

NO BRAVE STROKES - on Per Formo's paintings

To get within range of Per Formo's enterprise one should put aside expectations of emotion, pathos, sensuality and seduction in the material. One should also put aside semiosis and the material haptic strategy and rather look for the purely syntactical approach, and then, eventually, look further. His references are diverse, but decidedly modern. He places himself in a not definable spot in the space between Piet Mondrian and Frank Stella, between Agnes Martin and Peter Halley. He is also prone to refer to composers like Webern, Xenakis and Nancarrow.

The production of the individual painting is characterized by the painterly act as a pure and effective instrumental action where the picture is clearly defined by a plan preceding the execution. It is a result oriented painting which is to meet the pictorial conception. The stochastic painting where process and material are open during the fabrication has no place here. Formo speaks of distance and involvement. This may appear to define a contradiction, but on closer scrutiny in front of the painting, one sees that this is a precise description of a double phenomenon. He talks of relating to the material in a non-traumatic way.

He does not give room for time as a presence in the material of the painting. The surfaces and forms have been effectively painted. They are precisely effective when it comes to covering the surface. But then, if one looks more closely, time is present, a kind of highly necessary time because these are manually brush-painted planes. They are, however, in the service of the order of the image; they have no intrinsic value. The composition is modular and repetitive. The colour is primarily fulfilling as differentiation, as a contrast medium. Secondly, it is immanence. His colours may be poisonous, acid, dry, cultivated or boring, but always optically effective and consistent. They are rarely in tune or amiable.

The paintings may be difficult to look at. This is about effectively structuring a material in such a manner as to avoid a fulfilment of some kind; keeping the space open for something else, the not fulfilled. There is a consequent and permanent dodging or withdrawal in his art. Herein lies a modern opening. There is no reconciliation, no charm or facile flirtation. No "brave strokes". No ingratiating surface. No lingering time. There is little to hold on to, no banister other than the serial and permuting, which is, after all, a kind of contradiction. Formo says that he chooses to eliminate the process. He does not want any dogma. At the same time, he says that there are no places to go, that, to some extent, coercion is present in the situation, historically speaking. Under these circumstances, rather than pointing out of this situation, he chooses to establish a sort of agonized modern no when it comes to relating to painting. Yet it is also a kind of lightness of pain.

There is something about exposing oneself to his paintings that directly points to the labour involved in constituting oneself as a subject. His pictures are not forthcoming, but they have a very efficient presence. They have no obvious message, but by closer scrutiny one finds that they are clear historical documents. They are not new, but in a way one has never seen the familiar so strange. They have no legitimacy that they carry in front of themselves, and yet they are orthodox paintings through and through. They are not beautiful to behold, perhaps rather the opposite. The possible harmonized beauty is deliberately forfeited, squandered. It is in the ambivalent or multivalent space that they are attractive. Thus one may work one's way to one's self in the presence of these objects.

I suppose that the unrest I find in the presence of Per Formo's paintings is a component pertaining to some kind of work of the spirit. It may become a question of a sort of Gnostic painting. Painting as knowledge, as pure knowledge – about itself – without imploding as an idea, without indulging in the material of painting.

From this point, I see conditions for starting to question Per Formo's paintings.

Stein Rønning, July 1995

Translated by Birgit Kvamme Lundheim