photographic prints directly applied to the wall. This latter work again specifically employs aspects of the architecture (in this case Co-Lab in Copenhagen) to compound the visual conundrum of their making. The angled view, from which the photograph is taken, creates the artifice of a forced perspective upon the wall, rather than the box necessarily appearing to stand out from the wall, it is as likely to be read as a recess extending backwards. In this context it may be useful to reference Erwin Panofsky's treatise *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, his argument stems from an assertion that our physical appreciation of space and perspective is impossible to be realized on the planar surface of a painting (rather he maintained that our visible world is based on a curvilinear geometry). Therefore spatial depictions within painting are a construction:

Exact perspectival construction is a systematic abstraction from the structure of this psychophysiological space. [...] In a sense, perspective transforms psychophysiological space into mathematical space¹

¹ Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991) 30-31

In this appreciation of perspective we can see an affinity with the fundamental methodology of Magnússon. His practice often engages the elements of perception. Here we can see the play on the nature of perspective as a structure that is employed and varies both through the conduit of the viewer. That is the viewer as both locus of perception and as an agent of social and cultural adherence. With *Kassabox* one of the walls onto which the print is affixed is the back wall of an alcove, in this position the spatial echo is most pronounced. The structure of the alcove finds an analog in the image of the box. Added to this is the effect of the angled view of the photograph which renders the extremities away from the point of focus blurred. The photograph itself asserts a modality of view, an intimacy shared with many of Magnússon's other works, but likewise the singularity is evidence of a deficiency rather than an authority. This ambiguity, or uncertainty, is actualized in another body of work in quite a different way. Magnússon's exhibition at Listasafn Arnesinga, Hveragerdi, Iceland in 2004 included images of flowers which were blown up and scaled to fit the size of the gallery's sliding doors or the space revealed when a door is slid shut. The exhibition had the uncertainty of which doors would be opened or closed, what would be revealed or withheld. Even the potential that a door could be closed creates a dramatic effect on the nature of looking. This exhibition form asserts the position of the spectator in a different mode. Here the viewer can alter the view in an active manner, it is not merely their bodily location that affects the perception of the work, as in *Pen and Pencil*, but the viewer is given dynamic role. The very act of closing one of the gallery doors to reveal or obscure one of the prints carries a spatial metaphor, in it being suggestive of the opening and closing of a flower bud. Again the subject of the work is apparently somewhat mundane: a flower being ubiquitous object within art, but it is also a specific reference the immediate locality of the gallery, which is situated in a region where flowers are grown commercially.

In a sense Magnússon has been returned toward painting in recent years. Yet somewhat paradoxically this has occurred through the medium of video. *Puddles* of 2006 and *Seven Leftover Monochromes*, 2009 both are dramatic depictions of the dynamic processes of paint as it falls and flows, intermingles and solidifies. In *Seven Leftover Monochromes* the fixed gaze of a locked off camera (two monitors facing each other) looks upon a field of colour, it watches as the rich colour dries (the process compressed to three minutes) at which point another colour splashes subsuming and overcoming the previous hue, it then dries only for the same fate to befall it. The work is suggestive of the art historical precedents of both the action painting of abstract expressionism and rationality of colour field and minimalist art. It has the sense of being a metaphoric elegy to the processional narrative of art history, one movement overcoming the previous only for it to be submerged by the next. Yet, as always with Magnússon's work, there is an attention to an object without its full context. This absence of the substructure allows the reference to remain unfixed, at once the images feel like a mediation on the physical properties of paint and yet also suggestive of something more visceral, bodily in nature. Being precluded from the wider scene is also a feature of *Puddles*, it uses a series of monitors (or projections) and speakers which ricochets the sound of dollops of paint falling onto a surface across the gallery. As with action painting, the accumulation of material builds the surface into a topographic expanse without an implied hierarchy. This is extended within *Puddles*, as the active area is not a single canvas but dispersed across various monitors and, of course, what is seen is not a static end result but an eternal process.

Yet in conjunction with the work engaging in philosophical reflection and art historical meditation there is an inescapable humour. It does not feel that the work aspires to comedic purpose but nonetheless Magnússon's approach has an element of absurdity to it. The juxtaposing of elements and qualities and the architectural imposition of incongruous characters (such as giant cats and insects in *Rolling Cat*, 2003 and *Insects*, 2009 respectively) creates a sense of the illogical. The comic elides with the philosophical to assert an essential humanistic inflection. It can be understood that the humour in the work is, in part, an extension of the artist's personality, but it also reflects a world view in which the continuities shift and significance is uncertain. The conflation of the two

materials depicted in *Melted Plastic & Melted Butter* exercises a form of free association, the invitation to provide the connective tissue or narrative between the two is extended to the viewer. This slightly surrealist mode accepts an underlying, yet opaque logic, that is familiar but any explanation feels inadequate. Further, with the work dwelling in a place on the precarious edge between representation and abstraction an inevitable humour unfolds in those moments where the referent becomes complicated or synthesized to near absurdity. For instance *Joris and Palina*, 2004 – an air-brushed wall painting – depicts the eponymous gallery owners' facial colouring on separate walls, the colours meet at a shared corner and fade outward to white. The specificity and the abstraction pull in opposite directions; the work fundamentally depicts two individuals but its reductive nature renders them elusive.

Magnússon's work is deceptively simple. Its existence echoes through the conduit of perception but implicates a wider terrain of consciousness, architecture and humanity. Indeed the notion of echo is pertinent to Magnússon's approach. An echo is not just repetition, it is a new object modified and changed through its contextual path. Throughout Magnússon's body of work, there is a sense of a new totality composed from the materiality of the perceived world around us. And as is often the case with an aural echo, an absurdist humour is frequently part of that effect. This has the cumulative result to return our attention to the object and the tolerance of its objecthood. To look again at his Holbein like skulls, it is interesting to note that the skulls Magnússon's has depicted derive from a variety of contexts, toys, erasers, keyring, actual lamb skull, etc. His depictions are both what they reference and the contrivance of the situation in which he has created the work. This combines to test how our perceptions of an object are affected. It is not merely how the work negotiates between figuration and abstraction but how situation and history are implicated in the act of perception. It is a resolute commitment to uncertainty and ambiguity. Magnússon's work has developed a personal but rich lexicon to describe the material world and our confusing position within that. There is no striving for resolution or explanation but rather a sense of wonderment at the oddities of existence.