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# PERSONAL STRUCTURES SYMPOSIUM LUDWIG MUSEUM

ENGLISH      DEUTSCH

GLOBALARTAFFAIRS PUBLISHING

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## About My Work

Thomas Pihl



There is one very important experience I had as an artist, and that was moving from Norway to New York 11 years ago for studies in visual arts. One of the things that had an enormous impact on me was to come to a city and a visual culture, which was immensely embedded in aesthetics. If you live in Manhattan, you will experience that not one surface is untouched or unaltered by hand, or left un-manipulated in some way. I thought this was a very interesting source to work with and I immediately dived into that visual culture of surfaces. I looked at and studied all kind of products. I looked through magazines. I went to 99 cent stores and observed the visual vocabulary of commodities. I was fascinated by the news industry and its presentation strategies. And so on. I felt that it was interesting and a dilemma—that so many people are used to, use, and are surrounded by aesthetics. I found it interesting and troubling that the western kind of beauty—our kind of beauty—has been changed to perfection with the development of the commodity culture. Perfection has become the ultimate value system of the late capitalist society.

I started to work with acrylics because I thought that specific medium sufficiently represented and mirrored the aesthetic and synthetic aspects of that culture. It is a very malleable material and can be manipulated tremendously. In the beginning my work was very much like the surfaces I was drawn to. The paintings were like

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imprints. I made for instance molds of tiles and other surface structures—and cast paint in them. I studied and observed the material from many different perspectives. At that time my work provided a lot of surface information. The audience often received the work as it was intended, and talked about the commodities and products it was inspired by: The work looked like shower curtains, tiles and other kind of surface structures.

Later I became interested in beginning a process of "throwing out" and removing the information and visual references from the paintings. I started a reduction process where I shoved this referential information towards the edges of the paintings, and found that the visual impact became much stronger. I also was interested in how "conventional language" was then eliminated from the work. It made it more difficult to read and talk about. I thought that was a very interesting and qualitative aspect of how the work was received. I called the project "Preattention" because I was interested in how strong an aesthetic impact may hit—even if it is subtle and barely visible and therefore barely "articulate-able".

We are constantly manipulated in our culture—and specifically in the American culture. The level of manipulation we are exposed to, how all the images we encounter every day have this under-layer of meaning that we don't immediately see. That's why I also find it very important to address this theme. To give you just one little example: World leaders like George Bush and Tony Blair have made this subtle vocabulary change: The words Global Warming have been changed to Climate Changes. This is an efficient way of bringing aesthetically two words or phrases into a more comfortable area. That kind of charged aestheticization of a real phenomenon is very interesting. This is a slight manipulation that you don't immediately recognize, but it is there and it has an impact on your reception and what you feel.

I want to close with a few important formal characteristics in "prearticulation": These are color and touch. How desirable can a surface become? I wanted to establish contact with the viewer through the seduction of the surfaces, but let him or her alone with their own images or viewpoint. The impact of beauty, the seduction and the manipulative aspects are interesting, and I find that it works as intended. People really want to touch my work. It is the under-layer of the aesthetic impact—that we live with constantly—that is one of the main sources for this project

*Question: Why do you use those "non-colors"?*

Pihl: It was a long process before I arrived at the way the "prearticulation" looks today. I became interested in "throwing out" the naming of the visual vocabulary I am working with. I tried to "threaten" the color. If I worked with one color, I, for instance, threw in the opposite (complementary) color to make it difficult to name. All the aesthetics we are living with is very often connected to reading. The surface of a car is layered with complicated aesthetics. We think immediately: this is a car. We read a car as a car, a thing to get around in, but there is a lot of aesthetics in a car that have an (tremendous sensory) impact. These are aesthetic choices that make you want it, or make you feel safe, or make you feel rich and successful, or in charge etc. etc., and we are not conscious about it. When I worked with the color schemes in my work I wanted to throw out that reading of the various colors, to propel the viewer to locate subtle sensory reactions in themselves. For a long time the work was in a non-color system. Later I worked with colors that are more "readable", and have more associations. One could call this a "pink" painting. This might bring us to Florida, Barbie or feminist issues etc. etc., and we are suddenly in an area where we start to make more associations. And in this other painting, maybe we don't. In a work like this I consciously tried to "threaten" the naming of the color, so you can't say it is red or blue or pink, and we just end up with a mood that hard to define.

*Q: From what you say I get the impression you are an enemy of aesthetics, beautiful aesthetics and then I look at your work and I say, "oh, my God, they are beautiful." Are you a victim, so to speak, of your own work?*

P: No, I think beauty is a metaphor for what is human. Beauty is a deep human need that I am absolutely a supporter of. What is beautiful is a concept that is totally co-opted and altered by our culture to produce products. And I think that is the opposite, it is very similar but totally opposite, and something I am not interested in reproducing. It is something that's bombards us with visual information that we do not necessarily need in a deeper sense

*Q: There is a lot of information in your work as well. You bombard us with information yourself.*

P: No, to call these paintings bombardments is a grave over-statement. The intention is to withdraw the influence to such a degree that you can stand there equally as a viewer. I date the work, not when it is finished in my studio, but when it is shown for the first time. That means, the first time the viewer is present. It is important for me to include the viewer. I have tried to withdraw myself and my viewpoint as much as possible.

*Q: You are still very present in your work so it is about communication.*

P: Yes it is about communication but it is not dictation. It is not a language I am telling you—or a sentence—I think these paintings listen as much as they speak. I found it fascinating how strong aesthetics work the more I emptied out information. The word manipulation is very negatively loaded, but it is actually a neutral word: Visual impacts—towards us—good or bad. The paintings may deliver consciousness in that field.

*Q: Are your works different colors because you want to communicate different issues?*

P: It's a process of change. I wanted to see if other associations and discourses would come up if I worked with the colors differently.

*Q: That's the communication between you and your own work. You don't include me as a spectator.*

P: No, and I leave you alone. If you have a pink color, there is another impact than with whites or black.

*Q: By whom? By you or by the spectator? Or by everybody?*

P: By everybody, but what it is, I am not telling you. What you should or will think or feel when you are seeing the paintings I will not tell you.

*Q: Do you care about what I think?*

P: Yes, if you come up to me and talk to me. If there are settings like this, to share thoughts. Yeah, I am very interested in how you receive the work. And it always comes up an array of associations. You never get the same, but sometimes it seems that I hit a button and a "tunnel phenomenon" occurs. Then more people talk about the same themes.

*Q: Do you think you have succeeded in making your personality—your self—just barely present in your work, or it is obviously this guy standing there? I see his work—oh my God—that is the same thing. So soft, feminine, so tender. It must be the guy who makes those works. He is not the guy who made those [pointing at the works by Paul Ragueneis]. He is different.*

P: Of course, it is a personal process and of course my personality will sink into the work.

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