

The Plop of the Paint: Tumi Magnússon
by Joseph Masheck

Why wait forever for one weepy orange dribble in a Callum Innes to hit the bottom of the canvas if one could watch seven colors slosh in succession over two video screens and take their real time—or seem to—to dry. I speak of “Seven Leftover Monochromes”, a video installation of and about paint, mounted by Tumi Magnússon at Sleeper, in Edinburgh, in April and May. The work has two monitors playing seven episodic lava spills of (as I recall) quite saturated colors of paint, four on one side of the darkened room and three on the opposite wall. The room is dark, and most of the time the same color is projected on both screens; but then seemingly from whichever side one has neglected, a vividly different new pigment rambunctiously spills over its finally-becalmed predecessor. It’s as inevitable yet as ever-fresh as the next wave thinning out on smooth beach sand: a cinematic “wipe” of pigmentation fills the screen by overlaying its previous filling and then drying, in turn, before one’s eyes.

Tumi Magnusson, close up from "Seven Leftover Monochromes," video installation for two monitors, 2009.

The Icelander Magnússon (only a patronymic, as Icelanders do without family names) is a conceptual painter who lives in Denmark; six years ago he exhibited in Williamsburg (at Gallery Boreas). In his new installation piece the luscious sloshes of paint, whatever their programmed sequence of colors, plop down like so much pancake batter, with big bubbles that dissipate as the material settles in place. Yes, the bubbles diminish; and, for the time being one enjoys a good long stare before being jolted by the next bubbly spill. In actual fact, the paint in each episode is seen only during its wettest first three minutes and its driest last three. Committing to real time would have meant about a week of watching, as well as a good week of filming. But this proves (just?) sufficient time to allay the anxiety of what you know from experience must happen again, only to be just as startled out of contentment.

One hesitates to tag the seven hues with names (even if one could remember them). They seem too constantly contrasting to comprise a cyclical spectrum, like a visual octave; and with the odd number of seven there can also be no closed system of color “opposites.” But finding the cyclical structure musical is more than a matter of hearing juicy plops of paint on the soundtrack: it concerns the essentially temporal structure, which is even antiphonal in that the outbreaks of fresh color flare out, cadenza-like, only to commence “cooling off,” with fugal overlap between the waning of one and the ever surprising run-up to the next.

If in a sense the installation is a case of one art, video, as parasitic upon another, painting, there is no reason to harp on that. Breaking in again and again on the pacific lulls, the successive sudden spills of color do, after all, add to the list of attempts to follow up Pollock as “dripping down” on the floor. Consider, too, how the image—already, to begin with, non-objective—becomes ever more disembodied as the drying paint becomes “digested into” photography, with video assuming more and more responsibility as, increasingly, by default, the only pigmental evidence in view.

Insofar as painting is a matter essentially of color, it is significant that Tumi’s piece does so happily without composition, or practically even form as such. Significantly, in selecting video monitors for his Edinburgh installation, he was unconcerned with the proportions of the screens, beyond avoiding the current fad for an exaggeratedly wide, supposedly panoramic, mail-slot format, whose eccentricity makes such a distracting point of its shape. There is effectively nothing of line in the thing at all. Even the edge of a second

color as it swamps the first has no special linear character, as it could be stretched without consequence to fit any proportion of screen. And if there were any, the first would not be the famous “fifth line” of studio talk, conceived as following the four edges of the defining rectangle, but only the first.

Color, which I always think has been too readily pronounced a secondary quality by the philosophers, is definitely primary in this work, being literally all there is to look at (each successive “wipe” being too quick to have significance as cropped). By the middle of each episode, with one or another color filling the screen, there is no quantitative aspect except time; for as the paint dries, its hue is distilled as simply all that is there. For once nothing is owed to perceptible physical extension (what a relief), which is to say, to the presumably and presumptuously “primary” condition of a solid having length and breadth—as if liquids and gases were any less “physical.” Tumi’s “Seven Leftover Monochromes” reminds us, however, that it is paint as a fluid suspension of pigment that makes for painting as such.

“Seven Leftover Monochromes” also reminds me of how it was needlessly frustrating of Wittgenstein, in his late Remarks on Color, to follow the British habit of failing to distinguish, as Americans commonly do, between “color” as pigment (as with the German Farbstoff), and “color” as hue (Farbung, or better, Ton, if not Kolorit). Just try to make full sense of such a sentence of the Remarks as this: “Gray or a weakly-illuminated or luminous white can in one sense be the same colour, for if I paint the latter I may have to mix the former on the palette.” The irrationality tolerated in the British usage, which plagues Wittgenstein’s text, can be highlighted by analogy: to speak of a paintbox as a box of “colours” strikes Americans as only a little less absurd than speaking of a basket of smells. Tumi’s video may actually help to clear this up, because attending to the drying of the paint entails seeing very material colored pigment turn gradually, though again and again, into pure, video-detached hue.

It happens that Tumi Magnússon was unfamiliar with the Anglo-American expression “watching paint dry”—like “watching grass grow”—despite his coming from a place where one might expect to complain of having to watch the grass grow—or the ice melt. No matter: that would be all there was to his installation, were it not so substantially concerned with how paint makes for painting. A video installation, yes; but it is also a lyrical visual poem or song of sorts, or rather, song-cycle, made out of and about painting’s paint.

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