

Dankesang eines Genesenen an den Künstler

At first sight, there isn't much about the work of Michael Seidner that you can say with certainty. Apart from the fact that this wise astronaut-monkey-monk-who-came-from-the-next-past makes rather small-scale, abstract, colorful paintings, in which the imagery seems to result mainly from gestures.

So let's try to speak only about what we see. First, we see an otherworldly music of colors: flat, bright, pure and toxic; soft and undefined, layered and complex; colors straight from the far away corners of the rgb-space; hallucinogenic, industrial, prismatic or natural; ancient colors of aggression, aggravation, ecstatic joy or profound melancholy; colors as deep as the soul of a murderer. We see everything. Both the motivation of the artist to choose a particular color and the 'effect' of it on the viewer seem to be rooted in instinct and psyche rather than in consciousness and aesthetics. Be that as it may, the colors in the work of Michael Seidner are of a mind-blowing impact. As said we also see gestures, kinetic actions translated into paint. They dominate the painting to several degrees; they function as motifs, as structuring principles or as patterns that spread out across the canvas. Which is to say, they can be the beginning of the painting, its end, or its very *raison d'être*. And last, we see the paint applied in many ways: we see infinitely soft layers, sketchy strokes, or repetitive actions like scratching, scraping, and carving; all of which could have been done with brushes, sticks, fingers, knives, or pieces of wood; anything ("I did a painting with my sock yesterday...", "Yeah sure...", "Yeah really").

Based on all of this, one could probably interpret Michael Seidner's work as a particular, free-style continuation of traditions such as abstract expressionism, lyrical abstract painting or action painting. One could even argue that this artist updates these traditions with the stress and despair of the eighties and the digital colors of the nineties, with the black lines and free gestures reminiscent

of German expressionism and Graffiti; and so on. And it's true that his paintings present a level of expressive intensity that, to say the least, equals the work of the best artists within all of these traditions.

But essentially, this fellow is on a different track altogether. Among the many, many ideas one can formulate when it comes to the incredible, unique power of Michael Seidner's work, let me focus on a paradox which, once comprehended, in this case by mere *acceptance*, provides us with an entrance to the cave he lives in.

On one hand, nobody really understands Michael Seidner's paintings because, quite simply, they are not 'coded'. A painting is not made on the basis of a personal canon which was developed through the work on the previous ones. Hence: no style, nor even a procedure. No grammar, no signs or any visually readable trace of any philosophical approach towards painting; no general 'attitude with regard to the medium' we're all so good at detecting the postmodern irony of. Now and then you get the impression, trustworthy or not, that you can guess the mood, but it does not seem to be persistent and, since you're totally alone with this kind of paintings, you doubt if that mood was expressed or conveyed to the canvas intentionally. Maybe, the mood is yours and not the painting's. If you really scrutinize the paintings, in one of them you will detect a nervous gesture, almost like a tag, which reminds you of a trace you have seen in another one. But there is next to nothing to conclude from that; it could be some kind of habit. In other words: you get no clues.

And yet, on the other hand, these same paintings have a very deep impact indeed, on all kinds of viewers. They have *consequences*. In order to try to describe what these paintings are doing, I should probably revert to music, and name the most cruelly ecstatic pieces, like that movement in Ludwig van Beethoven's fifteenth string quartet – the title of which I paraphrased for the title of this text because

in the end I am simply thankful that these paintings exist – in which the strings weep and wail and the shrieking snares of the violins cut your damned soul to slices; purifying music that pushes your feelings and thinking to the edge of lunacy and makes you go, as Rilke called it, ‘to the limits of your longing’. Like that kind of music, Michael Seidner’s paintings provoke downright epiphanies, positive crises of deep awareness, erotic and transcendental feelings of total surrender and connection and hope.

Of course this is just a backfiring effect of that neurological network in which the number of connections has reached critical complexity, the network we call our ‘brain’. But who cares: you can see one of Michael Seidner’s paintings and feel a hot, slow shock-wave of mystical recognition and relief and deep understanding and redemption moving through you. You can feel as if you are sinking to the bottom of something. You can feel stimulated to the point of going crazy. And whatever you have felt, the intensity is such that the painting haunts you days and weeks after you have seen it. If I was the only one to experience this, I would gladly accept it as a proof of my own insanity and nothing more, but I know for a fact that lots of people describe similar experiences (this sounds like copy-paste from an obscure Ufo-enthusiast’s magazine). With some paintings, it happens the first time you see them, with others, you think it’s not going to happen but then it does, more powerfully so than with the first ones. They throw you onto yourself, they are an occasion for perfect loneliness, and you slowly or instantly develop a personal relationship with that ‘field’ in front of you. You are caught, staring into the painting like a rat staring into headlights at night.

But why is that, or how is that possible? If they do not use any language, how do these mesmerizing singularities of color and gesture speak? How do they lure individuals, educated in art or not, into experiences so powerful they feel ‘changed’ afterwards?

Part of the answer, I think, could be that the paintings of Michael Seidner are not language but a form of speech; they are articulations. An articulation is the first connection between expression and concept, an interaction in which

both are brought to a conscious level and generate the basics of speech. In other words, this is thinking as painting and painting as thinking. Michael Seidner is *led* by colors and gestures. It takes lots of courage to let go and be led by your own medium¹. It’s also a gift. Every work is another jump into the depths of accomplishment, engagement and energy, expressed and lived through the gestural, nervous, repetitive, obstinate, painstaking, ecstatic and deeply concentrated application of paint on a canvas. No irony or play with references here, but trance and energy. It’s unclear and maybe uninteresting how all of this affects the viewer, but it does, and very powerfully so. If an artist is generous, gifted and devoted enough to unleash and control all that energy and concentration, he is able to disappear into his work, and his paintings will provoke deep empathy. What the viewer thinks and feels, depends on that infinite amount of variables bundled into what we call ‘the moment’.²

However, this assumption has one tricky side. It could lead people to think that when Michael Seidner paints, he just performs a thoughtless automatic act in deep connection with the All, and doesn’t know what he’s doing, and it’s all religious power. I need to correct that. Of course people are free to think about his works what they want, but I don’t want to be responsible for any misunderstandings and get him the wrong kind of fan-club. I do think – besides, he tells me and he’s honest about everything which could well be one of the reasons he needs to paint überhaupt – that while he paints he doesn’t really know what he’s doing, which is normal. But I see that as super-consciousness, an electro-mystical state of awareness.

Because make no mistake, while Michael Seidner’s works are quite ‘out there’, they are incredibly interesting experiments at the same time, albeit risky to the point of being incomprehensible for outsiders; and the Monkeymonk is extremely ambitious too, often setting himself the goal of solving some kind of huge, painterly problem, one that he has organized himself, like a stuntman. Sometimes I see a new painting in Michael’s studio and love it immediately but feel pity for it as well; I think: “Oh baby, how are you going to survive the cruel, real world of white walls and stupid *inspectors*.”

Look at you, what has this bad-ass painter done? This is much too wild an experiment! You look like the schminked mask of the unknown, you are going to frighten the shit out of people!”. And then I look sideways at Michael, and the bastard is smiling and says: ‘Yeah, I know.’

Yeah, he knows. You will understand that Michael Seidner hasn’t been influenced all that much. In fact the only art he has ever talked to me about in terms of influences, is cave art. The first time he was inside a cave and saw cave art for real, was like a shock: ‘this’ was what he was after; in fact it was what he’d been doing already. It gave him perspective, self-confidence and a better understanding of which directions his own work could go in. But as said, apart from that one epiphany in a cave in the Dordogne, introspection is what all his works are the fruits of. Other influences may come, and he might even develop a signature style or approach; we don’t know and he doesn’t either. However, I can safely say that the paintings Michael Seidner has produced so far deserve a place among the very best that I have personally seen in lightyears. If he keeps flirting with the boundaries of painterly expression like this and manages to somehow stay at the safe side of lunacy, we are going to see many more, literally extraordinary paintings. Let’s enter the cave and enjoy them.

Dries Verstraete

Notes

1. Observe a young child making a drawing. When it chooses a color, for example, what does it think? Nothing about that color. Still, it ponders over it, chooses yet another color, and seems to have made some kind of *decision*. This seems to indicate that a child is capable of being led by colors, it is able to let the colors dominate the process, and to feed on them. A number of philosophers have written about this from the perspective, not coincidentally, of language; from Saint Augustine to Wittgenstein.
2. Think of Rothko, Rogier van der Weyden. We accept this moment of encounter with a work of art as real because we experience it. Maybe it all functions through ‘memes’, through some kind of recognition. Based on associations with colors and forms rooted in our human brain, based on a visual imagination that mimics the gestures of the painter, on a kind of empathy, people can feel the energy and concentration the artist has transferred onto the canvas. Like some kind of communication stripped down to essential energy and the visible signs of it. But then even people who organize a Rothko exhibition say they do not know exactly why Rothko’s paintings appeal to all human beings, and say they prefer not to know it.