

Transcending modernism

Jan Esmann interviewed by arthistorians Arnold Bloomenberg and Simon Cane for his second exhibition in the Alice Lookingglass Gallery, New York, 1999. Catalogtext reprinted in the New York artmagazine ZmartArt, issue 21, 1998. Reprinted by kind permission of the publishers. Copyright 1999 Jan Esmann and ZmartArt.

TRANSCRIPT...

Arnold Bloomenberg: Mr. Esmann, would you care to introduce yourself?

Jan Esmann: Jan Esmann, abstract painter. Raised in Bury, England, by danish parents. Resident of Copenhagen.

Simon Cane: You have often said you are an abstract artist, but most would consider your work figurative. How do you resolve that paradox – if there is any from your point of view?

Esmann: All good painting is about the dynamic interaction of color, light and form. Almost half a century of endlessly repeating the same 50 masterpieces of abstract expressionism has led people to believe, that if there is a figurative element in a picture, it automatically rules out the dynamics of color, light and form and irredeemably places the so called figurative work on an artistic lower level than the abstract work and therefore the same approach would naively conclude, that a figurative work is an anachronism ... that it is nothing but a sign of the artists ignorance of modernism and his sentimental repetition of premodern styles.

Bloomenberg: Undoubtedly color, light and form are important elements of abstract painting. But modernist artists abandoned representation, because representation by the necessity of mimesis did not allow complete freedom to use the fully expressive and artistic potential of light, form and color. Would reintroducing the figurative not automatically restrict the level of abstraction to a premodern situation?

Esmann: Obviously these three are the only formal elements of abstract painting whereas there actually is an other element also: representation. It is quite wrong to assume, that just because the old masters of representation couldn't combine color, light and form with imitation and the abstracts couldn't combine representation with color light and form, then it can't be done. It is the challenge today, to integrate the whole gammut of formal possibilities into a new pictorial language.

Bloomenberg: The way you describe the situation seems to confirm the distinction between abstract and figurative. Undoubtedly that is because of the restrictions of language, but for the sake of clarity could you say something about this distinction?

Esmann: Thank you, yes it is a problem of language. It is a sad misunderstanding that figurative elements in a painting are necessarily representational and i now regret using that word. The whole misunderstanding stems from Platos naive notion that representation is mimetic. It is obvious that representational painting up until my work has been mimetic, but if you grasp the whole modernist revolution of color, form and light and then reintroduce representation as a formal element of the same status as color, light and form, then mimesis will not be part of the representation for the representation will be solely and truly an abstract dynamic of color light and form. If the spectator sees the representation as mimetic, it will be his own projection. To me it is nothing but an element added to the other elements of color, form and light and my so called figurative painting is therefore painting on a higher level that purely abstract works because it deals with the whole gammut of painterly elements which neither premodern painting did, nor did modern nor postmodern. This is utterly new since its not postmodern in the Lyotardian and Derridaian sense of deconstructing metanarratives.

Cane: Yes, but why do you call yourself an abstract painter?

Esmann: Because what we might call nonmimetic representation is something that a few brave men are determined to discover, and because so-called nonrepresentative art is nothing but imitation of modernism. So the only truly innovative artistic situation today is to add formal representation, or rather pseudorepresentation, to the formal mind of an abstract artist. Imitation today is the sad situation of abstract art. It is impossible to do a purely abstract work of art today, that does not spring from imitation of other abstract works of art. The only way to avoid that today and thus do something truly original, is to arrange your colors, lights and forms in such a way, that they represent representation, or imitate imitation if you like. Only that way can we do, what has never been done before with painting: integrate all the elements of painting in a work of art.

Bloomenberg: That is truly new.

Esmann: The metanarrative of postmodernism is that there is necessarily is a metanarrative. As I have shown in my articles, modernism sprang from the huge metanarrative of theosophy and occultism. Midphase abstract expressionism sprang from the metanarrative of negation. Postmodernism sprang from the typically french metanarrative myth of deconstructing all metanarratives but your own myth of deconstructing the other. My painting has no metanarrative, it is simply my attempt to integrate the full gammut of painterly elements into an object in such a way, that the spectator will have to just be present in front of them. Being present now can not be accomplished by abstract painting – the fiasco of modernism and postmodernism proves that completely. Also the fiasco of Rothkoan and Reinhardtian negation to make the spectator be present now proves, that we have to reintroduce the representational element in order to move further. However, we should not reintroduce the premodern mimesis as some of the new figurative painters like Odd Nerdrum do. That would be utterly futile.

Bloomenberg: That's why you deny your way of doing figurative work is a regression to pre-abstract styles?

Esmann: Exactly. The job today is to integrate the whole tradition of modernism with the whole tradition of pre-modernism – without falling into that mudcolored ditch Odd Nerdrum and his student have fallen into: that of doing nothing but pseudo-symbolism. You see, they have also left out one of the four elements: color. Never before have all four been happily integrated; always only three of them or even fewer.

Cane: So why do you call yourself abstract?

Esmann: Because being called figurative generally makes people frown at you, because they immediately brand you as an imitator of nature and not an "artist". However, all abstract artists today imitate the idea of abstract painting, they imitate their impressions of other abstract painting, so they are the real imitator. Therefore, remembering what i just said about which kind of artwork today demands true genius, you don't have any other name for the kind of approach i have to painting, than to call it abstract. I do admit a better term would be desirable. I would prefer "metanoetic".

Bloomenberg: That makes sense. Undoubtedly "abstract" is not the best phrase to avoid confusion. But you are probably right, that calling your work figurative would cause just as much confusion.

Esmann: More so! Better to have people confused than to have them misunderstand you and yet think their denigration of your accomplishments are the whole and true story. If they admit to their confusion, they have an open mind. That's alpha and omega if you want to comprehend something new. That's also why "metanoetic" would be better.

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