

The past is never dead.
It is not even past.

Hertha Hanson

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The past never disappears – no, it is not even the past, it is a label that both confuses and enlightens; when it really just makes holes in the surface of the image and reveals all the possible spaces that are hidden there. This statement does not want to define what art is or could be, but at the same time it is indeed about *art in the form of painting*. Here, of course, there is a very solid past to reach back and grasp, and Hertha Hanson allows numerous thin root tendrils to link her with previous styles. But not in any kind of relationship or dependency, such as before and after. No, those two propositions merge into an intensive, throbbing now, where before and after remain completely immaterial. I can, of course, point to French or American informal art in the middle of the last century, but why, when what is important is not the style but the script, the hand, the body, how the relationship of artist-paint-canvas-viewer plays out.

I look at Hertha Hanson's new series of paintings, think about some older ones by her, and try provisionally to approach them.

Painting: layer is placed upon layer; the bottom one is always a precondition for those that follow. The ground – the foundation – might be covered but it still remains. There is no other path than the risk of possible failure, but at the same time every step must of course be a risk. Anyone who really wants to paint must take one step after another and then one more and then stretch themselves a little more. There is no way back.

Hertha Hanson described this situation in pictorial format some years ago. I am thinking about a painting from 2009, which superficially does not at all resemble what I would later associate with her, rather the reverse. It is a famous photograph later depicted as a painting – the leap taken by the East German border guard Conrad Schumann on 15 August 1961 across the barbed wire from the

GDR into Berlin's French sector. A photographer snapped at just the right second: the soldier has taken the leap, stretches out his body to reach across, is prepared to throw away his weapon; there is no way back. His past is the starting point; it remains present in the form of a background grid, an echo that never falls silent. Forever and irrevocable.

Layer is added to layer; the bottom one is always a precondition for those that follow. The gaze looks towards the border areas – in real life, in the act of painting. When she made a painting of the photograph on a large canvas, Hertha Hanson showed us the decisive moment's dual significance. The moment when everything is put at risk.

I also remember that Hanson quickly developed the theme spatially and in a painterly way without the figure. The political significance was passé and had perhaps never really interested her, because the painting's narrative deals with the painting itself. In other pictures by Hanson from the same time, the course of events is captured in flight, diffuse spaces, of varying temperature, where the forms raise the tone, strive outwards, further, but still linger in some kind of beginning.

The ground might be covered but it still lingers in the layers that follow. I have a sense that existence and aesthetics are communicating vessels.

The union of before and after.

An inner map of an important path, which is only staked out by risks, yet more risks, and then that final, decisive risk without any firm ground other than the first one that was laid down. And it is actually only possible to draw that first ground in retrospect – and then the question becomes whether it is even valid. A new drawing must be made. And, as well, this is an unfruitful filling-in of shapes, if the map is carefully drawn in advance, a waste. It would be a bit like having a night orienteering session in full daylight on a broad avenue.

Conrad Schumann's dilemma is also the painter's – to depart from a vague grid: to build momentum, judge the distance, calculate the

risks, estimate the leap, the run-up, be prepared for another risk, and another...

To aim at a point where the artist has not yet arrived. And – to create that point.

The ground can be covered but still linger. One strange detail in the painting of Conrad Schumann, if I now return to it again, is a small black shape by his helmet, as if something broke through the grid, the background, and yet another unknown space was broken open for a second. Perhaps it is the space for the last hesitation, when everything must be ventured.

I sometimes think of Hertha Hanson's painting process as a kind of extended architecture, the act of constructing, but also rare surface awareness.

When she exhibited in the crypt of Lund Cathedral, an intensive dialogue arose between the medieval walls and her abstract color fields. The pictures were suspended on the bricks in more than one way. When I later saw the same works in other venues, the sturdy brickwork strangely lingered as a feeling for the eye to suspend itself on.

In painting, lightness is associated with technical problems or issues. The curious artist always wants to encounter new challenges, find other solutions, because unexpected forms of expression can be discovered. And then the desire must be charged with doubt. From this charge emerges the feeling of lightness.

The wall, the background, the stability or the trellis on which to hang shapes and colors – it is there to be forgotten but it always exists. It should be sensed, but not as effort.

The grid pattern in the painting behind Conrad Schumann's leap is a kind of net, partly to be burst open and partly to make his body feel simultaneously weightless and tense. A form in extreme tension during a short moment of infinite lightness. It is an artistic "problem" – or rather path – to orient oneself along, half by memory and half by feel. The knowledge comes later. And becomes yet another background that will be present.

And, on the eve of every such path, after having ventured forth, to dare that last leap, the artist would no doubt say, together with the

Danish poet Mette Moestrup (from *Omina*, 2016 together with Naja Marie Aidt):

*you can't redo it
you can't redo it*

Now as then: The grid is in place, burst open and light, but the figure is lighter. Nothing of the effort must show. The *background* is still on and off the same architectural construction. Horizontal lines that build areas like beams across which, in front of which, through which, new forms will grow, multiply and rise.

I would like to speak formally about drawing.

The paint is laid on, but it must create space, movement, rhythm on a surface. In addition there is the geometry, the relationships that the various forms and painted layers have with each other. In the vertical formats with cool coloration, preferably blue in hues that lift the movement, I experience the play of forms as a unit within which the painting takes over with an intense conversation between the various layers and forms, interspaces, empty spaces and surface. I notice how this functions if I compare it with the corresponding horizontal format. There the broad streams of color move rhythmically across the canvas as if there were no boundary to the right or left. It is as if another spatiality is flowing out into our own dimension. When similar movements appear in a vertical format, strange bodies of color are created – almost vegetative but slowly, persistently growing upwards, striving up out of the format, but the surging quality is missing, although not the freedom. They usually know their boundary.

**Two kinds of lightness, one climbing, growing
one flowing, unrestrained.**

A sense of rising lightness versus the relentless weight of river rapids. But both appear in the paintings as if they did not feel the least effort. A quick inspection of the play of forms, the interweaving, the voices and contrapuntal voices reveals the long work, the effort to

erase the traces of effort. One single fault in the proportions, a failed brush stroke, and everything would feel heavy and forced.

**The ground, in this case the drawing,
lives in the choice of path by the paint and the brush.**

Proportions, I just wrote – but in non-figurative painting? Indeed, the colors and layers relate to each other, carry, support, question, complicate, facilitate – and this happens in intersections, interstices, encounters.

Drawing is not spontaneity; it is control, if only over previously unknown areas. The supervision of the eye, not the hand.

Let me pause at two smaller, horizontal paintings, both with a red rectangle painted on them – the one down at the left and the other shifted more towards the center. Similar shapes exist in other paintings. A kind of stop – a demarcation from the rest of the painting's movement and brushwork.

Here the image area is marked, but perhaps so too is *my boundary to the painting's space*. Rather as if I were looking into a world much larger than that permitted by the picture format. It passes by, manifold, where many planes and spaces meet, unite and diverge.

I think that Hertha Hanson starts with a tone or color scheme that she wants to try out. I linger at the two blue paintings with their red rectangles. Here, both rhythm and tone are obvious. Blue and white against a dark background with a kind of red pause sign. It is exciting to follow the interwoven swathes of color and note how they interact, also with the dark underpainting. It is possible to enter between the muted blue bands, which gleam a little extra through the darkness they appear to be emerging from. A bit like peering into a rushing stream and sensing the bottom. But such simple nature metaphors do not suffice for Hertha Hanson's paintings. It is the painting process that governs and challenges. She has seen the darkness and not been satisfied. In the one painting there is more white, true, but most of all she has painted a thin vertical aperture on the right. At once the light bursts in from behind and lights up the scene, at the same time as yet another space is opened or suspected. Another space, a light from behind, almost blinding in the midst of the blue.

**The light that holds together everything that exists,
writes Lars Norén in his book of poems *Stoft*, 2016.**

And this also applies to things that are apparently sundered, where the light is what joins them together, creating void, space and corporeality in the colors; it is part of the transformation from pigment to presence. A delicate movement back and forth between absence, emptiness, loss and almost intimate presence. The light streams through all of this. Seek in each form and find it.

The ground can be covered but still be sensed; Hertha Hanson's paintings are full of such scarcely discernible spaces. They demand time. Not to be felt – they are present as an irresistible magnetic force – but patience is necessary to let our gaze sweep through them. Sources to be discovered. Energies.

Densification is important.

Broad swathes move around each other. Thinner, more multilayered; an eager movement of grey, orange, yellow, which billows across a scarcely discernible background. The accord is definite despite delicate movements. But then Hanson again puts a stop to it with a severe rectangle, this time in black, where the marks of the trowel or palette knife are still visible. As if she wants to say: this is painting! The black color also becomes a brake. As if the painting, the colors, the drawing's delicate arabesque-like movements, had seduced her, led her astray and she suddenly realized enough was enough. And so she put a stop to it.

Every painting bears in different ways traces of the process – the act of painting, creating – which is not planned in any way other than that she has chosen a scale, a format, colors, tone, and then ventured into the as-yet unknown. Her painting process is not to know.

Just as it must be for the artist herself, as a viewer I note that it is not possible to arrive at a single focal point or moment when the picture totally opens itself up. On the contrary, each position reached – be it the dark ground or the screamingly white swathe that lies like a viewing bridge across the other colors' wild forward surging – each position the gaze arrives at gives birth to new entrances, opens

other spaces, reveals unseen movements. It is constantly to get lost, never to know, but to trust that my eyes steer me without interruption. Just as they steered Hertha Hanson's hand.

Painting is physical; it is time.

The bodily aspect is so self-evident that it scarcely needs to be emphasized. The eye willingly follows the broad swathes of color that are layered on top of each other, or the lines that are crossed. It is easy to feel the hand, to see how she stretches out, moves in front of the painting; the colors' landscape is also a kind of choreography. A question of balance, where one movement is set against another, eagerness against calm and so on. In the same way, each color swathe is a trace of time. They can be felt in their own body. The paintings invite us to stand fairly close and experience all these complicated movements in order to soon discover how time is stored and compressed so as to disappear into an ever-more complicated spatiality. The body, again, and now based on the old painting from 2009.

Conrad Schumann's leap describes two things: the movement and the barbed wire, which is not visible. Via the body language alone, Hertha Hanson depicts the dangerous obstacle that is the prerequisite for the event itself. And why should she point this out to us? If it is not felt in our gaze and body, then she has not succeeded well enough in the attempt to use color and form to depict an event. The task of the invisible is to make visible.

Accordingly, the brush and the palette knife are not only tools but also an extension of the body. Here the artist stretches outside herself – indeed, ultimately and by extension she goes beyond herself. Then the painting can be experienced as a separate body, an event in its own right. In this way the paintings are a kind of writing prior to the text.

Having reached this point, I think of the entire series of new paintings. Their impasto textures describe movements towards boundaries – of the space, of freedom – or maybe of both of them together. With their variations on the qualities of the line in the paint, each defines a space while simultaneously creating a body from the same space. The differences between the paintings' personalities are considerable. Red that austere holds itself together bit by bit with accumulated

outwardly focused force. The blue that is more flowing, open, gleaming, which wants to insist on a space that also exists outside the established boundaries. Or the shimmering, almost dreamlike images that are most reminiscent of bodies of wind, movements in the air. Grey and yellow almost as a memory, an after-image. If the movements of all these bodies of color create totally different gestures – coherent, extroverted etc. – then the details almost flicker even more. The surfaces billow in various fluctuations; the temperature of the colors – also within the same coloration – shifts so that small movements arise. Together they give birth to a fine-rayed light, which also sneaks in behind the larger impasto textures.

To express something, but not to know what it is before she has done so. The surprise when the work is finished. Hertha Hanson's paintings exist in themselves as finished works but they are also charged with the path taken to get there – the time it has taken and the new discoveries. She has tested boundaries and her own limits, but I envisage that as the work progressed she felt in a strange way helped by “someone” – an unknown, unexpected energy that manifested itself with new possibilities, and that has made the artist surpass herself.

It is about an unfettered gaze that is prepared to have a go. An assertion that can also be applied to other fields. But here it is about painting.

Thomas Millroth



191, 80×80 cm



#193, 180×150 cm



#201, 180×150 cm



203, 180×150 cm



204, 200×150 cm



213, 180×150 cm



214, 180×150 cm



215, 200×150 cm

Hertha Hanson. Born 1980. Lives and works in Karlstad, Sweden. Studied at Malmö Art Academy, Lund University. Has exhibited at such venues as Lunds konsthall, Malmö Art Museum, Kristinehamn Art Museum, Bror Hjorths Hus in Uppsala and Moderna Museet Malmö.

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