



Uniting the Seemingly Incompatible

By Peter Michael Hornung

For an artist, portrait painting is not merely a trade. It is a way of meeting other people on artistic terms. Lars Physant knows this better than most, having painted the portraits of others for more than 25 years. For him, the portrait is a way of stepping into character through another human being—their appearance, charisma, and interests. With the result, the painter aims to demonstrate what he is capable of, in relation to one of the most difficult tasks in art: depicting someone in such a way that, in one and the same picture, one can recognize both the sitter and—what is no less crucial—the artist himself.

This dual recognition is always present in Lars Physant's portraits. One recognizes them by their irregular shape, inner complexity, coloristic character, and everything that initially appears heterogeneous and separate, only coming together in retrospect.

Such a work always presupposes a close collaboration between two people who are both fully present in the image in their own distinct ways, and whose presence is equally a prerequisite for the project's success. One is the painter, in this case Lars Physant; the other is the sitter. As a rule, it is the latter who chooses the former—the painter. Only then is it the painter's turn to choose, for example, how the sitter should be presented. It would be naive—indeed, outright wrong—to believe that only the portrait painter is affected by the sitter's presence. The sitter is also affected by the situation itself: the act of being painted. Furthermore, the sitter is influenced by the artist who, observing attentively, has positioned himself opposite them and now attempts to capture his shifting impressions into one unified expression.

A third party may also come into play: the patron. This could be a church, an association, a foundation, an institution within the art world, or a museum, such as the National Museum of Denmark or, as in the present case, the Museum of National History at Frederiksborg Castle.

Every commissioned portrait is a consequence of circumstances that vary from person to person, from task to task, and from year to year—as is also the case with Lars Physant's

portraits. They evolve because the artist evolves, just as they change because the situation changes. There is a difference between portraying a member of one's immediate family, a close acquaintance, a chief executive in the upper echelons of business, or a high-ranking member of the Royal House, such as, most recently, Her Royal Highness Princess Benedikte.

This last category of portraits poses demands of representation that the former do not, partly because a depiction of a royal family member will always be surrounded by special attention and a larger public audience. The unveiling of such a portrait always takes on the character of an event. Added to this is the fact that it is shown at exhibitions, reproduced in newspapers and magazines, and discussed and debated time and again—even among people who do not otherwise engage with visual art.

In all cases, the sitter must approve the artist before this work can begin. Through this choice, the artist secures the sitter's initial goodwill—and perhaps even an engaged relationship with his work. Much is at stake for both of them. For even though such an assignment can stretch over a long period, involving several meetings and many intense moments, the afterlife of the finished portrait is always of far greater duration. Thus, it is not only the sitter who passes into posterity, but also the artist. The portrait is a representation to which two people subscribe their names in different ways, as an expression of their shared engagement and presence in the finished picture.

One—the painter—does so by imprinting the painting in accordance with his artistic conviction, with what he can do, dreams of, and believes in. We might also speak of the stylistic hallmark by which the artist can always be recognized. Naturally, the artist also signs his work as a sign that it is finished, and that he approves and takes ownership of the work he has executed. But the image's stylistic character is his primary signature.

The other—the sitter—is present in the painting by being immediately recognizable and perhaps by having his or her name permanently associated with the picture. A picture that does not resemble the person it purports to depict is not necessarily a bad picture; but its value and function as a portrait representation will then always remain open to debate. We know many such portraits from art history, especially from older art. For if we go far enough back in history—or simply far enough away from our own latitudes—we encounter examples where grandeur, omnipotence, or flattering idealization played a far greater role than immediate resemblance.

Often, we do not even have reliable knowledge of that quality in a picture which we call portrait likeness. Likeness is usually a property that photographs in particular can document, or that our own personal impression of a person defines for us. If, on the other hand, it concerns historical figures of whom no photographs exist, we can only come to terms with the concept of likeness by comparing other portraits of the same person from the same period. Ultimately, the significance of a portrait in its time and posterity may stand or fall on its artistic value. Therefore, it is never a matter of indifference who painted the person being portrayed.

We tend to hold highest those portraits in which both the artist's style and the sitter's expression step unmistakably into character through the outcome of the assignment that temporarily brought them together.

That quality is present in Lars Physant's pictures. Immediate likeness is a quality of portraiture that he strives for to a high degree. His pictures always closely approach reality, scrutinizing and exploring it as if he were a scientist and the sitter a field of study that must always be subjected to a detailed examination before being presented to the public.

Yet the pictures also bear witness to the fact that the artist always reserves the right to insert a certain abstraction between himself and direct imitation of nature. He is the one who ultimately decides how this so-called reality should look when communicated as visual art.

There is no single truth about a person's pictorial appearance. As long as we speak merely of a portrait's date, dimensions, technique, signature placement, ownership, where it has been exhibited, what it was acquired for, or what it is insured for, we have a form of evidence. But the moment we speak instead of the picture's quality and resemblance to the sitter, the judgment is made individually by the person looking at it and evaluating it. When it comes to art, the definition of what is true or right is an individual matter. Lars Physant's pictures encapsulate something of this relativity.

Lars Physant has made portraits since he was thirteen years old. However, actual commissioned portraits are tasks he only took on within the past 25 years, starting with his portraits of Poul Sømark, a high-ranking member of the Order of Saint Michael, and Kim Sjøgren, a violinist and concertmaster.

Like so many other prominent and sought-after painters in the portrait genre, Lars Physant has no formal training as a portraitist. He did not serve an apprenticeship under an older portrait painter, as was the practice prior to the establishment of art academies. As an artist, he is self-taught—which does not rule out his having had role models: significant painters whose works he looked up to, without them knowing in their graves that they had gained a loyal and deeply engaged pupil in him. These role models were the Old Masters, whose works he could view in museums or reproduced in books. At one point in his career—after deciding to become an artist—he considered applying to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. However, his father opposed this plan, which likely would have shaped his future had it been realized. He has recounted this himself.[1]

Perhaps it was this paternal countermove that ultimately secured his unique artistic profile. For it became one of the explanations for why, as a painter, he was exposed to entirely different influences than his peers, leading him down a different path—both artistically and geographically. Had he entered the Art Academy in Copenhagen, he might have become one of the *De Unge Vilde* ("The Young Wilds") who, in the late 1970s, studied postmodernity under Professors Stig Brøgger and Hein Heinsen, and made their collective breakthrough at the exhibition *Kniven på hovedet* ("The Knife on the Head") at Tranegården in 1982. We cannot know. We only know that Lars Physant was born in

1957—the same year as Claus Carstensen, Erik A. Frandsen, Nina Sten-Knudsen, and Søren Jensen; a year before Peter Bonde; and two years after Mikael Kvium. In short: he is their peer. And like them, he believes in painting. But that is where the common ground ends, for the type of painting he believes in is different.

The generation of "young wilds" oriented themselves toward the Neo-Expressionist wave that manifested in German contemporary art during the late 1970s. They travelled to Germany and absorbed the culture of a large European neighbour that was only then regaining its footing in visual arts after the World War. Lars Physant did not do this. His heart drew him to the Mediterranean region—not so much to its art as to its architecture. Rome became the first stop on a path toward a future offering a vastly different, rich, and composite inspiration than Copenhagen. Barcelona became the next, and he has lived and worked there since 1994.

The Eckersberg Student

As a metropolis where he might live and work, Rome intimidated him both through its grandeur and its vast concentration of historical monuments. Perhaps he feared becoming overly influenced or standardized by all the classical and Baroque monuments, which could render any artist a hostage of the past. By contrast, compared to Rome, Barcelona was a city where modernity was better represented. Here, one was less of a passive spectator than in Rome.

Yet it is evident that as a young man he shared the Danish Golden Age artists' enthusiasm for Rome. An extended grant-funded stay in the city was the learning process that, especially in the first half of the 19th century, served as the crowning achievement of any promising Danish artist's education. The city, with all its architecture and art, was regarded as a monumental art academy in its own right. However, unlike the home academy at Kongens Nytorv, there were no professors or teachers here to guide anyone. There were only the experiences that the city, with its vast wealth of historic structures, could convey to any Golden Age artist motivated enough to receive them. Here he—at that time it was impossible to say "she," as women did not yet have access to education at the Art Academy in Copenhagen—could see everything considered important and exemplary as a foundational framework for great and true art. But it was up to the artist to seek out and find his own models on site. Ancient sculpture, which in the form of the Belvedere Torso completely spellbound a young N.A. Abildgaard, did not necessarily interest the more neoclassically inclined artists of a slightly later period, such as C.W. Eckersberg. Eckersberg used his stay to paint *vedute*—views toward that part of Rome where the ruins of a great past mingled with the impression of a more living and picturesque present.

Lars Physant was clearly on Eckersberg's team. He focused on architecture, and a painting such as *Morgenerobring (After the rain)* from 1994 is just one of several examples of the pact forged between the heritage of the Golden Age and a young painter who had no desire to be both young and wild. However, his respect for ancient Roman monuments did not stand in the way of his need to investigate, for instance, Eckersberg's depictions of them on a sober, experience-based foundation. For perhaps Eckersberg, in his pursuit

of ideal beauty and harmony, had occasionally been forced to "cut off a heel or crop a toe"—to quote his contemporaries the Brothers Grimm, two German philologists and folklorists who could also use reality as inspiration to tell fairy tales.

In this way, through his urge to test the truth value of Eckersberg's painting *View through Three of the Northwest Arches of the Third Story of the Colosseum* from 1815/16, Lars Physant arrived at the in many ways surprising conclusion that the tripartite view presented in the painting did not entirely correspond to reality. What was seen in the background through the arches could only be seen in that precise manner in that specific painting.[2] In other words, it was a form of picturesque construction. Thus, this painting of the Colosseum could be cited in support of the philosophy that there apparently exists a special beauty behind what seems to pass for the whole truth but is not always so. Perhaps that was why this particular painting by Eckersberg caught his interest. For the divided panorama forming the core of the picture could also confirm a fundamental idea behind Lars Physant's own motifs: the reality we experience with our senses does not constitute a complete and rounded whole. Rather, it resembles the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. And we must lay these pieces out before us and assemble them into the harmonious synthesis we always strive to achieve—if nowhere else, then in our consciousness. The conclusion is clear: what we can see with our own eyes is not necessarily the definitive and exhaustive truth about the reality that normally accompanies us. But the artist with sufficient empathy can, through his pictures, lift a final veil, open our eyes, and thereby give us insight into a nature we are otherwise only able to glimpse and sense—for our senses and intellect alone do not grant us access to it.

The memory of Rome's special alliance with its own grand past remained on Lars Physant's retina for a long time—like a beautiful stamp. Long after he had left the city, that memory continued to trigger pictures, as in the painting *Kanaler. Lissi Otto* from 2001. Here, from a high vantage point, the artist looks out over the neighbourhood near Gammel Strand in Copenhagen, with Frederiksholms Kanal to the right and the Palace Chapel and part of Christiansborg Palace to the left. Through its motif, this painting reconfirms the significance that the Eternal City held for him, not least through the paintings that Christen Købke, Constantin Hansen, and other Golden Age artists executed in this site, which is almost sacred to the history of art.

A critic once referred to Lars Physant as an "Eckersberg pupil in the 1980s." [3] The mention of this imaginary pupil relationship pleased the artist greatly, as he readily admits that Eckersberg has meant a immense amount to him ever since childhood. There was no conscious elective affinity involved. Yet in one respect, Lars Physant takes after the famous Golden Age painter: just as Eckersberg received his most important portrait commissions only after returning from his journey to Rome, Physant likewise received his defining commissions only after his year-long, inspired engagement with architectural and landscape painting. Only on this basis can one speak of a spiritual affinity between the two artists from different eras. Physant's interest in the portrait seems to have grown out of his interest in thematic landscapes and cities—everything surrounding and occupying him. But he did not anticipate figure painting by supplying his architectural paintings with the staffage almost always found in Golden Age views. In his work, human

figures are not invited inside the frame merely to provide a sense of scale for buildings that may originally have been the primary subject. When the human figure made its entrance in Lars Physant's works, it was not as a parameter serving practical purposes, but as a proper portrait.

It was against this background, as a portrait painter, that Lars Physant found the opportunity to refresh his early youth's passion for drawing faces. This was a pursuit he had cultivated since the age of thirteen. In his boyhood years, he had drawn scores of portraits on small slips of paper that he could quickly hide from his parents if necessary, so they would not discover what he was so passionately engaged in—for what if he turned it into a livelihood? Which, in the end, he did anyway.

No formal education or professional instruction lay between what he did then and what he was able to do later—or can do today. Under these direct and unschooled conditions, a painter can do little else than draw upon the experiences and memories accumulated over time, carrying them along from one assignment to the next like a summarized capital of experience. The latest picture in a body of work is always a synthesis and a product of the works that preceded it. It is within this experiential progression that preparatory works, sketches, and studies find their natural place. The artist does not need to start from scratch every time; instead, he can build further, layer upon layer, learning from the knowledge he has already acquired. Metaphorically, the most recently completed picture always stands on the shoulders of those that came before.

When Lars Physant sets out to paint a portrait, he first creates a large series of drawings of the person. The drawings circle around the sitter, observing them from various angles; facial expressions shift, and the drawing changes with them. Sometimes these drawings are executed in different colours, as if to indicate or illustrate a surprising diversity within a limited field. One of Lars Physant's models spoke of how intense and heartwarming an experience it was to sit for him, but also how demanding, moving, open, and self-exposing such a session could feel from the artist's perspective. The sheer number of sketches represents a process of approximation.[4]

Through this practice, Lars Physant mirrors other artists. J.F. Willumsen also drew his way toward a gradually growing familiarity with whatever he decided to paint or model, and Lars Physant is exceptionally familiar with Willumsen's works and style. He copied two paintings by Willumsen to serve as the background for the double portrait of patrons and collector couple Annie and Otto Johannes Detlefs, which he painted in 2011. But as with all backgrounds in Physant's works, it is a matter of more than just an ordinary "background" understood spatially and aesthetically. The paintings of Willumsen, among others, and the sculpture by Godtfred Eickhoff simultaneously draw a mental portrait of the couple's interests—of what has engaged them in both their private and public lives.[5]

Fundamentally, it is about engaging fully and unreservedly through the work one voluntarily undertakes. One dives deep into something and keeps going, not letting go until it feels complete, resolved, and definitive to one's conscience. Like J.F. Willumsen, Lars Physant continues until, through his preliminary work, he has virtually learned his subject by heart—like a beloved lesson. Feeling—or knowing—that he has mastered

something as thoroughly as he can before realizing it as a work gives him a sense of freedom. Only in the finished work can the artist express his observations and deliberations, which together form what we might call his commitment.

The starting point for these studies and approximations is the artist's conviction that he stands in the midst of chaos. It is this eternal and fundamental experience of a kind of preceding chaos that ignites the working process and legitimizes it. The artist must act to overcome this feeling of powerlessness in a world that seemingly lacks inner cohesion. The starting point feels confusing precisely because there are so many choices to be made that have not yet been made, and so many possibilities that have not yet been tested. Only by working away from this initial feeling can he approach something more stable and definitive—a higher form of order where human beings and their surroundings can be placed into a system that, like Neoplatonism, carries traces of the metaphysical and supra-individual.

When it comes to these initial drawings, one might venture a comparison with Cubist practice. For Cubism was also about viewing an object—a vase, for example, or a person—from multiple sides and then reconstructing the object or person as a sum of these many observations from as many angles. Such can be the truth of an artistic method; but it can also be the truth of a person's appearance in a so-called Cubist picture—and not only there.

Perhaps this is one reason why Lars Physant produces so many preliminary drawings or sketches for his portrait commissions: an acknowledgment of the transformative significance of the single moment and the relativity of artistic truth.

Synesthesia and the Fraternization of the Senses

When a person is to be painted, the portraitist quickly observes that their facial features can change from day to day—indeed, even over the course of a single day. A face does not fall into the exact same lines in the morning, when the person may have just gotten out of bed, as it does in the evening when the day's work and challenges are over and overcome. If the person is at rest and content, the face will show slightly different features than if that same person is burdened or worried. Joy, anger, sadness, and melancholy, or a calm and serene temperament, each leave their distinct marks.

Physant has made this step-by-step transformation visible in a series of portraits, all painted under the inspiration of Carl Nielsen's 2nd Symphony, *The Four Temperaments* (1902). The symphony consists of four movements, each dedicated to depicting a specific temperament: the choleric, the phlegmatic, the melancholic, and the sanguine—that is, the cheerful and carefree.[6]

Lars Physant has called these portrait series "a synesthetic experiment." Six individuals participated in this experiment.[7] The artist asked them to listen intently to the movements of Nielsen's symphony, and as they attempted to identify with the gradual transformation of the music, the artist observed them. On this basis, he executed their portraits as a four-part work in which the face's transformation follows the symphony's

movements, rendered in distinct colours. The underlying premise is that yellow is the color that best matches or corresponds to the choleric expression. Thus, yellow belongs to the first movement describing the choleric temperament. The second movement, the phlegmatic, calls for green. Lars Physant chose blue for the third movement's coloristic signalment of the melancholic temperament, and he concludes with red for the fourth and final movement, which describes the sanguine.

According to synesthesia, one specific color corresponds to one specific temperament. But can musical expression and the character of colour be united on an experiential level? Synesthesia—or "co-sensation," as the phenomenon is also called—can as an idea be traced back to antiquity. It is the theory that different sensory modalities can be related or connected or at least experienced as such by particularly sensitive individuals. When these sensory impressions work together and complement one another, they afford us a richer and more nuanced experience of the surrounding world. Yet even individually, they can be connected—much like members of a larger family might be, perhaps without knowing it. In certain synesthetically disposed people, the experience of a piece of music or a sound does not remain isolated; the sound heard triggers an experience or sensation of colour. Furthermore, this coupling is constant, so that specific sounds, tones, or musical moods are always accompanied by specific colours.

No scientific or rational proof can be offered for how or why this synesthesia—this linking of sensory impressions—occurs. It is a matter of feeling, and in some, this feeling-based experience of harmony between colour and mood is simply present more clearly than in others. But that does not make the connection any less significant, provided that we—like Lars Physant—take an interest in the thoughts of the German poet and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.[8] Herder was among the thinkers who most sharply rejected Enlightenment rationalism, asserting that factors other than pure reason help shape our experiences and interpretation of what we encounter. Feeling—that which stems from emotional response—should not, according to Herder, be placed on a lower plane than reason and rational cognition, nor is poetry a more primitive mode of expression than philosophical or scientific language. All human cognition originates in sensations and in the experiences that accompany the life we live and the development we undergo. Thus, even if no scientific evidence can be found for the connection between melancholy and the colour blue, the link is no less real: it is evident to anyone capable of feeling it.

The link between tones and colours inspired the 18th-century French mathematician Louis-Bertrand Castel to construct a special colour harpsichord, the *Clavecin pour les yeux* ("Harpsichord for the Eyes"), in which striking various keys on the keyboard triggered a sequence of different colours. Thus, even a deaf person could, in principle, experience something visible caused by invisible music. The colour harpsichord became so well-known and recognized in its time that even a prominent musician like Telemann composed "music" for this unusual instrument.

Curiously, Carl Nielsen's 2nd Symphony can also be traced back to another sensory modality: a quite modest picture that the composer encountered in his youth without any

preparation. Late in life, Nielsen described this visual inspiration in a flash of memory. The picture in question hung on a wall in a village inn on Zealand, where the composer, his wife, and some friends had randomly stopped to enjoy a beer:

"And it was here," Carl Nielsen related, "that I noticed a most comical coloured picture divided into four panels, depicting 'The Temperaments,' complete with titles: 'The Choleric,' 'The Sanguine,' 'The Melancholic,' and 'The Phlegmatic.' The Choleric was on horseback; he held a long sword in his hand, with which he slashed wildly into thin air, his hair flying madly around his face, which was distorted with anger and devilish hatred to such a degree that I burst out laughing. The other three pictures were in the same style, and my friends and I amused ourselves heartily over their naivety, exaggerated expressions, and comical gravity. But how strangely things can turn out! I, who had laughed aloud and mockingly at these pictures, kept returning to them in my mind, and one fine day it dawned on me that these humble pictures nevertheless contained a kind of core or idea—and imagine, even a musical foundation! Sometime later, I began working on the first movement of the symphony..."[9]

With his music, Carl Nielsen wished to elevate this simple picture to another plane. If the symphony can be called an inspired musical translation—or interpretation—of a simple, popular allegory of human temperaments, then Lars Physant's paintings are an inspired translation of the symphony's four movements back into visual language: a series of monochrome portraits.

In one of his exhibitions, Lars Physant demonstrated this pairing—or co-sensation—by creating an experiential space where visitors could use headphones to listen to the four movements of the symphony. In the same space where they could immerse themselves in the shifting moods of the orchestral music, they could simultaneously view the series of portraits inspired by the emotional response to that same music. It was then up to the individual to decide whether a connection existed between the two art forms or "sensory modalities"—whether the music became visible in one or more of these faces, and whether the faces gained an added dimension through the music. Only when a person stands between music and painting in this way, opening up to both at once, can two such different art forms be perceived as members of the same large family. The artist calls the experiment "an attempt to mark cardinal points in mapping human emotional behaviour patterns, their moods, and their feelings." [10]

At times, the experiment helped the artist select the facial expression best suited for a larger portrait. Furthermore, there was a lesson to be learned: nothing permanent or uniquely "correct" exists in a human face. Therefore, it holds many truths, and it is these truths that the artist seeks to isolate and uncover one by one by drawing his models repeatedly—or, as here, by painting the same face coloured by the unmistakable mood shifts of a symphonic work whose overarching theme is human mood swings.

A Background for the Picture

Other, perhaps more essential factors than moods come into play when painting portraits: namely, the background. In principle, it is impossible to paint a portrait without some

form of background. It may be gilded, homogeneous, or monochrome—or the opposite: heterogeneous and polychrome. It can appear without appreciable depth or feel dizzyingly deep. It can be neutral or reveal something crucial about the sitter.

We have seen that music matters greatly to Lars Physant—jazz, and especially score-based classical music. In classical music terminology, *counterpoint* refers to the combination of two or more independent melodic lines into a single polyphonic texture. A requirement for these voices is that, in addition to sounding harmonious together, they should be characterful, self-contained, and partially independent. They must exist side by side as statements within the same polyphony without resembling one another so closely that one is merely an echo or a varied repetition of the other (if they do, we are dealing with a fugue).

In the visual arts, an exact equivalent concept does not exist. However, this does not prevent "contrapuntal" effects from being created in a picture—a portrait, for example. The parallel to musical counterpoint occurs when a person is depicted against a background composed of an entirely different category of forms than the person themselves. This is evident in Lars Physant's portrait of Queen Margrethe II and in his earlier portraits of Princess Benedikte. Both are seen—and painted—in interiors dominated by rectangular wall panelling. With these panels, the shape of the frame is brought into the picture plane itself, as if to strengthen the composition. They divide the wall into vertical and horizontal lines that meet to form rectangular fields. In places, these rectangles are fitted into larger framed rectangles, as seen in 19th-century interiors. Thereby, the background forms a geometric sounding board for the figurative subject. This strict, planar-geometric structure exposes the person in the space precisely because the two—figure and background—are so fundamentally different in nature.

We do not know whether Lars Physant looked to a couple of Eckersberg's most significant portraits here—such as *The Nathanson Family Picture*, the double portrait of the two Nathanson sisters, or the large group portrait of King Frederick VI of Denmark and his family. But since Eckersberg's works have engaged Physant since childhood, the composition of these pictures could easily have influenced him, confirming that the background can always be used constructively in characterizing a human being—whether high or low born, royal or commoner, young or old. The background can highlight a person just as one voice in a contrapuntal piece of music highlights another, creating an impression of richness and variation when they converge.

Yet the background can also subtly account for the profession, knowledge, or fields to which the sitter has a special relationship—especially if the person is a recognized scientist or an engaged amateur devoted to a specific field of knowledge. It merely requires the artist to hint at or visualize this professional interest without using words. Eckersberg did this when he painted the physicist H.C. Ørsted and later the mathematician and astronomer G.F. Ursin. In these pictures, the physicist and mathematician were visually accompanied by concrete examples of the inventions or theories that made them who they were in the public eye of their time and posterity.

Lars Physant did something similar when he portrayed Queen Margrethe II in 2015. The Queen was placed against an illustrated wall displaying a graphic site plan of the excavations at Jelling, combined with selected symbols of the most important archaeological finds in Danish history. As the painting was commissioned by the National Museum of Denmark, these references to the Queen's interest in archaeology and Danish antiquity were particularly fitting.

The site plan was a construction—or an illusion—created specifically for this picture and this specific placement. In reality, the plan did not exist, at least not in the room where the Queen sat for the portrait. It appeared as a relevant background projection in place of the collection of 18th-century portraits hanging in the Queen's study at Fredensborg Palace where she posed. Here, the artist rightly recognized that if the portrait of the living Queen were surrounded by older royal portraits, it would divert attention from what mattered most.

It is such rearrangements and modifications that place Lars Physant at the crossroads between realism and abstraction. These two style designations are usually perceived as opposites that ought to be mutually exclusive. In practice, however, they are not. When speaking of visual art, consideration for the sovereignty of the picture often has the final word. The use of symbols in a portrait reflects a perception of reality that borrows features from both realism and abstraction.

The Many Gazes at One Object

Another essential characteristic of Lars Physant's works is that they are often composed of multiple images that cannot fit within a standard frame.

Through thousands of examples in art history, we have grown accustomed to the idea that a painting should be rectangular or square. This format has become a convention seen wherever pictures hang: art museums, galleries, auctions, private homes, and beyond. Explanations for why this is so, are easy to find. A square or rectangular picture harmonizes with a room's proportions—with the floor, ceiling, walls, window frames, and doors—echoing the dominant horizontal and vertical lines of any room. Thus, the walls can be seen as a prerequisite for the picture's format, while the picture's format reflects the room's proportions.

However, Physant's works are irregular. They do not conform to the proportions dictated by standard geometric figures like a square. That they constitute an exception to this rule requires an explanation—and a short look back.

Throughout history, there have been other exceptions to the rule. Take Gothic altarpieces, where the height of the picture often increases toward the centre of the composition. This stems from the Middle Ages' preference for symmetrical compositions and the belief that what is centrally placed must be most important, and what is most important is usually largest. Another example is 18th-century portraiture, where rectangular or square formats were frequently set aside in favour of oval portraits.[11]

If we limit our search for parallels to Danish art, we find them primarily among the Symbolists, including, during a brief period, J.F. Willumsen.[12] In his work, the subject sometimes bursts through the edge of the frame—or its rectangle. It feels as if the frame can no longer contain the image within it; it overflows, colours the frame's edge, or pushes it out of its strict geometric form. Lars Physant's practice also has counterparts in his own time and the decades preceding it. From an international perspective, 1960s American painting offers key exponents of the "shaped canvas." [13] Yet neither American painters like Ellsworth Kelly nor the Englishman Anthony Green have had a direct influence on Lars Physant's practice.[14]

Nevertheless, they share something in common: for these painters as well, a picture is primarily an object—something placed on a wall that, like a sculpture or relief, possesses physical extension in space.

Normally, a picture's format is measured in two dimensions: height and width, with height preceding width. Here—with Lars Physant—a third dimension enters the picture. It is much smaller than the first two (at most a few centimetres), but no less important to the overall impression. With this artist, the depth of the picture is almost always indicated. This dimension reveals that his medium is not a conventional painting, but rather comparable to a painted relief. We are speaking of an evolution of the picture beyond a flat surface. These works may appear flat when viewed as reproductions in a printed catalogue, but in reality, they are not.

Lars Physant's paintings are not enclosed by irregular frames; in fact, they are not framed at all. Thus, his pictures are unbound by convention. Nor is the shape of such a painting determined by the motif the artist decides to paint. Rather, it is the reverse: the motif emerges as it follows the articulated, complex form of the structure. This is an unusual working method, rendered even more unique by being predetermined through a close collaborative relationship between two people who are also close in life.

Lars Physant paints on relief structures executed by his Spanish wife, the sculptor Silvia Magriña-Costán. These assembled, irregular structures incorporate different types of canvas—some coarse, others fine. The painting ground is as heterogeneous as possible using classical materials like canvas. This surface presents specific demands to the artist who applies forms and colors onto it. "The surface of the canvas is nature in itself, and it is fantastic what one can do with it," the artist has said.[15]

Lars Physant views this ground as a challenge, feeling stimulated by the contrasts that must ultimately hold together as a painting should. Creating coherence among these separate parts falls entirely to him. He alone must bridge the gaps between the different sections or "islands" in the relief—something no one has done in quite this way before. He calls this method "contrapuntal realism." [16] One could also speak of "split perception," a method he has employed since 1998 that has become synonymous with his style.

Split Perception

The expression "split perception" might suggest that perception was once unified and that the artist decided to break it apart as a consequence of his working method.

However, the reverse is true. Human perception is split from the outset. What we experience, we experience piecemeal and in fragments. Yet we deny this to ourselves, wishing to view the coherence of our perceptions as a fundamental condition of how we see. Former rector of the Art Academy, Else Marie Bukdahl, linked this fragmented perception to physicist Niels Bohr's theory of complementarity in her article "A Plurality of Gazes." Citing Mount Fuji as an example—a sacred mountain viewed under varying light conditions and angles—she writes: "In Lars Physant's visual world, we encounter an independent artistic interpretation of a world that can only be captured through a plurality of gazes, functioning as an artistic parallel to Niels Bohr's view that our world consists of a network of 'interwoven complementary understandings' of different aspects of one and the same nature." [17]

The portrait of Queen Margrethe II serves as an example of a picture assembled from differentiated fragments, where unity finds its final resolution in the Queen's face. Her eyes form the exact centre of the composition—the artist's sole requirement for the relief surface created by his wife.

Similarly, the artist's recent portrait of Princess Benedikte is like a puzzle of squares coming together to emphasize the figure's integrity. Yet the puzzle remains open, with gaps between pieces ensuring borders are not entirely erased. Details abound, testifying to the time the artist dedicated to the work and reflecting a respectful engagement with everything that met his gaze. Ultimately, the artist retains full control over the role these details play within the unified whole.

This division of the surface—this deliberate partial structure—is a stylistic feature emphasizing that the picture is an assembly of parts, and that a whole is created by impressions accumulated over time. This fragmentation serves as a reminder of something viewers often forget: no artwork is created all at once from a single impression. While a picture requires countless moments to come into being, a viewer registers it in a fraction of a second, sending immediate impulses to the brain. Yet memory and perception are intertwined; while we recognize Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* instantly, deeper understanding requires more time.

Physant assembles his picture over time through a series of actions, deliberations, and observations, creating a pattern where individual pieces represent his own sensations. Over time, he may smooth over traces of resistance encountered along the way—scraping, painting over, or creating the illusion that difficulties never existed. Multiple layers exist within such a painting, each potentially erasing traces of its predecessor. Alternatively, he may set a picture aside and start anew, enriched by experience, continuing as if uninterrupted. We cannot see or know these hidden stages when viewing the final work, yet Physant does not oppose transparency.

When viewing the finished painting in an exhibition, we may not explicitly perceive these deliberations, yet we gain an intuitive insight into the process. Perception requires time; as we observe a landscape, a street, or a person, our gaze shifts, blinks, and moves. Our perception changes alongside the time spent exploring and experiencing our surroundings.

Consequently, our total experience of a segment of the world differs from a picture's concentrated depiction of it. A painting or photograph represents a specific choice among many possibilities. Viewing a completed painting—such as a Roman *vedute* by Eckersberg—allows our roaming gaze to rest. Still, we must remember that the still image was realized from an accumulation of impressions over time before the artist selected a final angle and composition. A painting is a distillation of a reality that was once broader and more complex than a single image can contain.

When focusing on the finished picture, our gaze may shift many times to examine details—much like in works by Vermeer or Hammershøi, two artists Physant holds in high regard.

This brings us to the small dotted fields that appear regularly across many of Physant's works, including his portraits. With distinct structures and colors, these fields act as messages from elsewhere—signals from other realms of art. In earlier works, they formed a broad frame around the main subject; now, they have moved inside the picture plane, drawing the viewer's eye and raising questions about the artist's intent. Why break up an already irregular surface? Should a painting not strive for stylistic uniformity?

In the portrait of Queen Margrethe II, the background plan of Jelling represents an intersection between antiquity and the present day. Another example of this pluralism is Physant's visual nod to Georges Seurat,^[18] creator of Pointillism (or Divisionism), which developed the Impressionist use of color mixed optically on the viewer's retina.

Physant does not aim to revive historical Pointillism; his dotted squares are simply one texture among others, serving his broader interest in material pluralism.

While paintings rarely feature physical depth, they can theoretically incorporate a fourth dimension: time. Physical objects exist in three dimensions, but tracking them across time introduces a fourth dimension ("spacetime"), a concept introduced by Albert Einstein in 1917.

Physant's incorporation of varied structures and colors can be seen as an indication that different parts of the painting were perceived at different times and under different conditions. Time itself has no color, but it affects light, which in turn determines color. As light changes with time and weather, colors shift—warm reds and oranges in sunlight, cool blues in shadow. As Goethe noted, yellow and red can be seen as darkened light, while blue is illuminated darkness.

Lars Physant shares this complexity and diversity through his work. Though his compositions may initially appear irregular and composite, they rely on our capacity to synthesize disparate impressions into a cohesive whole within our consciousness.

NOTES

1. Lars Physant. *Momentets skønhed* ("The Beauty of the Moment"). Copenhagen 2008. Interview by Lisbeth Bonde, p. 11.
2. Kasper Monrad. "Udsigt gennem tre buer" ("View Through Three Arches") in the exhibition catalog *Under samme himmel – Land og by i dansk og tysk kunst 1800-1850*. Thorvaldsens Museum / National Gallery of Canada / Hamburger Kunsthalle. Copenhagen 2000, p. 25.
3. Lars Physant in a letter dated "Barcelona 14.9.2007" to the author of this article.
4. Thyge Christian Fønss-Lundberg. "Skønheden og sandheden" ("Beauty and Truth") in *Lars Physant – Serendipia*. Kastrupgaardsamlingen 2017–18, p. 104.
5. Thyge Christian Fønss-Lundberg. "Skønheden og sandheden" in *Lars Physant – Serendipia*. Kastrupgaardsamlingen 2017–18, pp. 113–116.
6. The four movements of the symphony are: *Allegro collerico*, *Andante comodo e flemmatico*, *Andante melancolico*, and *Allegro sanguineo*.
7. The six participants in this artistic experiment were British artist and film director Peter Greenaway, poet and author Klaus Rifbjerg, recorder player Michala Petri, Spanish poet, author, and philosopher Rafael Argullol, Bishop Tine Lindhardt, and art historian Thyge Christian Fønss-Lundberg. Four portraits were executed for each individual, each with a distinct expression and dominant color scheme. The portraits of Peter Greenaway (2015) were the first produced; the remaining five were painted two years later. *Lars Physant – Serendipia*. Kastrupgaardsamlingen 2017–18, pp. 128–141.
8. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), German poet, philosopher, and theologian. See Søren Holm: *Filosofien i den nyere Tid*. Copenhagen 1964, pp. 287ff.
9. Quoted from program notes written by Carl Nielsen in 1931, shortly before his death, for a concert in Stockholm featuring his 2nd Symphony.
10. Lars Physant in *Simultan perception: Vindens geometrier og Lorca*. Vendsyssel Kunstmuseum 2013, p. 80.
11. This was likely based on the notion that an oval frame enclosed a human face more naturally than a square, acting as a visual echo of the face itself while serving as a decorative element within a room's decor.
12. Jacob Thage. "Kunstnerens brug af rammer i 1800-tallet" ("Artists' Use of Frames in the 19th Century") in the exhibition catalog *Rammens Kunst*. Statens Museum for Kunst. Copenhagen 2008, pp. 148ff. Irregular frames appear in J.F. Willumsen's works such as *Ægte Kastanier* (1891) and *Jotunheimen* (1892–93).
13. Prominent figures of the "shaped canvas" movement include Frank Stella (b. 1936), Kenneth Noland (1924–2010), Ellsworth Kelly (1923–2015), and Elizabeth Murray (1940–2007).
14. Like Lars Physant, English painter Anthony Green (b. 1939) created installations composed of smaller paintings of varying sizes, though his Pop Art and comic-influenced style did not directly influence Physant.
15. Lars Physant. *Momentets skønhed*. Copenhagen 2008. Interview by Lisbeth Bonde, p. 11.
16. Other terms used to describe Physant's method include "multiversal realism," "introspective realism," and "introspective naturalism." Lars Physant. *Momentets skønhed*. Copenhagen 2008. Interview by Lisbeth Bonde, p. 5.
17. Else Marie Bukdahl in Lars Physant: *Flerhed af blikke*. Gallerihuset. Oct 27 – Nov 24, 2007.
18. Georges Seurat (1859–1891), French painter.