

Experiencing the Self within the Processual—Jan Holthoff in a Talk with Emmanuel Mir

Emmanuel Mir

To start with, I am keen to learn more about the course of your artistic development to date—about how you arrived at where you are today.

Jan Holthoff

The basic structure of human beings can be conceived of in terms of its subject-object constitution. We humans are able to confront ourselves and our environments with senses of self that experience and reflect. It is within this sense that both our capacity toward epiphany and our painful awareness of mortality and limitation reside. That is why we search, whether through spiritual devotion to the divine, through hedonistic stupefaction or simply the pragmatism of mastering the everyday, for solutions.

I have been greatly fascinated by the notion of the sublime as formulated by Immanuel Kant and the intellectual current of the Romantic period as revealed in the works of Caspar David Friedrich and William Turner, for example, and still resonating in the work of Joseph Beuys. The romantic stance of yearning, so well epitomised by Friedrich's nudes from behind, is an expression of the search for meaning among a spiritually charged conception of nature—the search for a pantheistic extension of self, and one which, alas, remains unfulfilled. With Beuys, on the other hand, things are different. With him, it is action—the process—that plays, along with the energetic presence of the material, the greatest role. Under the influence of the artists Peter Doig and Herbert Brandl at the *Kunstakademie* [Academy of Fine Arts] in Düsseldorf, it seemed to me again possible to address the theme of landscape, whereby my own approach remained more related to subjective experience than was the case with Doig or Brandl. My half-abstract landscapes testified to a certain movement toward nature and its psychedelic-mythical dimensions, without cultivating any distanced rupture in the relationship between humans and nature—but also without proclaiming any return to nature or search for fulfilment in the idyllic harmony of Arcadia.

What do you mean by that more explicitly?

I began by painting half-abstract landscapes. I had done a lot of travelling and had been to India, Israel, the West Coast of the USA, Hawaii and Canada collecting huge amounts of photographic material, colour studies and sketches. I was intent upon experiencing the sublime in nature and aimed to bring that experience into my work at a later time back in the studio. Already, the postulate for a subjective landscape painting was contained therein in two separate regards.

On the one hand, my paintings had begun to reject working with secondary realities. More particularly, neither the flood of media and Internet images nor the pictorial world of art history were to serve as points of departure for the pictorial conception but, instead, the subjectively experienced. That is why there are no canoes from the film *Friday the 13th* to be found in my paintings—no icebergs from a Caspar David Friedrich painting nor any scenes from an Andrej Tarkovskij film, even though I greatly admire him as a filmmaker.

On the other hand, my half-abstract landscapes also constitute spaces that can be subjectively experienced by the beholder. In formulating realistic landscape fragments or fragmented representations of figures in landscapes, I was seizing upon the beholders' stocks of recollection to pull their gazes into the pictorial space. I employed the motif to lure them into the border zone, in which it is no longer clear as to whether a given structure is changing

into the silhouette of a mountain, for example; whether a given plane has become the sky, depicts a lake or simply represents itself—is self-referential, as it were. The painting begins to oscillate within the experience and finally raises more questions than it answers. The process of seeing, in itself, is thus brought into focus, and the construction of reality becomes experienceable.

What does that look like in more concrete terms?

I have done washes on canvases while they were still drying so that the colours drip downward to form fractal-like capillaries, for example. Self-similar structures emerge, as can also be observed in nature—in the branching off of treetops, for instance, or the flashes of light created by a bolt of lightning in a stormy sky. I allowed the acrylic paint to coalesce here and there in watery streams and produce perpetually changing abstract spaces, or applied and partly removed multiple layers of paint to reveal raw textures recalling nature and the effects of erosion or producing watercolour-like, shimmering spaces.

The painterly process thus emerging reacted, in turn, to all of this; gestures were accentuated, or realistic motifal fragments were formulated as cadences. The landscape—a mountain or a house in nature—grew up from out of the process and solidified itself here and there in particular places. In the course of working out the motifs in this manner, the act of painting actually constituted a dialogue with the abstract backgrounds. I either inserted a given motif harmoniously here, or struggled with the grounds there, often counteracting them altogether or wresting from them the realistic motif. Construction and deconstruction were two determinant compositional principles that had attracted my attention.

The pictures could be read in two different directions—as either emerging from abstraction or becoming lost in it. The half-abstract landscapes thus engendered could not simply be consumed, so to speak. From close up, one saw the fine details of the texture, whereas backing away from the painting revealed landscape spaces. Both perspectives were, together with the process of each painting's 'enactment' through the beholder, important elements that interested me greatly.

You have also dealt extensively with philosophy and the human sciences in general. You published an interdisciplinary thesis, for example. What kind of influence has this had on your work?

The constructivism of Paul Watzlawick and the revelations of quantum physics arrived at by a certain Werner Heisenberg have played a big role for me. I have also concerned myself with depth psychology, of which the theories of Carl Gustav Jung are archetypal—that was the kind of intellectual horizon I had been exploring. In my painting, things are always about constituting reality. Heisenberg, for example, says that the experienced reality of the inner shells of atoms is predetermined by the conditions to the mode of generation through which we bring about that same reality. The questions posed by the beholder designate the qualities of the generated reality. Indeed, that is what characterises the role of the beholder. An electron, for instance, can be manifested as either a particle or a wave, depending upon the type of inquiry. Likewise, our senses, the psyche and the concept-generative intellect are all responsible for producing the human sense of reality. It is thus, for example, that, in the case of synesthesia, sounds can be seen. Experiments conducted with people suffering from brain damage have shown that they might be able to distinguish colours according to the degree of tinting, for example, though they remained unable to allocate various hues of red to the category *red*, as that category was no longer available, as it were. So too is language, the

world of terminology, no description of the world, according to Wilhelm von Humboldt, but rather its determination. That is why there are indigenous tribes, for example, that classify the world in categories not of gender but of animate and inanimate, wherein natural phenomena clearly understood by us as inanimate are experienced as living beings.

I am no radical constructivist, however, but instead espouse a more moderate constructivistic approach. I believe in a realness that is, in essence, empty but possesses the potency to produce reality. Nonetheless, I do not believe that this reality must necessarily be an illusion. More readily, I believe in engendered reality-complexes that, in accordance with and relative to their conditions for existence (or within their own conditionality), are stabile. That is why there are patterns, within conditionality, of regularity and recognisability, as manifested, for example, in the intersubjective experiences of humans. These complexes are relative in that they can only be characterised through their specific conditions and would, in other contextualities, lose their validity. This is why the rules of quantum physics exist only alongside those of Newtonian mechanics and there is no single comprehensive, all-encompassing theory; it is how the world view of Amazonian tribes exists alongside our own and how the perception of an animal can coexist alongside that of a human. It also explains how the art of indigenous Australians exists alongside the abstract art of the Western world without the possibility of any real case ever being construed for any kind of comparability. Indeed, we ought to be more aware of these kind of thoughts, as they would bring more tolerance into our lives and might keep us from continually adopting the missionary position, as it were.

Are you a painting philosopher or a philosophising painter?

Painting is a kind of human science conducted with its own set of means. The human sciences have linguistic capacities for examining notions such as truth or reality; painting is another method of examination. Experiencing the creative process has, alongside my own awareness of self as an active subject, become increasingly more important in my painting. Whereas the pictorial idea was still bound to the motif in my first block of works *Broken Vistas*, any remaining fragments of realistic landscape have now given way, in my newer works *Frozen Gestures*, to a purely gestural painting, however subliminally visible intimations of landscape might still be at times.

When I approach the canvas, there is no landscape photo, no sketch nor colour study. I apply the paint-drenched brush to the canvas to formulate the first postulation. This first assertion emerges altogether irrationally, without adherence to any rules whatsoever. That is how I begin to take possession of the white space of the canvas. As with a graffiti artist, this moment constitutes an attestation to *being-there*, an aroused affirmation of self, formulated as a coloured trace upon the canvas. From there, I begin to explore the empty white plane, my eye following the strokes of the brush. The accumulating clusters of gestural formulations and their emerging compositional referentialities begin to consolidate themselves from the simply possible into the actually real, until the painting finally begins to unfold its own immanent logic—one by which the subsequent strokes would seem imperative, thus guiding the act of painting to its end. The pictorial space has become a laboratory in which I can playfully explore each painting, sounding out the painterly possibilities on each new canvas. The subconscious becomes selflessly unified with the active subject in the abandon of the painterly process.

Your assertions concerning the significance of the subject and the search for uninhibited awareness (of nature among other things) remind me of Romantic notions. In its gestural clarity and profound boldness, your painting bears Romantic traits.

The *Broken Vistas* that comprised my first block of work are surely bound to the Romantic stance of yearning and a pictorial language that aspires toward the mythical. The active subject—yearning for extension, in search of travel and new experience, and never recoiling at confrontation with the sublime qualities of exterior nature or the internal nature of the subconscious—characterises the Romantic spirit as revealed, for example, in one of Caspar David Friedrich's nudes from behind, or a seascape of Turner's. This stance expressed itself in my motifs as well as in the painterly process, which, in the wet on wet application and the washes, aimed at integrating structures of nature.

As an intellectual current, however, the Romantic is ambivalent and, when viewed as an epoch, clearly oriented toward history and a national cultural identity. It is thus that the German fortress and the thousand-year-old oak appear in the work of a certain Carl Friedrich Lessing, for example. I have always rejected these national dimensions, to whatever regard I acknowledge the fact that the collective subconscious is preformed, as it were, by cultural coherencies.

The new paintings in my current series *Frozen Gestures* testify to an overcoming of this Romantic intellectual stance. The departure from nature as a motif and experienceable space goes hand in hand with my increased attention toward the active subject, who is able to generate, from autonomous postulations and colour-zones, sensually experienceable colour-spaces. Even the departure from the horizontal landscape format of the *Broken Vistas* in favour of the upright format traditionally allocated to portraiture reflects this movement toward the subject.

The abstract *Frozen Gestures* are more akin to traces left by the subject acting within the process—a kind of psychogram of the underlying state of stirred arousal integral to that process. What is involved is not simply a depiction of any momentary physical sensibilities but rather an impression taken of a certain harmonious state of the spirit. These impressions presented in the upright format, then, bear resemblances to self-portraiture. In this way, the abstract paintings are imbued with a human quality, and represent a turning toward, and not away from, human life.

At the same time, the paintings are not entirely free of landscape allusions. From recollection, the landscape makes its way into consciousness, at times more, at times less explicitly, but always only in 'frozen gestures' as the traces of impressions, while abstaining from the mythical dimensions of the *Broken Vistas*. What was begun in the *Broken Vistas* still resonates subliminally in the *Frozen Gestures*, however: the oscillation of the gesture between self-referentiality and recollected landscape impressions.

Let us return to the topic of your extended travels. I find it hard to imagine that the landscape motifs you captured in photos and sketches comprised the sole aim or substance of these sojourns abroad. What other impulses played an important role in the development of your artistic personality?

My artistic stance has developed over time, and my studies at the *Staatlichen Kunstakademie* [State Academy of Fine Arts] in Düsseldorf, as well as my two-year stay in Brooklyn played a meaningful formative role.

Thankfully, the contemporary art world no longer knows only *isms*. It is more of an agglomeration, comprised of a multitude of contrary artistic positions that stem from disparate currents from throughout the history of art and represent the most varied of intellectual

stances. The *Kunstakademie* is an intellectual space in which these varied currents are made accessible to students through the presence of prominent teachers. Through critical examination of a teacher's work, students are trained to develop their own artistic criteria. As part of this process, they write their own academic biographies. It was in this manner that I studied under Gerhard Merz, Helmut Federle and Herbert Brandl. Each station along the way has been greatly important for me, and each has left its traces. Whereas the main focus with Gerhard Merz was on perpetual scrutiny of one's own intellectual and spiritual equity, one's own artistic strategy and the development of artistic precision, questions concerning the energetic-psychological dimensions and the sensitivity of a painting as manifested by characteristic style and aesthetic decisions were at the forefront with Helmut Federle. With Herbert Brandl, it was the shared inclination toward abstraction and landscape that I found particularly beckoning; the prime characteristics of his work, such as speed and a spontaneous painterly style, would not manifest themselves in my painting until later, when I began working on the *Frozen Gestures* during my stay in New York.

In Brooklyn, I encountered a more non-academic mode of painting, which I experienced as exceedingly free, direct, honest and authentic. Nobody is interested in where or even if you have studied. Whether conceptual sculptor, photographer or graffiti artist, everyone is doing something, and there is a great deal of animated exchange about it all, as well as the feeling of belonging to a community—especially in Bushwick, where I had my studio. Art is thriving in urban spaces and cultivating them in ways I have not witnessed in Europe. In these surroundings, I was able, through my exchange with the Bushwick scene and engagement with Abstract Expressionism (which is much more present there than in Europe), to re-evaluate my painting and finally develop the aesthetic concept of the *Frozen Gestures*. Even the immediate surroundings of my studio, located in an area comprised of warehouses and lofts deluged in graffiti, brought on a feeling of subversively charged energy and heightened the senses when it came to speed and the spontaneity of the brush—qualities that I have greatly admired in the spray-paintings of Katharina Grosse and the drawings of Cy Twombly, for example.

It was particularly the work of Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Joan Mitchell, however, that I really rediscovered during this period. The engagement with the physicality of Pollock's paintings, and the directness of the gestural expressive stroke with de Kooning and Mitchell impressed me greatly when involving myself with their works anew. The paintings of de Kooning and Mitchell know no clearly contoured objects whatsoever. The painterly process begins not with any aim toward representation but with the processual search, which finally appropriates the pictorial space and, through the creative act, transforms it into an agglomeration of free gestures that would appear to strive toward transcending the pictorial borders of the frames. The paintings are akin to fabrics woven of subconsciously manifested instances and consciously controlled decisions.

Perhaps we should conclude, then, by staying with the relationship between biography and painting. Does painting mean to you a kind of existential search—one that not only concerns the reality of the picture but also that of the painting subject?

A successful painting unfolds a kind of self-conception; it constitutes a balance between what is subconsciously engendered through a process in the form of solidified traces and the manifestations of emerging controlled action—a balance wherein the self is present and yet abandons itself to the process and its dynamic altogether. Essential to this is speed, which keeps the retreating and resiliently reflective sense of reason at bay. This does not mean a loss of control, however, nor any loss of concentration. The painterly act can thus entail a

transcendence of the intellect while unfolding its self-referential qualities without ever losing sight of the relationship to the painter's subconscious store of recollection.

Both the painting and the actively painting subject are exposed, through the process, to the creative engenderment of the new as well as to the recollections and bounds of time concurrently. My *Frozen Gestures* are neither portrayals of any pure present nor transcendent like the works of Ad Reinhardt or Agnes Martins, for example. The paintings each constitute spiritual dimensions and bodily presence simultaneously, captured in both the act of emergence and a state of existence within the frozen formulations after the paint has dried. The artistic act thus unfolds an existential dimension in that there is no escape for the self from itself but rather the continuous fact of its presence at every instance. The dramaturgy of the picture is elevated to an assertion of *being-there* on the part of the subject, who, still evident in traces, has taken possession of the canvas to put themselves to the test time and again, and who, through appropriating the painterly process as an identity, has submitted to the forces and facts of expansion and finitude. The approach to the world entailed therein localises the artistic act in the here and now.