

On Blytt's paintings

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It's not entirely uncommon, these days, to consider things in relation to screens. Along the way of our gradual transition into an all-virtual existence there are many who are frantically attempting to track the process so as to create the markers that will eventually be considered those that accurately described, or even predicted, what was going on.

The painter's canvas is obviously one of the surfaces on which such discussions take place. In Are Blytt's recent work we sense that the medium is no longer the message, but rather a vessel, a transportation device through which all manner of information keeps flowing. By definition, of course, most artworks function like this, but it is quite obvious that painting in particular has suffered under too narrowly being understood, both by its devotees and its detractors, primarily in relation to itself as a medium. Painting's "vesselness" and the messages it may wish to transmit repeatedly disappear from the conversation, meaning goes up in smoke, lost in so much nothing-new as to become a *fumata nera* of aesthetics.

Abstraction was always a way of using painting's traditional means (brush strokes, the layering of paint to achieve depth etc.) to avoid clear representational content. Over the last few decades we've seen an interest in the opposite, a tendency to what might be called post-painterly figuration. This is a form of painting in which pictorial representation is sought, or at least tolerated, without much regard for painterly technique,

indeed often going so far as to simply borrow images from other media without so much as subjecting it to any kind of painterly transformation.

In Blytt's paintings there is very little excess or surplus of any kind, neither material nor informational. Rather there is careful, perhaps even reluctant, employment of whatever means are considered useful. The result is a series of paintings that function as reflecting surfaces where titbits of history, current events, other artworks and cultural produce keep bouncing off. Some are very specific, such as the press photo signed by Angela Merkel that the artist ordered off eBay. This sort of 1:1 representation pulls the work towards "reality" by injecting it directly into the painting itself, in a very crude manner, simply gluing it onto the canvas. The photo's presence in the middle of this large painting is that of a piece of reality that's cut loose and attached itself to the artwork as a kind of visually jarring but benign symbiont.

Abstraction has always dealt with the medium of painting itself, insofar that its processes of creation, significantly without referential content, have regularly been the only meaning being communicated. Post-painterly figuration, on the other hand, is concerned with getting at more or less clearly defined referential content without much care for any of painting's traditional techniques. Photorealism, for example, or digitally rendered painting today, are still ways of painting that are inherently *about* painting itself.

Post-painterly figuration is not about painting, it simply *is* painting that happens to also contain figurative elements, such as photography or text, as part of its vocabulary. It is painting void of the obsessive-compulsive question of "how or why am I painting?". There is a significant difference between "exploring the means of painting" and making use of them for

whatever they're worth. The latter is just a matter of painting to get at something else. And in 2017 people happen to be obsessed with screens. In works like *Bread and Roses* and *Youth Riot*, Blytt paints these words on top of the abstract backgrounds in a way that at first glance make it appear like printed sheets of paper have simply been attached to the canvas. Within the images these elements function like screens much in the same way that our attention spans today keep us continuously on our phones while watching television. We have simply become used to processing information at such a speed that one medium at the time isn't enough anymore. So while these subsections of the image serve like the photograph of Merkel, as a way of drawing the real world into the paintings, they also highlight the ways in which we tend to feel that we are not in touch with reality if we are temporarily offline.

The undeniably low-tech look of such screens in Blytt's work stands in sharp contrast to all the painters who currently obsess over ways painting can somehow make use of digital media. Technological innovation has always been among the primary sources of inspiration for artists, so much so that those who appear not to engage with the latest developments are always in danger of being considered irrelevant. Undoubtedly this situation has been partially created by painting continuously having to adjust to new perceptual and cognitive realities. As a result contemporary painting has seen a lot of rather over-eager attempts at computerizing itself to stay relevant to the development within media and media distribution.

From a wider historical perspective, however, this represents not so much the return of the real as simply the forever shifting back and forth between what is, apparently, real and what is, supposedly, something else. Abstraction is

real, resting completely within itself as pure *being*. Also, abstraction is clearly *unreal* insofar that it is forever pulling away from referential reality. And so, painting finds itself going back and forth between sublime irony and the earnest urge towards transcendence. Painting inevitably explores not simply the perception of depth but more importantly the depths of perception, engaging its beholder in a form of visual stimulation that shifts gently, or sometimes shockingly, in between pleasure and pain, juggling back and forth between expression and composition, innovation and decoration, beauty and terror, triviality and the sublime. And so the zeitgeist of painting is marked by attempts at dealing with all the informational overflow and uncertainty of the so-called "post-internet".

The technology that is most substantially referenced in Blytt's work, however, is books. In the series of medium-scale paintings made to look like book covers, sharp and distinctly coloured blocks of information are seemingly projected onto backgrounds of muted, canvases. Additionally Blytt has chosen authors that invariably relate to experiences of an existential or ideological nature, covering everything from the 2008 financial crisis to literary naturalism, newly relevant questions about determinism versus free will within the historiography of post-late capitalism, or late post-capitalism in Europe. As reflections of such ideas these paintings seemingly make claims as to what points of reference need to be understood if one is to deal successfully with whatever we may consider important within contemporary culture. As paintings they offer themselves up as objects and assets of aesthetic value, but even more so as attempts at truth.