

Review

Nowadays, painting exhibitions often present experiences of a more unexpected nature. This is at least the case when carried out by artists who acknowledge the insights acquired from the past 50 years of painterly history. This has consequently led to a whole series of exhibitions of late, including painting that in one way or another relates to the fundamental questions of modernist aesthetics with regard to form, colour, figuration, and surface. At best, these exhibitions constitute thought-provoking reminders of the visual dead-ends that abstract formalism is still full of. Under less favourable circumstances the exhibitions have consisted merely of artistic illustrations of aesthetic issues discussed in venues other than the exhibition space.

Matthias van Arkel is an artist who has, ever since his debut, taken up these issues in his everyday, painterly practice rather than relegating them to a crash course in aesthetics. In one of his first exhibitions in an architect's office in Stockholm, he applied the paint in the exhibition space in such a way that the viewer was forced to step over the "work" in order to observe it from more than one angle. Limiting elements such as

stretcher frames, a clear idiom, and a logical hanging procedure shifted the focal point to a question of material, smell, and physical movement, or in other words, sensuality. Last year, van Arkel further developed his concept in an exhibition together with Per Kesselmar at Botkyrka Konsthall. Van Arkel participated with a three-dimensional "painting". The work was not, however, in a more predictable sculptural form, but was instead constructed as a room in which the viewer could actually enter and observe the work "from within". Instead of dealing with what one could call "the anatomy of painting", van Arkel transforms the painting into a bodily cavity into which he invites us to explore with our gaze. To use an inverted analogy, one could say that the painting itself transforms the viewer to the focal point of its own mute process of observation, accompanied by a whole spectrum of smell and light sensations.

Matthias van Arkel completes this sensual and conceptual approach in his new exhibition at Galerie Aronowitsch, a venue that is normally associated with more modernist projects. Each work in the exhibition has its starting point in the discrepancy between the notion of painting and the various material descriptions

that often follow, with the exception of the obvious lack of the most usual of them all – paint on canvas. Van Arkel pursues a strategy similar to that of a wise captain navigating uncharted waters. Through cross bearing, he seeks to define his own position in relation to his chosen medium. Either by allowing the paint to take the form of a colourist Rubik's cube, that he carefully places in a museum cabinet, or by squeezing the paint together between two panes of glass, only to pull them apart and turn the painted surfaces towards the viewer. His handling of the paint and surface on which it is applied has a lot to do with action painting, but hardly the uninquisitive kind that seeks to describe the control of the interaction between the hand and the brain as an unconscious process. Van Arkel is considerably more systematic in his analysis of how paint – or that which resembles paint – responds to the application of physical force.

To some degree, his work has a simulated scientific quality about it, but contrary to what one normally associates with such a trait, van Arkel has no ambition to reach a definite conclusion. While wandering through the exhibition, one is inevitably at some point struck by the feeling that one is residing

within the works of art rather than among them. One can at times clearly observe a pattern reminiscent of nerve fibres branching out within the paint. In another case, van Arkel plays with the notion of the perfect positioning of the artwork by mounting a metal rail on the wall, making it possible to reposition the painting at will in a horizontal or vertical direction. As mentioned earlier, the artist works in a meta-painterly tradition, in which his comments concerning his medium are at least as important as that which we actually see. Transforming such an approach to an interesting artistic expression would normally be considered a very demanding endeavour, van Arkel, however, achieves this seemingly effortlessly. The main reason for this is presumably the fact that his studies are not an end in themselves, but are accompanied by a genuine love of the craft of painting. One would have to be quite cynical and suffer from imagefatigue not to be stimulated by the crackling nerve impulses he sends out under the skin of painting.

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