

CHRISTIAN
AWE POST-
DIGITAL
ILLUSIONS
WITHOUT
OBJECTS

BY KLAUS SPEIDEL

“That is nature itself. The objects emerge from the canvas and have a truth that deceives the eyes [...]. This magic is utterly incomprehensible. The larger effect emerges from bottom to top through the thick layers of colors, one upon the other. In other cases, there is the nearly indubitable perception of a fine vapor breathed upon the canvas; or, in still other cases, of a light foam sprayed over it [...]. In approaching the canvas more closely, everything blurs, flattens and disappears; but at a distance, everything undergoes genesis, recreating itself once again.”

(Denis Diderot, from the “Salons of 1763”)

Thoroughly anachronistic in its placement at the beginning of this essay, this 1763 citation of Denis Diderot actually refers to the figurative still life painting of French Salon master Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin. Be that as it may, this description comes just about as near to aptly describing Christian Awe’s work as Diderot is chronologically far from it. As with Chardin’s work, Awe’s oeuvre is fascinating not least of all for its inherent tension between painting and picture. Like Chardin, Awe is an artist for whom color, form and stroke retain their own value – while he also is an *illusionist*. Letting color be color while simultaneously evoking illusoriness: This is a fascinating paradox – and not just for the 18th century. From this perspective at the very least, we see that a comparison of Christian Awe and Jackson Pollock is misguided (even while it does suggest itself strongly, and that not without reason). After all, Pollock’s strokes, sprayings and color flows are relatively *immediate* and can thus be deciphered beyond any illusion. Pollock’s *drippings* are traces, clues. A work by Pollock, while *non-representative*, includes *indexical* pointers as to its process of creation, making it readable. Like a crime scene, it points to the events of its own creation where the artist has left clues behind. It becomes not only self-reflective but transforms into a *narrative*, simply because narration is *per definitionem* the representation of actions and events.

Harold Rosenberg, who coined the term “action painting,” formulated it in a particularly pointed way in 1952: “What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event” (H. Rosenberg, “American Action Painters”, 1952). For the action painter, the canvas becomes an “arena” in which (s)he *acts* rather than *depicts*. The artist transforms into a gladiator entering the arena. The work is what is left over at the conclusion of the battle. Strewn with splatters, some of Awe’s work could also awaken such martial associations. But the first impression would here be deceptive. While his canvases also bear clues, allowing us to trace them back to a series of *actions*, it is much more difficult to read them in a directly *indexical* manner. We have the *impression* that we understand how the layers are applied, but in *reality*, the work’s subtle stratification and detaching makes it nearly impossible to read the actions at work in its creation. Often, what appears at first glance to be a spontaneously sprayed application was actually a long process of removal. Awe’s work hence calls into question not only the link of *perceived speed* and *actual speed in the creative process* but also creates further paradoxes in this regard. It is for this reason that Gabriele Uelsberg speaks of a “construction of the informal” in reference to his work (Dr. G. Uelsberg, catalogue “Christian Awe – amour fou”, 2014) and suggests its similarity to Renaissance painting. Awe’s work could in fact be linked to what became an artistic principle *par excellence* after Italian Renaissance theorist Baldassare Castiglione: *sprezzatura*. The *agile simulation of spontaneity*, *sprezzatura*, is the ability to make it appear as if “what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought” (B. Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, 1528) – while in truth, the opposite may (and in probability should) be the case. While the visual difference between Italian Renaissance painters and Awe’s abstract compositions is great, the path both take is similar: It is about *art disguised by art*.

As with the works of the Renaissance, Awe's works approach the viewer, aiming at "astonishment", as the artist himself states. For Awe, immediacy and total readability of the painting process are not values in themselves. The idea of speed – so often vital in abstract expressionism, as it guarantees immediacy – is also problematic with Awe. Since many of his works awaken the impression of great dynamism and speed, many viewers assume a fast, explosive and spontaneous creation process. However, this is at best only partially true. Awe's working methods make room for the random. He likes to be surprised by what emerges in his own works, but the application, drying and partial removal of five to fifteen layers of color is based on a consciously guided plan and often takes many weeks. There are numerous thoroughly deliberated steps in his working process which explain the precision of his compositions, but are not recognized as such on the surface of the work. What looks accidental can here be consciously painted or formed using removal. Many areas of the work that appear added and dripped onto the painting are in reality brought to the surface from deeper layers via subtraction. In this technique-based sense, Awe is closer to the *décollage* artists, like Mimmo Rotella and Jacques Villeglé, than to many of the American *action painters*. The fact is that the working methods of different painters already differed significantly in the heyday of traditional *action painting*; Willem de Kooning's works, for example, evoke the impression of a fast stroke method, while in reality he often worked for months on a work. Awe himself refers to the relative slowness of Jean-Michel Basquiat. I am not sure if one should already speak of a sort of *illusion* (such as that of speed or the visual superficiality of the foreground) in this context, such as would be rejected by modernism (which forms the intellectual backdrop of action painting).

In his critical treatment of illusionism, the American modernism theorist Clement Greenberg levels particular criticism against any attempt to create a feeling of depth with a flat canvas. Whoever follows such an artistic pursuit has, according to Greenberg, misunderstood the medium of painting. Rather, Greenberg values works that emphasize the flatness of the canvas and thus bring out what is *essential* to painting and distinguishes it from sculpture. Initially, it appears that many of Awe's works, particularly his water pictures – which so vividly awaken the impression of three-dimensionality – diverge from Greenberg's ideal in this sense. Even if they only rarely depict objects, they do rather correspond to the art theory that prevailed from Plato to Lessing and defined *illusion* as the goal of art. But in taking a closer look at Greenberg's texts, we realize that he, too, cedes some space to illusion. Sometimes, states Greenberg, "the artist deliberately emphasizes the illusoriness of the illusion which he pretends to create. [...] The result is an optical illusion, not a realistic one, and only emphasizes further the impenetrability of the plane surface." (C. Greenberg, "Towards a newer Laocoon", 1940). Now this seems to be the sort of experience the water pictures convey. Their almost surreal plasticity allows the flatness of the medium to be emphasized all the more. If we come close enough to grasp at the drops, "everything flattens and disappears". It is because we are quite literally taken in that we are not; *the drops are three-dimensional on an utterly smooth surface*.

The genesis of the water pictures brings us closer to Awe's creative process. The scientific aspect of his method comes into focus precisely because they began with an accident. More on this below; we should first note that art, for Awe, had to do with magic, research and skilled craft long before the concept of *artistic research* was in everyone's mouth. It was at six years of age that he observed painter Manuel García Moia creating a largescale artwork on the wall of a house in his home district Berlin-Lichtenberg. Until this very day, Awe has not forgotten how the artist took the six colors available to him to create 30 new colors. More than the content of the artwork itself which Awe today no longer mentions when speaking about this watershed moment, it seems to have been this aspect that fascinated him from the very beginning. Perhaps this early experience may

explain why Awe is not satisfied to simply use preexisting materials, instead constantly searching for new techniques in order to broaden his palette of creative possibilities. *Gravel pictures, pattern pictures, water pictures...* For Awe, stylistic change often comes with the development of a new technique. His water pictures, which he has been creating since 2015, compel water drops – normally conceived as transitory – to linger. But this was not actually what he was looking to achieve. He simply forgot one of his works in the rain. In other words, these pictures would not exist without *serendipity*, the principle that has also played a vital role in non-artistic research successes – a principle we have to thank for post-it notes and the zipper, penicillin and the discovery of X-rays. Horace Walpole, the author who coined the expression, defines *serendipity* as the ability to make discoveries, by accident and sagacity, of things which the explorers were not in quest of. Just as Fleming discovered penicillin when mold killed *Staphylococcus* bacteria on a forgotten plate, Awe developed his water picture technique after the rain ruined his painting drying on the terrace. Once able to overcome his anger at the negligently destroyed work, Awe discovered a potential to create a new type of work. In this new form, art disguises art so much that it appears as nature, as if the artist did not paint, but simply “captured” the traces of a natural process. Phenomenon and depiction of the phenomenon here converge quite literally, with the result being pictures that seem so three-dimensional that we have to touch them because our eyes trick our mind.

The “pure” water pictures from 2015 are characterized by their relative compositional simplicity. Only a few layers are used, and the works often have a clear direction. At times enigmatic, they are much clearer and less explosive than many of the earlier works. They suggest a more contemplative viewer. While they are also made for long observations, they contain less ambivalent forms than much of what the artist had created before. Visually, too, the water pictures of 2015 appear to be a deceleration in his oeuvre. It goes hand in hand with the development and integration of a new medium in his artistic repertoire. In the 2016 works with water elements, layering increases once more and the stylistic elements characteristic to his previous works emerge again. Water has been organically integrated into his formal repertoire, just as gravel and patterns were in previous years.

Inasmuch as the slowness of Awe’s painting process belies the impression of speed his pictures exude, it may explain the complexity of his works. True, many of his pictures possess a great coherency, and their structure can thus be discerned in a relatively short amount of time. A work like *Begegnung*, the mural Awe created in 2016 for Lower Saxony’s Landesvertretung in Berlin (state embassy to the federal level), allows for the extraction of allusions to a principle like *Unity in Diversity*; but still, the works invite the viewer to longer-term observation. This is not only a way to try to indexically reconstruct the narrative they communicate, but also a way to explore the many layers and the different interpretations suggested by their ambivalent forms. In this sense, too, his works are “classical”. As G. E. Lessing, a contemporary of Diderot, explained in 1766 in his paper *Laocoon*, painted works are not there to be “merely looked at, but to be observed, for long periods of time and repeatedly [...]. The more we see, the more we must be able to imagine; the more we imagine, the more we must think we see.” Of course, this citation is also not about abstract art or even about still life but rather about *history painting*, the portrayal of mythological or religious narratives (depicted iconically rather than indexically). However, this citation may be used to refer to Awe as well. After all, he wants to create paintings the viewer never grows tired of looking at, works so complex that the beholder always discovers something new in them, non-figurative representations that families look at together in the evening instead of watching television. In other words, Awe creates what Lessing calls *fruitful moments* that lead us to imagine more than we think we see.

The fascinating thing is that Awe's works virtually challenge us to draw upon traditional thoughts regarding art while still appearing so decidedly contemporary that it is hard to imagine they were created in the 20th century, let alone before. It is hard for our post-digital eyes to free themselves from associations with computer-generated forms. In the real world, something either flows or is patterned; a bucket of paint or a spray can that are filled with patterns instead of color can only be digital. The *use of dripping patterns* only seems possible in a graphics program. Strangely, I still remember my surprise quite clearly upon first seeing wallpaper patterns coming out of a can. The surprise was real even if the can was virtual and the patterns only appeared on my screen. Awe's *real* pattern pictures likewise call forth memories of *digital ones*. Once we engage in this transfer, his work is temporarily digitized, mentally speaking. His real layers start to remind us of the *layers* in Photoshop and the color intensity of his works makes it seem like the works are backlit like our computer screens... .

Even if in some cases we do succeed in adapting our perception to reality, not only *recognizing* the subtractions in his works but also *seeing* them as such, the illusion of dripping patterns abating and any digital associations weakening, we still always find our way back to our primary perception in which patterns drip, explosions stand still and water drops remain round on the surface. Awe's pictures thus become tilted images which, like Jastrow's duck-rabbit, can appear as one thing or the other but in which each construal brings with it a totally different series of visual experiences. "So we interpret it and see it as we *interpret* it" (L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*). Hence, while a better understanding of *before*, *after*, *in front of*, *behind*, *added* and *subtracted* in his paintings can lead to deception, it still represents an enrichment, because in taking another look, everything is always once again the other way around.

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