

BUILDING A VIEW

This exhibition surveys seven years of artistic practice. Beginning in 2000, this time span comprises a particular political /cultural environment and events that became influential to the work. Thus, the show at The American Swedish Historical Museum reflects seven years of artistic development and the personal research of an International Swede.

The story begins at a country house in Sweden, a "dacha", by a lake. In the studio, which is an old wooden shed painted red, we can still see a life size model of ruins erected in Leeuwarden, Netherlands in September, 2000. The real ruins were built in the square courtyard of the town hall of Leeuwarden. The purpose of this art project was to work with the idea of community and public space. I was invited to join as the only non-Dutch in the group. Thus, I had the position of outsider to the community. I collaborated with a foundation that provided placement of convicts-as-workers as an alternative to their serving prison time. Like me, they too, had a marginal position towards the community. Together, we inserted ourselves into the public space in a semi-clandestine way. Hundreds of civil servants looking down from surrounding windows saw them only as masons, not knowing their convict status. A theatrical and colorful situation was naturally taking place on the site.

For the Public Interest project I had selected an additional site: a very old church made of orangey bricks. I brought blue mortar rubble from the first site and placed it in niches of the facade. Following the arch of a vault I wrote an inscription on the wall. It was two quotes, one by a Christian mystic, and one by a Muslim Sufi. Both lived in the 1100's and talked about the virtue of being in the world like a passerby.

Being a passerby is a form of identity, an alternative to a national one: no flag to fight for, but a willingness to cooperate humbly and lovingly with temporary neighbors.

Ethical notions and aspirations are generally part of feelings of national pride and identity. These may be ill defined like Freedom. On the other hand a notion like Brotherhood is an ethical value really part of the spirit of internationalism as much as that of nationalism. What is underlying is a sense of community and interdependence.

What does Swedishness imply? The Swedish national hymn is mostly an ode to nature. It refers to the sky and the sun as seen from a particular vantage point, the Swedish land. Inherited ethical values rooted in age-old egalitarian principles, like the famous 'every man's right' from medieval times, make up a tradition that I suppose I am a part of. But, my own connection to the land is localized to the extreme and thus can hardly be called Swedishness anymore. It is the lake near my cottage and what grows around it. Also, I am a New Yorker and a Brooklynite. I have lived in "exile" for so long, it has become a way of being. I have invented a certain "Swedishness" for myself: A personalized mythical cultural identity. It includes a particular personal foreign accent in English, a certain amount of Norwegianness, and it shares flavors with filmmaker Tarkowski's Russia.

For many people the soft and gentle white on white style of interior design rooted in Gustavian tradition is emblematic of Swedish culture. By contrast, my own interiors are full of black and color. I do sense that the very obsession with the making of interiors is itself characteristic of people in the North, where one naturally has a stronger need for shelter from darkness and desolation. I see paintings as "interiors" to be lived in and as tapestries surrounding one with imagery which recedes and emerges alternatively.

My pictorial world is intense with color and light from....the brief summer in the North? Or, is it the intensity of the South of France, or Spanish baroque painting? As a painter, I draw from a deep source of colors (with all variations in hue, texture, light etc.) and their links - smells, flavors,

memories and connotations.

In titles for groups of paintings I have used the word "palette" quite often. It refers to the origin--the source--where everything comes from. It also refers to a state where everything remains malleable. When in use, the palette is the locus of wet pools of color running into one another. "First Palettes," 2005 are made with mortar and pigments on paper. The title refers to the striving for an elusive origin of origins. Where is the beginning of this long string of associations of colors and their flows which will eventually coalesce into paintings of ordered language? I executed the series in a ritual manner, giving myself ordinances such as high speed and short sessions, working in isolation in my remote country studio.

"Melancholia" is the title of another series. Melancholia is a passive state. It is something one is subjected to; it washes over the soul like a wave, causing immobility. In Durer's famous burin engraving we see the pensive female figure sitting, head resting in her hand. The word melancholia in Greek means black bile. In Medieval times bodily fluids or "humors" were associated with mental states. I have found this particular mental state of darkness to be linked to the creative process. It seems, at times, to be a necessary preparatory or premonitory state.

The darkness, the dark night in the North, is inevitably linked to cold. Or so it was until global warming set in. Nowadays, it is freakish and anguishing to actually experience a dark winter without cold!

If I try to narrow down my sense of the North or my sense of a spot on the Earth that I am particularly connected to, and to the characteristics of this spot, it is this: I am very close to the sky. Somehow the sky with its changing clouds is closer to the ground in the North--or so it seems. When living in my country spot in Sormland (whose surroundings could be compared with other pastoral settings such as Upstate New York, Russia or England) I am overwhelmed by the sky. It directly and forcefully affects my moods, my mind and my physical wellbeing, my activities and energy. Visually it is dominating yet intimate; it is as though I could touch it! It is three dimensional and I am in it.

In Zurich in the year 2000, I did a performance called "The Migrant." It was a continuation of the metaphor and practice of the humble bricklayer. Six months later, I started a huge project in my then studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It was located on the 9th floor and had two enormous windows like a pair of eyes looking out onto a panorama of Manhattan. Using blue mortar and orange bricks, I built a wall around my windows to offset the view of the city. This was the beginning of what I'd call "Blue Orange Works." Realizing the scope of the task of the masonry, I started to record the daily work on video. The video project became a 27 minute video diary called, "Blue Orange: The Bricklayer's Palette." The view of Manhattan through two huge holes in a wall would be the stage of the 9/11 catastrophe three months later.

In the 3 days following the attack, the streets of New York City saw a natural outpouring of brotherhood and compassion. The political propaganda machine would exploit those feelings and channel them into patriotism and warmongering. Xenophobia was rampant. Suddenly, American flags appeared everywhere. This development was, to me, more anguishing than the event. From that moment, I mobilized myself as an artist in the service of "Blue Orange": a web site with a manifesto, and held performances/gatherings in my studio. The manifesto called for the striving for ultimate utopia. The colors, blue and orange, evoke images of sunset and sunrise all over the world. Or, as French poet Paul Eluard wrote, "The earth is blue like an orange." A monumental scale painting also came out of this; it painted itself in one swift movement.

I believe I follow a long Swedish tradition when going out in the world being outspoken, unafraid and outraged when necessary. The admirable Jan Eliasson was president of the UN in 2005. He and his chief of staff invited me to have a presence in their offices for the duration of the 60th session. The project was called "Red Bricks Flying at The UN" and comprised five paintings, a video and a statement.

Forms, colors and acts come from visions that present themselves as actions to me. For instance, "Blood and Oil Spill at Rockefeller Center" in 2004, came out of outrage over war-profiteers. It was a vision of a spill at the foot of the Atlas statue at Rockefeller Center in New York City. This vision haunted me for a long time until finally I decided to replicate that public space in my studio. It became a collaborative performance and a natural catalyst for paintings which succeeded one another afterwards.

Painting is a multidimensional medium. It is both the eruptive acts and reflective states. It is mobility and immobility, action and reflection. Colors and forms cannot remain unambiguous; they oscillate and always become something more than their impetus. Thus, in Melancholia from 2006 there are traces of spills, but now the black is something else, like a stain or something oozing from a source. Painting is transformation, where the end result is greater than the sum of the parts. Painting--in the course of being made--looks back at the artist and talks back. Painting is a timeless state with no chronology. There are sudden bursts and interminable labors, loop-like activities and parallel developments.

"Blue Vaults," 2005 is a group of paintings parallel to my other groups. Jan Eliasson at the UN substituted the world map behind his desk for Blue Vault no 4, a painting with blue/white swirls and brick fragments. The title Blue Vault alludes to an interior space. It is also an indication of one aspect of painting, its double character of surface and depth, enclosing wall and opening firmament. Before the advent of Calvinism/Lutheranism in Northern Europe, the vaulted ceilings in churches were painted and adorned. Since then, we have to sit and gaze up at whitewashed vaults. I envision painting these surfaces in such a way that they spread out like a Rocaille or Mandelbroth with asymmetrical patterns and at the same time provide a celestial depth. I see paintings as interiors to live in, to "dwell in" in the Bachelardian sense. This speaks of both a way of looking at painting, and of its function. It is part of the architecture and physical space public and private, and it assumes a viewer interacting with it.

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