What Do Matts Leiderstam's Panels Do?

From: PANELS, a publication published on the occasion of the exhibition with the same name at Wilfried Lentz Rotterdam from 18 November 2017 to 21 January 2018.

'Abstract' is both a verb and a noun, proclaims Alfred H. Barr in his text on abstract art in the catalogue for the seminal exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1936. The ambiguity that this entails has been a fellow traveller of abstraction ever since its invention as an aesthetic category at the turn of the last century. Always contradictory and yet self-reflexive, abstraction remains urgent, as Matts Leiderstam's recent series of paintings testify to. As of late, the artist's decades-long insistence on the importance of ways of seeing has been interwoven with abstract art's care for articulation.

All of Leiderstam's recent works are painted on poplar panels, with oil and acrylic. They are on the small side, ranging from sizes similar to those of portable devices like laptop computers and iPads. Some of them have been made as solitary paintings; others come in pairs. Several of them can be shown either in landscape format or in portrait format. As they are often displayed sitting on narrow shelves, they can be handled like objects—easy to turn around and re-arrange in various ways. Although the paintings are somewhat pedantic, ever so slight traces of the labour of the hand can be found on the smooth surface.

The paintings are abstract. The kind of geometric abstraction that they employ is partly related to classical abstraction: i.e. stripping the observable world of details; condensing the picture plane into large coherent shapes, linear and ordered. Sometimes there are grids, reminiscent of the kind of pictorial code which for centuries was used to transfer motifs from one surface to another, taught at Nordic art schools up until the 1980s. It is noteworthy that every painting has a frame, either painted or shaped by leaving the wood bare, and that the colours are subdued. In this way, structural and compositional problems seem to be at the fore, and impersonality and dispassion too, like in the work of Frank Stella.

Even though Paul Gauguin argued that all art involves abstraction, it is clear that since the 19th century there have been different waves of the self-conscious use of abstraction as an intellectual and formal technique. The most recent one, since the 1990s, emphasises social-performative abstraction and thematic approaches to economic abstraction, as expressed in capitalist realism, in addition to formal abstraction. The three strands share an engagement with the politics of representation, or the question of 'how': the ways in which something is formally articulated. In this sense, the language itself is an important part of the message, although not all of it.

Leiderstam's series of new paintings, entitled *Panels*, belongs to this recent wave of abstraction. Like earlier examples of abstraction, they are about deep analysis of the basic principles of the status of the image. In Leiderstam's case, it is a nexus where the tradition of painting, regimes of viewing and new technology collide, furthering the capacity of abstraction to simultaneously encompass matter and spirit, being both worldly and idealistic, with vaguely indicated motifs such as viewfinders and geographical coordination grids. In Barr's terms, the paintings are at one and the same time 'near-abstractions' and 'pure-abstractions', both referring to subject matter and being self-sufficient. They actually also bridge Barr's dichotomy between Paul Cézanne's and Georges Seurat's geometric, intellectual and logical abstraction, and Gauguin's and Henri Matisse's decorative, emotional and intuitive abstraction.

The paintings by Leiderstam can inhabit many different spaces. They are at home not only on shelves but also in drawers or on desks; in the studio where they were painted as well as in the spaces where they are shown in exhibitions, including adjacent office spaces. In this way, they are much more than simply images. If Mark Rothko's ambition was to convey the symbolic without symbols, maybe Leiderstam wants to touch the imaginary without figurative imagery. Like most of his work to date, while speaking to visuality in general and to the gaze in particular, they are meant to be experienced physically in three-dimensional space. Phenomenological involvement becomes a prerequisite, as is their intensive relationality, which means that they also comprise installations where they can be handled, almost like in storage or as part of an archive.

On the one hand, the paintings are panels; on the other hand, they are screens, depending on which side of each painting is in focus. Within the history of painting, panels are an ancient tradition, with the vanished 'pinakes' of classical Greece—paintings on panels, presumably of various heroic scenes, displayed in a specially devoted building on the Acropolis, the 'pinakotheka'. Slightly later, the strikingly realistic faces with eyes meeting the gaze of viewers of any era, the Fayum portraits of Egypt were painted on wooden panels placed over the face of the mummy. Throughout Orthodox Christianity, icons are also typically made on panels. From the Middle Ages onwards, many personal devotional paintings were painted on wooden panels, and could be taken on the adventures that any trip entailed in those days. Such old paintings were portable, contemplative pictures to be brought along, like the invention of books and eventually newspapers, all precursors to the handy electronic devices of our time.

The making of Leiderstam's paintings is related to ritual, to solitary work in the secluded space of the studio—a practice which is reminiscent of the lead character in Andrei Tarkovsky's legendary 1966 film, *Andrei Rublev*, about the Russian 15th century icon painter. He was a monk who emphasised painting as a sacred act while being the

tool of God, which in the Orthodox tradition simply means accepting that any icon has already been ‘conceived’ in heaven, and the painter is only transmitting it to this earthly world. While the sacred is entirely absent in Leiderstam’s paintings, he is nevertheless extracting himself from the buzz of everyday life in order to paint in the studio. Such withdrawal strategies can be thought of as part of social abstraction, a performative form of abstraction, known from contemporaries such as Richard Wright and Doug Ashford.

Within modernity, panels take on different functions and are instead building blocks—construction elements connected to industrial production and distribution. Prefabricated concrete panel systems revolutionised the building of apartments across the planet after WWII. Between 1945 and 1985 it is estimated that 170 million apartments were constructed using such panels, crossing both national borders and ideological spheres and adapting to local conditions. A shared concern was decent, and affordable, housing for the population, which can be seen as part of the same social and political utopia which underpinned much of the abstract art of the avant-garde. Another example where sturdy panels have influenced post-war society is shipping containers, whose metal panels help make possible the vast system of transportation of goods all over the world —a complex logistical network without which not even this text could be written.

At the same time as Leiderstam’s paintings are associated with panels, they are connected to screens. While historically speaking paintings can be claimed to be ‘ur-screens’, visual focal points, the electronic screens of our day and age both allow for establishing contexts, historical and beyond, and for the elimination of any background information. They connect and they disconnect, performing what Benjamin H. Bratton has described as the foundational contradictory modus operandi of ‘the stack’. The stack is an abstract vertical planetary-scale model, largely digital, replacing the horizontal topology of geopolitics as defined by the 1648 Westphalian Peace, with its division of land into nation states, distorting and deforming the older logic. The stack’s multiple layers of sovereignties, all on top of each other, is now a superpower of our time, albeit as Bratton argues, an incidental one. The double movement of strengthening belief and at the same time destroying it is in full swing within the stack. Inside the stack, the myriad of screens serves the dream of life without a referent; it is existence without anchors, free-floating singularities which appear to lead a Darwinian life, with a screen within a screen within a screen within a screen, etc.

Not only is there a system, a code, in Leiderstam’s series, but a protocol is discernible too. Even the embryo of an algorithm of sorts is present, albeit a strictly analogue one. This can be seen in light of conceptual and minimal art’s reliance on administrative logics and bureaucratic systematisation. Palpably methodical inquiries, resting on a conceptual basis, are common in the work of Leiderstam: for example, the multi-year

projects *Grand Tour* and *Neanderthal Landscape*, loosely joined under the rubric of 'after image'. Both of them pertain to how our ways of seeing change, due to political upheavals, technological innovation and the development of knowledge. But whereas the earlier projects are related to classical paintings and are assemblage-like, and primarily emphasise perception, not least the desire of the gaze, *Panels* is equally invested in a formal articulation of the image as well as the manual and meditative making by the artist. Instead of being 'after images', they rather activate traces and reminiscences in the cloud, which is also the artist's own hard drive—his mind.

The paintings are syncretic forms of abstraction, mutated and blended. Queer, if you wish. They offer viewers an occasion to sharpen their vision, to practice precision and accept the paradoxical. Their formal articulation carries abstraction's rallying cry: beware of how I am formulated, how I am taking shape. Everything matters. In this way, the panels function like triggers, although they are opaque and don't allow us to see through them. They are extremely beautiful objects that operate as visual stoppages, in the best sense of the word, denying the viewers transparency, which is more and more of an official doctrine across society today. However, Édouard Glissant's important demand for the right to opacity is precisely the right not to be transparent. It is the right not to be legible the way that the colonised and otherwise oppressed have always been obliged to be measured and assessed, and therefore controlled.

Maria Lind, december 2017