

RESPONDING TO AN INNER STATE

Kjell Strandqvist, artist

It's dark and rainy as I stand behind the Philadelphia Church on Rörstrandsgatan. "There's a sign on the door that says 'The Factory'", were Martin's directions. Housed in an old sausage factory, the studio consists of a windowless rectangular room, naked fluorescent lamps on a shabby ceiling with a veritable landscape of flaking paint hanging from it. Layers of dried paint render the floor tiles barely discernable. A series of paintings stand leaning against one of the walls. I sit down on the red chair opposite. Martin starts showing what he has accomplished over the past few years. The first painting I see upon entering the room transports me to another world—that of Goya. Apparently I am not the only one who makes that connection. Configurations in a dark earthy colour scale emit a dampened chord. Down towards the right, a diffusely applied yellow surface creates a light phenomenon that grants access to another realm. It is oddly understated, and feels vaguely coordinated, yet conveys a clear sense of a nighttime occurrence in an alien nature, suggesting something obscurely ominous. A murky landscape, an abruptly illuminated spot, a glow that seems to elucidate the image as a whole.

Martin presents one painting at a time, explains his intentions, what has led up to the final conclusion, and what he is trying to avoid. He often uses the word improvisation, and says he sees the paintings as part of a suite—that they correspond with each other as though stemming from the same flow. I have always seen Martin as a spontaneous, intuitive and generous person; an unusually musical artist (he is also a pianist) well acquainted with the idea of improvisation. Starting from a given point or sequence and proceeding in a circumventing movement filled with emotional whims and formal impulses, only to return to the point of departure to pick up the thread once again. The procedure reminds me of jumping on ice floes as a child, not knowing whether they would hold out or not. A considerable risk was involved, but if you managed to cross the finish line with your shoes still dry, the rewards were oddly exhilarating.

As we delve through the paintings, I find myself detecting an affinity to Chinese painting—something about the atmospheric qualities of the colours and the character of some of the shapes. I point this out to Martin, whose initial reaction of surprise soon gives way to an appreciation of the comparison. This process of feeling one's way ahead while painting, with an openness for the path painting can take when momentary impulses are allowed a creative role, affords me certain freedoms as a viewer.

I later come across a painting that feels unusually wet and windy. Before I have a chance to discover it for myself, Martin explains that he had Turner in mind. In the midst of a myriad of short brush strokes, he points out a simple drawing of a sailing ship, something I had not noticed at first. The rapid lines next to a smooth, uniformly painted colour formation possess a blunt straggling quality that conveys the feeling of pouring rain. Through his fluid manner of painting in an area alternating between scale and temperature, the sensation of wind and water is brought to bear.

Previously, a figure or an object would often appear in his paintings as a scale indicator or bearer of a narrative. This is an approach he now claims to want to distance himself from, as he feels that it can, at times, result in excessive sentimentality. Furthermore, he would rather not repeat himself, but get on to other things. As an artist, responding to one's inner state, although necessary, is not always easy. Being attentive to change and interruption involves an element of risk. There is a lot one stands to lose, and the advantages are not always obvious.

Paintings; slabs of paint gliding in and out of each other in rhythmical accumulations form landscapes; the varying density of the paint and absorbing capacity of the glazes result in unexpected combinations. That which at first sight seems chaotic and difficult to grasp is often brought together by a distinct shape. A pregnant, articulated form often turns up at the edge of the canvas, stretches inwards, and like a visual paper clip, binds excessively sweeping gestures to the surface, giving direction to our imagination. Regardless of the appearance of the form, it becomes a focal point that boils down and concentrates the colours causing the painting to coagulate, as it were. Martin Ålund's art is lyrical, intuitive, and seemingly cursorily constructed, but given time, the saturated (veiled) spaces created by these improvised concentrations of poetic, dampened colour point to a surprising precision.

It's still raining as I leave the studio. ♦