



SERENDIPIA

Kosmos – Polykosmos – Psykokosmos

THE ACT OF SEEING AND ECKERSBERG

Lars Physant

“Once I had to deliver some things, including a black bottle, to a man in town. It was in the spring, when everything was turning green. By chance I noticed that the landscape was reflected in miniature in the bottle. I was now seeing a painting of the surroundings, so beautiful, so perfect and so truthful. I have since used the discovery of this method often.”¹

Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783-1853)

I believe that it is the actual love of *seeing* that is the principal foundation of Eckersberg’s talent for, and his results in painting. Visual perception naturally defined his entire way of thinking and his awareness of reality, science, philosophy and religion.

Without comparing at all, what is extremely relevant to this exhibition is that Eckersberg’s bottle experience reminds me of what happened in my life, when, around the age of 5, I found out that my father could draw. I asked him to draw the tree in the garden, the flowers on the window ledge – basically anything... It was pure magic that, in the ‘microcosm’ of a pencil drawing, he could depict outer reality! Establishing a relationship to perceived reality by turning it into a drawing or a painting: it was this that started to give my life meaning.

I started by copying my father’s drawings. Not until several years later did I finally dare to try to draw my own response to my surroundings. I could draw portraits of a living model, when I was about 13 years old. But it was not so much of a revelation, when I later discovered that I was able to draw equally lifelike reproductions of pictures in books and newspapers.

The Eckersberg method

Eckersberg was hugely important for me when I visited Rome for the first time in 1987. I was there to paint at least one picture for each of the 40 chapters that made up the book, *Rom – pladsernes*

¹Peter Michael Hornung and Kasper Monrad: “C.W. Eckersberg – dansk malerkunsts fader”. Copenhagen 2005

by²[English: Rome – City of Squares]. And I had to do it without the use of photographs, in true Eckersberg style, sitting on a three-legged hunting chair in front of the subjects.

My enthusiasm for Eckersberg also led to an artistically and historically interesting discovery during the 8 months or so that I spent in Rome. In 1990, in an attempt to discover the exact angle, from which Eckersberg had painted *A View through Three Arches of the Third Storey of the Colosseum* (1815), I soon realised, in a state of shock, that the subject does not, and never did exist. In the Colosseum it is physically impossible to achieve a sufficient distance to experience an overall view through three arches at once. Thanks to the artist's mastery of perspective and painting, it was possible to deconstruct and reconstruct the Colosseum in such a way that it would come across as a completely convincing depiction of a Roman view: completely on a par with his other Roman views, where even today it is possible to locate almost the exact viewpoint. The other exciting thing was that it confirmed and, in my opinion, almost proved Kasper Monrad's supposition that Eckersberg was inspired to structure a composition divided by three arches after seeing the masterpiece by his admired master, Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*, in Paris between 1810 and 1813³.

Using the 'Eckersbergian method', between 1987 and 1996 I created hundreds of drawings and watercolours, and a number of acrylic and oil paintings. But in many cases I regretted that I never took any photographs of my subjects from those years. At some point during this period I started to experiment with obtaining fruitful feedback and synergy between the direct study of the subject and the use of photographic representations in the artistic process.

David Hockney's magnificent study of painters' use of optical and photographic aids throughout the ages highlights beautifully the infinite and positive options that exist for a painter⁴, when it comes to further qualifying the expression in pure painting.

In his article about Tuxen's royal portraits, Thyge Christian Fønss-Lundberg made clear what a liberating and constructive tool photography can be as a supplement to a realistic expression in painting⁵.

The force field of the painting's space

Erik Fischer's text, *Eckersbergs harmoniske univers* [English: Eckersberg's Harmonious Universe] and his examples of Eckersberg's awareness of what I have called *compositional energy* had a decisive influence on my painting and my reflections on it⁶. "However, drama in Eckersberg is synonymous with movements and tensions in the force field of the painting's space" – *THE FORCE FIELD OF THE PAINTING'S SPACE!* Experiencing the surface of a picture as an energetic force field is a wonderful description of the actual space in the act of painting.

¹Ole Askov Olsen: *Rom – pladsernes by*. Copenhagen 1996

²Kasper Monrad: *Under samme himmel – Land og by i dansk og tysk kunst 1800-1850*. Exhibition catalogue for the exhibition of the same name. Copenhagen-Hamburg-Ottawa 2000

³David Hockney: *Secret Knowledge. Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*. London 2001

⁴Thyge Christian Fønss: 'Purveyor to the Royal Court' in *Tuxen: Colour, Countryside and Crown*. Exhibition catalogue, Skagen Museum and Fuglsang Art Museum. Aarhus 2014

⁵Erik Fischer: 'Tegninger af C.W. Eckersberg'. Den Kongelige Kobberstiksamling, the National Gallery of Denmark. Copenhagen 1983

Villads Villadsen beautifully describes the essence of Fischer's acute, passionate empathy with Eckersberg's universe: "He [Erik Fischer] emphasises, in particular, the structural energy of Eckersberg's art and extracts some structural and geometric regularities, pointing to an almost absurd duality in the essence of the perspective, almost as an instrument serving the depiction of space, almost as an image-making instrument: possibilities, which, to use a musical metaphor, contain harmonic, polyphonic and contrapuntal tensions... This [painters' acknowledgement and use of the theory of perspective] relates to the fact that space and surface in the perspective system have a complementary relationship with each other."⁷

From COSMOS to POLYCOSMOS

Since my early youth, I have been fascinated by Pierre Alechinsky and his icon-like way of creating one image out of many images: in other words, a collection of independent images, but images that interact and comment on each other on the overall surface of the picture – in the overall universe. In the 1980s, I experimented with working 'à la Eckersberg' on a divided picture surface of paper or canvas. But, to a greater extent, I also needed to accommodate an inner, not naturalistically recognisable, abstract dimension in the paintings. This is what characterises several of the works in the COSMOS section of the exhibition: an outer element that represents the inner world, and vice versa.

Since my first encounter with Abstract Expressionism, around the same time as my encounter with the art of Alechinsky, I dreamed that realism and abstraction could meet, to the advantage of both, in the same work.

By *serendipity*, about 20 years ago, because of a lack of space in my former studio, I happened to lay some small canvases on the surface of a painting that was on a table. My goodness! What if this *was* the surface of the work? I, together with Sílvia Magrinyà i Costán, immediately started experimenting with the potential of this expression, in which the very surface of a painting ruptures the general framework for painting. Since then, I have painted almost exclusively on relief structures created by Sílvia Magrinyà. The vast majority were created as independent abstract works and based on her personal inspiration. But some, especially for the portraits, contained my requests for the composition.

There was significant inspiration from Jean Arp's reliefs. But it soon became apparent that the sculptural element was not the most interesting. In my opinion, it was the accentuation of the changes on a divided surface in a painting that were really thrilling. I immediately saw the possibilities of involving everything Eckersberg had taught me, alongside my enthusiasm for abstraction, introspection and abstract expressionism, in a collection of parallel universes consolidated in a single work. *United divided reality; contrapuntal realism* and *multiversal realism* are expressions that have been associated with my paintings on wooden relief structures using many types of canvas as the picture surface.

As a direct extension of Erik Fischer's description of the Eckersbergian force field of a picture's space, in 2011 Lisette Vind Ebbesen wrote a text about my paintings on relief structures, focusing on the works as complex energy systems. ' $\Delta S_{univers} \geq 0$. *The growth of the entropy for the universe will always*

⁷Villads Villadsen: *C.W. Eckersbergs dagbøger. Volume 1, 1810-1837. Udgivet og kommenteret af Villads Villadsen. Copenhagen 2009*

be positive – the 2nd axiom of thermodynamics' was the subtitle of the text, which concluded: "Entropy also prevails in Physant's paintings, but it is governed by the artist, who has personally placed the information and opinions in the closed system in shapes and colours, which together create correlations, contradictions and multiple energies."⁸

The main title, *Order in Disorder* touches on the intention, which I, while not comparing, feel I share with Eckersberg: for the viewer's experience of a picture to result in a state of a higher degree of harmony. I very consciously seek out subjects, which initially seem chaotic and totally out of balance, and then attempt, in the process of painting, to achieve an experience of harmony parallel to a meditation: for example, in *Virtual Mandala*.

I am sorry I never met Erik Fischer. I would have loved to try to share with him the experience of the drama I feel, the interaction between discontinuity and continuity, which the composition and the painting on a divided relief structure constitute.

In 2003, when Peter Greenaway presented his vision of making simultaneous perception a kind of experiential mode for the 21st century in *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*⁹, I knew immediately that it was something important, which had consequences for my own work. With his unique talent and vision as an artist and intellectual, Greenaway has been an important support for me in my experiments with simultaneity in the perception of a work. The original idea behind this exhibition was actually a painterly and cinematic collaboration between Greenaway, Rainier van Brummelen and myself.

By way of a direct introduction to the chapter about *Polycosmos – United Divided Reality*, I will mention two moments, when serendipity plays a key role.

The happy meeting

The white relief structures, often containing some yellow fields, which come across as independent, finished works, occasionally hang on the walls of my studio, before I feel inspired to paint on them. I see, experience and re-experience them countless times as I get to know them better and better, and try many alternatives before a meeting with my idea for a painting. It is a much more complex encounter than between a composition idea and a square or rectangular flat canvas or sheet of paper.

When, at some point, the amount and strength of the *random* concordance between the relief structure and my dream of a composition that can complete its inherent possibilities reaches a level in which the concordance simply becomes too much and too strong, I start to tremble with electricity. The encounter that was always meant to happen *has* happened, and a brand-new work has begun. Then it is just a question of painting it!

Serendipity: from possibility to necessity

⁸Lisette Vind Ebbesen: 'Orden i Uorden. Entropien i Lars Physants malerier'. Catalogue for *Panta Rei. Solen er ny hver dag, og den har samme bredde som en menneskefødd*. Skagen 2011

⁹Peter Greenaway: *The Tulse Luper Suitcases. Part 1: The Moab Story. Part 2: Vaux to the Sea. Part 3: From Sark to the Finish*. 2003

When a complex relief structure, after its *happy meeting* with an idea for a composition from me, is ready to begin its process as a painting, I attempt to make maybe 8, 12, 18 or more individual parts work together into a kind of articulated balance. I find it profoundly fascinating and amazing that I am inevitably forced to improvise this balancing of the relationships between all the individual parts and their relation to the whole.

The level of complexity is far too high for me to be able consciously to process the precise relationships between the individual factors such as light, colour, texture and the way of painting in, for example, 16 very different single fields simultaneously. The best option is to trust that the process, backed by more than 50 years of experience of applying paint to canvas, will produce moments of serendipity, when the right action is seen, felt, thought and carried out.