



THE
ABSTR
ACTION
OF
BARRY
LYN
DON
ARE BLYTT

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the Agency



Roses for Lady Lyndon, 2011, white, pink and green oil on linen, 2x 140x100cm

FOREWORD:

The Art of Implying

by Hanne Beate Ueland

In recent years we have witnessed a renewed interest in formal abstraction, both geometric and expressive, within contemporary art. Artists contemplate the tradition of modernist abstraction and engage with the legacy of political and institutional agendas, transferring them with ease to the current situation. Are Blytt is an abstract painter, but his starting point is not to appropriate his predecessors' strategies. Behind the subdued surfaces of his enigmatic abstract paintings, there lurk personal references that add to the narratives and suggest open-ended readings.

The works in the exhibition *The Abstraction of Barry Lyndon* spring from a long-term fascination for the film *'Barry Lyndon'* made by Stanley Kubrick in 1975. The film is most renowned for the director's groundbreaking use of natural light. Yet the visual references are not what Blytt is most enthralled with; for him it is the psychological drama. The film depicts a character with outrageous ambitions, whose odyssey between social classes ends in catastrophe. Blytt engages with these striking emotions and depicts them in an abstracted, suggestive manner.

One example is the two-panelled work *Roses for Lady Lyndon*, where the artist barely insinuates almost invisible shades on white. The subtle nuances of pink, green and black suggest the idea of rose bushes, a symbol of such grandeur that the almost invisible depiction is sufficient to awake the most vivid visual impressions.

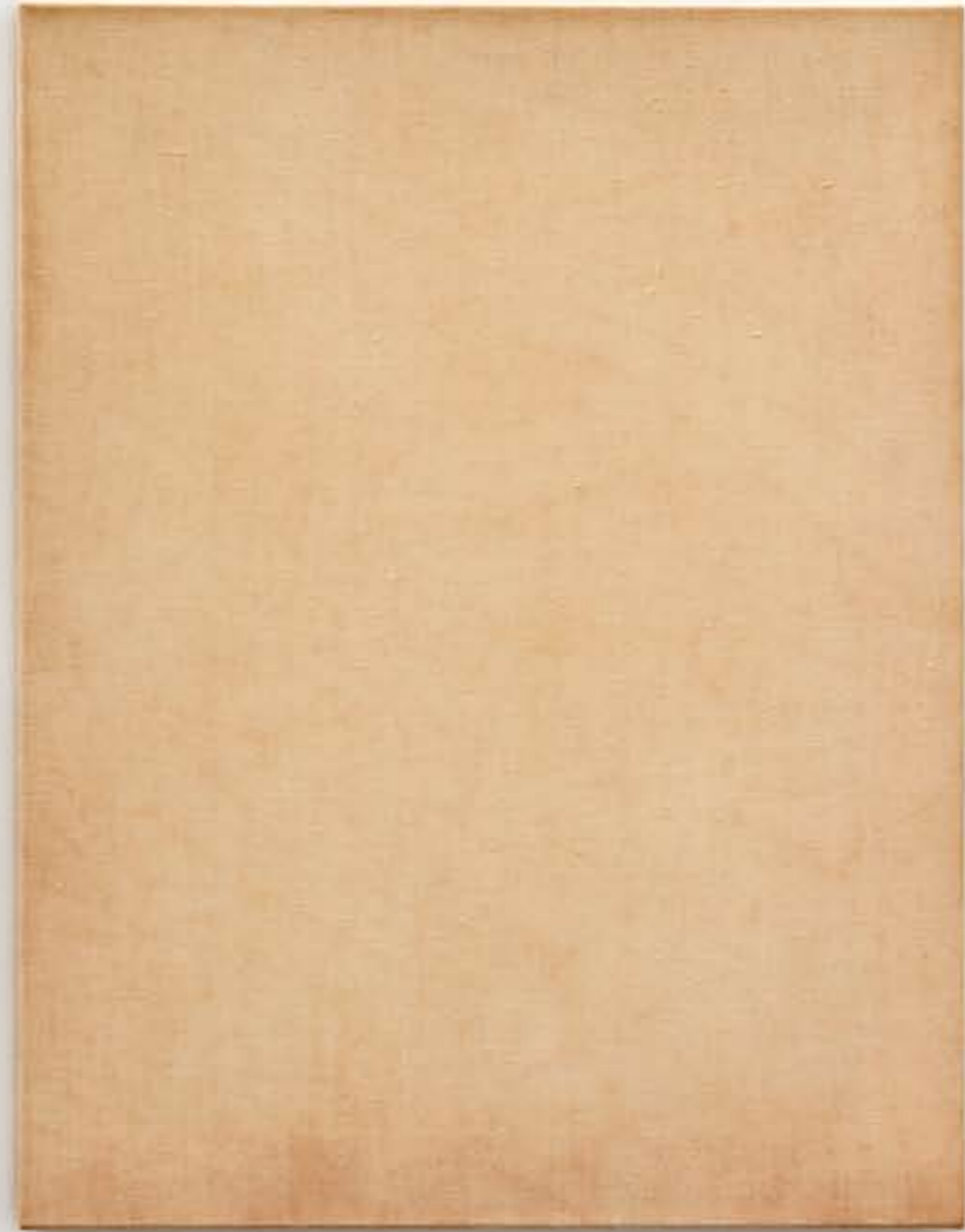
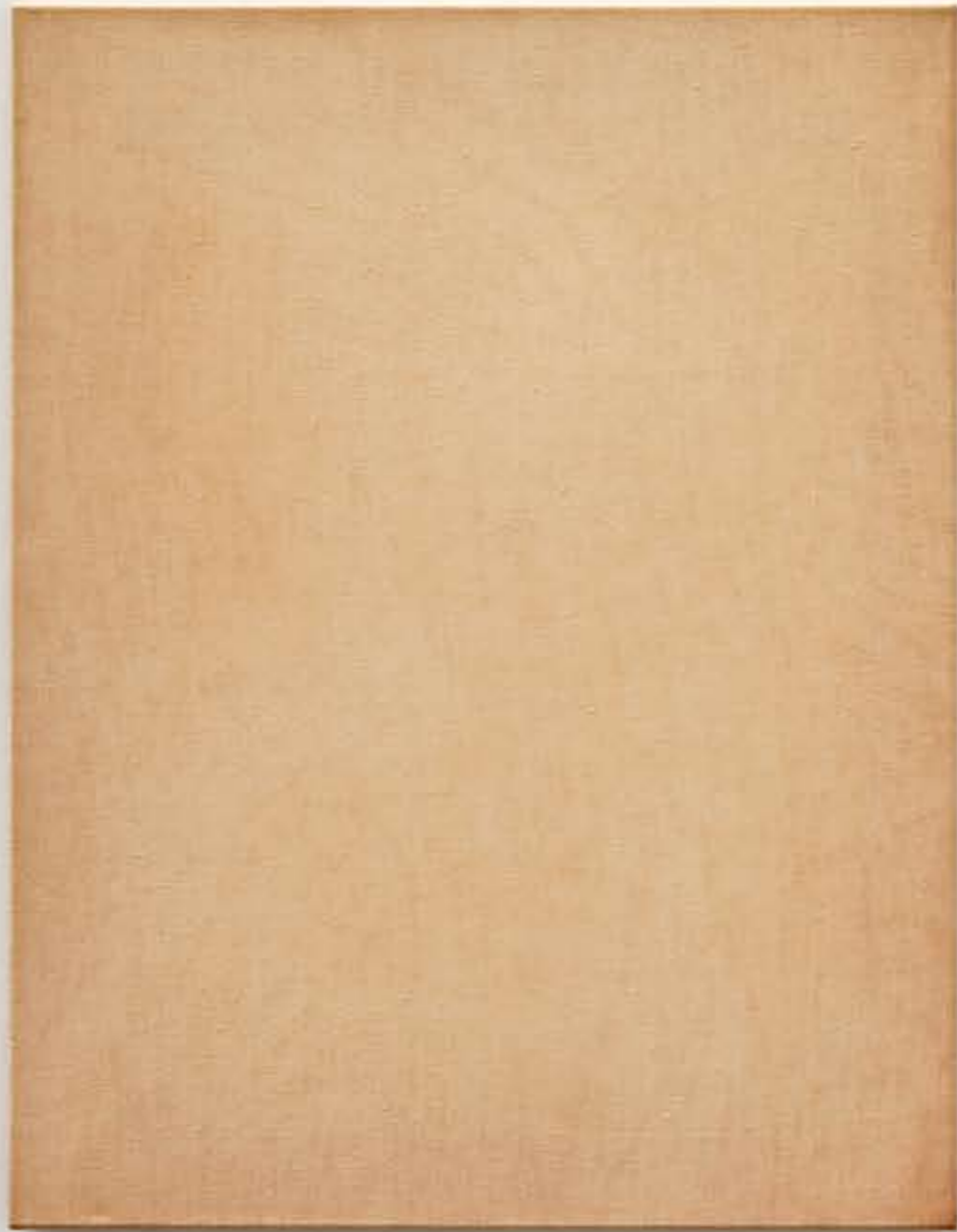
In Blytt's art there is also a consistent use of letters and words that reveal a certain relation with conceptualism. Blytt, however (along with an increasing number of other young artists) uses a more personal starting point that breaks with the conventional use of signs found in most Neo-conceptualism. His large-scale poem paintings are of poems he himself has written, beautifully composed verses on the theme of the origin of man and culture. The poems reveal a sincerity often neglected in contemporary art. Still, the presentation is paramount. The artist paints only parts of the poem, hence attracting our attention to the singular sign. Each sign or letter is painted with the utmost punctiliousness and thus invites us to discuss the work in terms of what the sign means.

Artistically, there is a connection both to classical conceptualism and its interest in the isolated sign as a symbol, and to modernist painters such as Cy Twombly, whose paintings and sculptures are dominated by a passing presence. The delicate, suggestive gestures so characteristic of Blytt's paintings can recall the gestural lightness in Twombly's paintings from the 1950s and 60s. There is a certain coherency in the two artists' imaginative expressions, and interestingly enough, flower motifs are appearing in Twombly's more recent works.

Blytt's art is rooted in a desire to create something that slowly pen-

etrates the mind of the viewer. And as with his artistic predecessors, the titles are important. Blytt reveals his ideas in words and presents us with a starting point for our visual experience. This exercise might resemble the experience of standing in front of a fossil in a historical museum. When looking at something that once was alive, we must use our imagination to gain a fuller picture. Blytt's art gives us the opportunity to read stories and impressions from an often 'lean' visual starting point. As a counterpart to artistic expressions referencing existing visual material, his paintings may be experienced as subtle visual training. The work in itself will not always reveal the full story, but it is there – in the slight gap between the visible and the invisible, between the obvious and the implied.

Hanne Beate Ueland is a curator at the Astrup Fearnley Museum. She holds a master of Art History from the University of Bergen. She has curated exhibitions with renowned artists such as Yoko Ono and Ann Lislegaard and most recently Ben Colen. Currently Hanne Beate Ueland is specialising on new media projects within the Astrup Fearnley Museum.





Detail of *Roses for Lady Lyndon*, 2011, white, pink and green oil on linen

ESSAY:

Fluctuations

by Charles Danby

Erasure is as much the construction of a surface as it is the removal. The truth of this statement has never been made more apparent than in Robert Rauschenberg's Erased de Kooning Drawing (1953). It is one of few contemporary works that resonates with exacting authority as both material and conceptual statement. It was a moment that Rauschenberg referred to as poetry, and a moment that all other commentaries could only describe as gesture, protest, irreverence and vandalism. It marks time as material truth.

In turn, the work of Are Blytt does not strive for the immaterial but instead to articulate the material, and it chooses objects and design as its means. Set against the fast moving speed of the present Blytt's work revels in moments of pause and intermission, and in objects and articulations that are intimate, personal, close at hand and recurring. He takes pleasure in sustained 'absorbing' activities of reading, listening to music and watching film, and to the design and origin of these creative abstracts. He is drawn to objects that can be picked up and handled, books, manuscripts and till receipts, and to objects that implicitly contain,

carry or suppose narrative. He is further drawn to the peripheries and exteriors of these objects, to their covers, cases, and acted upon surfaces, and to the graphics, images and hastily scrawled notes that mark and mar them. These superfluous scribbles are disclosures of fleeting thought, calculations or reminders, symbols that disconnect from the world as the moment of their manufacture or reiteration passes, and which in their displacement simply become numeric and typographic abstractions.

It is these disconnected marks and articulations that Blytt replicated in earlier works such as 950 (2009) and 15/100 (2009), often enlarging their scale, and paying over-exacting attention to their transcription (as purposeful conceit) far beyond merit or worth. In these works Blytt presented a complete and partial encounter with an object, dramatising it through closely cropped frames that not only displaced its already displaced subject but further offset the structural frame of the works (as paintings) with iterations of time, speed and sequence that more readily draw inference from photography, cinema and film.

Film and literature have played a central role in the latest body of work produced by Blytt, an ongoing series based on Stanley Kubrick's Barry Lyndon (1975), a film that charts the life journey of the fictional Barry Lyndon from a social position of little, that of broken Irish gentry, to something, that of English aristocracy, and back to little, that of destitute outcast. Blytt's attachment to Kubrick's film is both curious and revealing. Barry Lyndon is lesser known amongst Kubrick's films and appears on the surface markedly different from those that most readily define the director. Yet it defines Kubrick's principal of using natural



light and contains like many of his films a moral code that is exposed through a linear circularity of life odyssey (in this case that of Barry Lyndon). Kubrick's film is also built on conceit and this plays to the advantage of Blytt. It is a film based on a novel, that of William Thackeray's The Luck of Barry Lyndon (1844), which itself was first and foremost not a novel but a serialised story written for magazine publication. Added to this Thackeray's text was written with contradictions and inaccuracies specifically designed to undermine (in the eyes of the reader) its central character, Barry Lyndon. In Thackeray's novel Barry Lyndon is for this purpose the (unreliable) narrator of his own story. As final twist and conceit Thackeray's novel (while fictional) is based on truth, on tales that circulated around the life of a known English-Irish rogue, Andrew Robinson Stoney (1747-1810), who like the character of Barry Lyndon married dubiously into the high social class of the Landed Gentry. Barry Lyndon is an abstraction prior to Blytt's intervention.

The Abstraction of Barry Lyndon (2011) is the first of a series of works by Blytt to draw reference from Kubrick's film and to test its truths and half-truths. It is a set of four small-scale works that chart the narrative cycle of the life of Barry Lyndon using the text plates that appear at the beginning and the end of Kubrick's script. By marking these peripheral points Blytt constructs in shorthand, through speed, synopsis and abstract, a stand-in and substitutive narrative that describes in literal terms (without visual abstract) the story of Barry Lyndon.

In contrast to this shorthand speed there is a very real slowness and meticulousness of making that is manifestly present within Blytt's works. Such a mapping and invoking

of objects draws curious parallel with the narrative of Funes, the protagonist of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges' story, Funes, His Memory (1954). Following an accident Ireneo Funes, a young and ill-educated Uruguayan boy, acquires the exacting ability to recall everything. His memory is faultless and unlimited, he retains every detail of every moment that passes, and as such there is no erasure to his memory only accumulation. Through this Funes finds himself inextricably linked to the present. Every moment proposes a new set of relations that by virtue of their difference require new language and new description. Within Borges' story time emerges as the mechanism through which objects take form, '...he [Funes] was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front).'

Blytt appears sensitive to the fragility that underlies Funes' condition, aware that what is seen or understood in one moment is different (except when considered as abstract) from what is seen and understood in another. Blytt therefore adopts positions of summary, of abstract, as structural forms of reduction that are themselves additive (enabling of narrative) rather than as they might logically appear (restrictive of it) through economy and replication. Funes' only point of release is his attempt to slow his engagement with the world down, and by so doing limit the paralysing overload that his awareness and memory of everything causes him. Blytt likewise attempts to slow things down, but not as a way to be alleviated from the networks of the modern world and the images it contains, but as a way to fetishise abstraction and extract supposed truths from surrogate objects and latent memories.

Blytt's use of the title The Abstraction



Grey II, 2011, shellac and pigment on archival paper, 48x56cm

of Barry Lyndon is a playful paradox, descriptive and literal in two senses, both prior to and post his involvement. This literalness to wordplay is matched by the directness of Blytt's approach to the work. In the work Blytt isolates the text plates (titles) from Kubrick's script, printing these onto paper before transforming them back to the blankness of the original paper. The Abstraction of Barry Lyndon is a formal exercise but it is also a metaphorical one, replicating the cyclical but linear trajectory of the life of the protagonist in the returning palimpsest of the paper. But as Blytt's work implies the match is never perfect, the memory and the mapping can only function as approximations and partial accounts, and unlike Funes there is no perfect memory that renders logic and reason void, and 'blankness' blank. It is here that marks that appear as erasures, obliterations, obstructions or smudges, are instead more accurately depositories of material accumulated around, and parasitic to, articulations of concrete surface, image and object. Here time becomes the determinate of form, and as such the material depositories of Blytt's action marks the constant flicker and changing aspect of that which is observed and considered stable, like the variance of the dog that Funes watches. These are the slippages of image outwards and sideways from themselves, the scars and residues that are persistent, active and resident.

The Barry Lyndon works like much of Blytt's output are deceptively empty in their appearance. Blytt utilises pictorial emptiness not as an end in itself but as play to provoke, mask and destabilise the structural conceits that he brings to the works through their manufacture. He contests the idea that the 'barely visible' instinctively informs the contemplation of nothingness, resisting transcendental



The Abstraction of Barry Lyndon, 2011
oil and ink on archival paper, hand coloured linen, 3x 36x26cm. Wood sculpture by Kevin Hunt

theology by resolutely grounding his work in the material world, in objects and narratives, and more so in those of fictive, partial and flawed relation. By building conceit upon conceit and setting these against others, most readily those of erasure (as an amassing of material) and labour (as that of protracted manufacture), Blytt ensures that he constructs an unstable, unsettling and uncertain ground for the work. The works hover in contrivance offering only the barest of bones as narrative guidance. Through this Blytt entices a stretching of language that tests the linguistic and material properties of abstraction, proposing belief and alchemy of the kind where light cast through a prism splits into colour.

Added to this Blytt's latest works are largely moderate and intimate in size, they resist perceptual encounter, and remain instead reciprocal in scale to the objects from which they emerge. And even where Blytt's works tend toward unambiguous emptiness, as monochromatic articulations, in works such as *Die Jahreszeiten/ Abstraktionen des Henle Verlags* (2010), they are not fully relinquished to Suprematist will, but instead are retained and held back (grounded to the world) if only by their titles. *Die Jahreszeiten/Abstraktionen des Henle Verlags* (2010) is a series of four canvases that colour match through saturated fabric the iconic branded grey-blue colour of the Henle classical musical scores. These are the most complete orchestrations of original musical text, and while as saturated or mechanised monochromes the works might suggest a refusal to paint, a refusal to break or mark the picture plane, they also affirm a fundamental truth of painting, that of surface and interface.

Blytt's newest works *Skin* (2011) extend from this and propose wordplay of a different order, matching lin-

guistic duality with material doubling. These are canvases in which material linen (both dyed and bleached) is stretched in literalness and synthesis of both canvas and skin (as informed by their title). The dyed and bleached processes of the works manufacture compound its wordplay and conceit by drawing it into the colour range, visual appearance and surface opacity of light skin tone. Skin is a curious measure to preoccupy Blytt as it returns a different aspect and cogency of surface than that which has predominated his works to date, that of receipts, book covers and manuscripts. The precise musing of this latest synthesis of material is yet to be disclosed but it may not be so far removed from the bodily that it implies. From something romantic or deeply personal, as throughout his works Blytt retains a fundamental and strict attachment to the real world, to the objects that surround and captivate him, and to the people and things that he connects with, even when these are bound in memories, musical scores or abstracted lyrical affiliations.

This poetic leads Blytt's works in places to reach out and to breach the boundaries and physical borders that mark and retain them. The four fragments that make up *The Abstraction of Barry Lyndon* (2010) are for example presented not on the wall but instead propped on the floor. But what is the cloth trapped under the framed drawing if not an aspect or glimpse of the dematerialized canvas that the work is not (as drawing), and at the same time the scarf, the garter or personal keepsake passed between lovers (marking period and class within British and European society in the time of Barry Lyndon). Such keepsakes are reiterations and triggers (of time spent and words spoken), an embodiment of sentiment or abstracted thought (that of love), transformed into object. Blytt's

works appear to reverse such transformation, extracting sentiment from objects and offering this as depository, a new type of mark and a new description. It is a watchful erasure that amasses in its connection to all things present and material.

Charles Danby is a writer, artist and curator. He was the curator of Grand National - Britisk Kunst (2010) at Vestfossen Kunstlaboratorium, Norway and is a Teaching Fellow at the Slade School of Fine Art, London.



Grey III, 2011, shellac and pigment on archival paper, 48x56cm

70
25
4
700
250

950

INTERVIEW:

by Charlotte Jansen

Where do you see yourself, in terms of contemporary art practice?

As a contemporary painter, but I also make installations and sculptures. My approach is both painterly and conceptual, concerned with addressing the area between figuration and abstraction. I find this grey area between these two poles intriguing.

Why Barry Lyndon?

The protagonist's lust and hunger for social climbing and wealth fascinates me, and the fact that Barry Lyndon's personality, with his social insidiousness, and lack of empathy, is a projection of another person's—his mother's—wishes and desires. One of the main pieces in this exhibition is called Roses for Lady Lyndon, a diptych in white oil paint with very light pink and green colour fields. I value beautiful things like flowers, but I do not like the idea of using beauty just as a costume.

Barry Lyndon is also the quintessential unreliable narrator. There's something implicitly controversial about minimalist art—it instils fear and paranoia—Michael Fried suggested it displaces the viewer to some-

thing outside the artwork itself. As a painter, do you feel an affinity with the unreliable narrator? What is it that draws you to minimalism, where the meaning might be so concealed from the viewer?

There is certainly a fictional and imaginary aspect in a lot of art. I don't find minimalism to be obtuse or highbrow, but maybe it speaks to people with more academic interests, in that sense that it does not try to convince or impress the viewers for pure entertainment or commodity. It is intellectual in that it is based on ideas. But it is my everyday life—objects, interests and memories—that inspire my motifs. Actually I think that is a classical painterly approach, to paint what's "around" you. I suppose therein lies an inherent contradiction in my work. I am equally concerned with creating an object of painterly interest as with creating one that generates thoughts.

As Charles and Hanne have incisively highlighted, there is a dichotomous aspect to your work. How did you first become interested in the minimalist mode?

My personal connection with it perhaps begins with my mother, who is a modernistic painter, so from a very young age I was exposed to this kind of abstract language. It is also probably something that is inborn. My home is also very sparse and empty.

There is something beguiling about abstract forms, like looking at mathematic equations taken out of context. Between 2008-2009 I made a series of paintings based on handwritten calculations about waves and the sea, sent to me by a bioengineer friend. They arrived to my studio in a box with no sender address, so for months I did not know what on earth they meant and they were intrigu-



Arè Blytt's studio in Oslo, 2011

ing in their abstractness. I enjoy the process of unearthing meaning from abstracted forms.

Can you explain what you mean by this 'process of abstraction'?

I think it is about reducing the information content towards an idea and a non-figurative outcome. In this process the titles are often highly important, as in some works they are key in understanding and reading the finished work. I like to create art that has an elusive meaning that requires the viewer to dig deeper, rather than serving up the answer on a silver plate.

There is a certainly a perfidious degree of dumbing down in contemporary art—and people aren't stupid. How do you view the contemporary art scene in Norway?

It's very good, and has a lot of energy. I also find there is a lot of emphasis on the intellectual and the conceptual, and it is not driven by visual themes. But there is definitely a shift in generations happening now. The government provides a great deal of financial support, which makes a huge difference to artists living and working in Norway. In last years some younger Norwegian artists (like Ida Ekblad, Matias Faldbakken, Lars Laumann and Gardar Einarsson) have entered the international art scene with great success, but we also have people focusing on the Norwegian scene doing a great job, keeping Oslo as lively as it is. We have unusual many artist-run spaces in Oslo run by young and upcoming people, such as Noplace, Galleri Knekt, Landings, Sungam Noty, Tidens Krav, Podium, Dortmund Bodega and 1857.

When it is so much easier for artists to survive in Norway, do you still feel competitive with your peers?

Yes sometimes, especially with other painters. It's horrible to see somebody doing a piece that's what you are working on. Maybe today's easy flow of information encourages us to think that way? Though if you compare art with science, math or maybe philosophy, it is possible to read this competitiveness as positive, as it pushes people to solve new problems, rather than address the same one twice.

Do you see any analogous concerns between your work as a visual artist, and other art being produced in Norway, for example black metal music, which has had a huge impact worldwide?

Perhaps in its straightforward, stripped bare attitude. I am too young to remember the infamous days of Norwegian Black Metal, but my elder brother was part of the scene, (he ran a record shop in Bergen) when it was most notorious in the 90s. Norwegian Black Metal later fell into the same traps that a lot of art and music tends to, becoming too theatrical and absurd.

What is your daily life like?

At the moment I'm in a one-month stay at The Scandinavian Foundation in Rome where I'm eating and drinking fantastically and trying to work in this ancient environment. Yesterday it was the opening of Roma Contemporary Art Fair here, which was a bit boring and safe, but Kaleidoscope had a fun stand with karaoke and dance. But normally my everyday life spins around being in my studio in Oslo. I'm very much a studio-based artist and that's where I work and where I do the thinking. I have a studio in an old school building in a nice area of Oslo near the fjord, and it's only a five minute walk from where I live. There are other young artists living in the same complex so we



Are Blytt's studio in Oslo, 2011

have lively lunches and evenings. I'm also fond of reading and I try to make time to do that in between everything else. The next place I'm going to is Kobe this autumn, were I'm participating at the Kobe Biennale 2011.

What angers you?

As an artist, it is easy to be saddened by how much money and time is being spent by some of the biggest art institutions without producing any interesting results. Driving a car and being hungry is also a very bad combination for me.

Who are your heroes?

I have the complete collection of the books by John Steinbeck in my bookshelf so I'm at the very least a fan of his. Art wise it's tempting to say the whole American scene from the 50-60s, and maybe also the beautiful Anselm Kiefer sculpture called The High Priestess/Zweistromland, which is permanently installed at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo. More recent discoveries is a beautiful flower painting by Monet called Agapanthus and the rocked and bare minimalism by Sergej Jensen and Gedi Sibony.

What do you think will happen in future, in terms of the art scene?

I am not sure about the future, but I try to be optimistic. I hope the art scene will be liberated of hype and trends, at least.

Charlotte Jansen is a writer based in London. She writes The Art Journal blog and contributes to various publications, including Art Slant and Art Wednesday. She is also founder of NO way, an independent press agency for the visual arts and music.



Die Jahreszeiten/Abstraktionen des Henle Verlags, 2010, hand coloured linen, 4x 50x35cm

THANK YOU

The Royal Norwegian Embassy

Hans Christian Skovholt

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Virtual Portfolio

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Detail of *Grey I* and *Roses for Lady Lyndon*, 2011