

Susan Swartz: Nature and Inspiration

“The subject-matter is visible to everyone, content is only discovered by him who has something to contribute, and form is a mystery to most.” – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Paintings bearing titles such as “A Personal Path 2” and “Contemplation 2” are immediately indicative that the artist is devoting herself to painting as the most direct path to self-knowledge. Painting facilitates an understanding of one’s own existence. One path would be to choose a narrative in which one’s biography is related in images aspiring to a generally illustrative Realism. The alternative path to finding oneself can, of course, dispense with autobiographical elements, relying instead on a less immediately apprehensible narrative in which one’s own existence engages in an abstract dialogue with the images. Thus, rather than chronicling the important stages in life or charter the linear trajectory of a career, “A Personal Path” yields a visual mapping of one’s own inner soul.

However, the overlaying of colour from top to bottom and bottom to top does indeed illustrate a career – a process, which the viewer may find difficult to relate to. For a process has both a beginning and an end. With Susan Swartz, this end represents the completion of the painting process – to the benefit of the art work. These decisions are important, and pose a problem for every artist: Does the painting get better or worse if I continue to paint?

Although the overlay of the brush strokes can be understood, the logic of the “seeing” observer militates against a deeper appreciation of the painting process. Which colour should be applied first to form the ground, and which last for the upper-most layer? The successive layers of paint amalgamate and meld, and are applied in rapid, pastose brush strokes with a Western imagery. The white mixes with the primary colors of yellow, red and blue, generating a delicately nuanced spatial effect on the canvas (“Who’s Afraid of Red,” “Yellow and Blue” is the title of a series of paintings by Barnett Newman). Furthermore, it is not possible for the viewer to describe in words the physical attributes of the painting in such a way as to convey to another person who cannot see it an impression of the work. The image consciously defies verbalisation. The titles are merely aides for autonomous interpretations. The image has no boundaries, but is open on all four sides. It depicts an excerpt, a snapshot from the daily life of the artist. It operates without perspective, ie. it does not lie or attempt to deceive the viewer. The image refers only to itself and to its own two-dimensionality.

The aura of speechlessness directly mediated by the image dissipates in the process of viewing, as emotions, feelings and assimilated logic speak out from the canvas. The painting is composed as an abstraction, and articulates itself as such. It is precisely this process of overcoming quotidian reality which can be construed as “finding the path:” the quest for another, higher reality into which the artist has embedded her work.

The work "Contemplation 2" rotates within itself to a greater degree than "A Personal Path 2." With its brush strokes running vertically up and down, the painting does not spill over the edges, but revolves around itself in a delicately modulated wave-like-motion. It has a decentralised centre – a rare occurrence in the paintings of Susan Swartz. Yet, by the same token, it does not evince any analogies to nature, but is, instead, encoded. Rather than urging the eye to complete the representation, it compels us to think and contemplate; the viewer must finish the painting for himself. The "open work" is how Umberto Eco in his eponymous essay (1962) describes the diological process. As in many of the artist's works, white once again predominates, leavened by red and blue, two of the three primary colours. "Contemplation 2" originated in a concentrated application of paint, with the brushes finding their extension in tools resembling palette-knives. This concentration is the theme of the painting, a reflection on itself which extends beyond the painterly.

The two paintings usher us into the emotional world of the artist, who remains identifiable even in those images more connotative of nature. Her works are not mere technical or mechanical exercises, but always the immediate expression of the artist's personal experiences. Accordingly, "Blue Fusion" and "Blue Fusion II" are two emotionally expressive works, which reveal the gamut of creative thought. A richly-coloured image abounding in red, blue and yellow (I) is juxtaposed with a more introverted painting in which blue and red feature strongly, yet consign yellow, in contrast, to a more marginal role. The paintings are possessed of a varying lightness, of an intensifying luminosity. Both are unbounded, as emotions know no boundaries, and both are highly personal.

This also applies, albeit less intensively, to her series of paintings such as "Landscape of Resonances," the "Serenade of Lilies" or to the works inspired by the annual seasons. They take discernible reference to landscapes, whilst eschewing genuine representation. Everything is sublimated and visually charged. This is why the artist can work without predetermined iconographies. Her images originate from within, born of her keen observation of nature and her discovery of its intrinsic wonder. But she is not depicting the physiognomies of a landscape, as demanded of artists by, among others, the globetrotter Alexander von Humboldt during the first half of the 18th century. Her representations are individual approaches to archetypal nature.

In her abstractions Swartz is upholding a tradition deeply rooted in American historical landscape painting as, for example, in the Hudson River School and the Wasatch Mountain School. The mountainous Utah landscape and the ocean waters of Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts serve as a source of inspiration and motifs for her acrylic works. The tradition of these schools is represented by artists such as Maynard Dixon (1875-1946) and particularly Albert Bierstadt (1830 Solingen – 1902 New York). With Bierstadt having also studied at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, reflexes of the Düsseldorf 19th century school of painting still resonate subtly in

the paintings of the 21st century. Together with Thomas Moran (1837-1926) from the Hudson River School and Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900) from the second generation of the Hudson River School, these artists forged magnificent, generally large-format panoramas of the North America landscape beneath awe-inspiring, sun-bathed skies. And for the first time they captured on canvas landscapes which were completely unknown in Europe. Over the course of the centuries, European landscapes had – in painterly terms – exhausted their possibilities. Their dramatic glorification by Romantics such as Caspar David Friedrich, or the flight of the impressionists and the 20th century landscape artists from classical landscapes to more virgin terrain, particularly in some of the photo-based landscape pictures by Gerhard Richter, have in Europe yielded options for adopting a new perspective. In contrast to the traditional painters of the Wasatch Mountain School, Swartz has no need to compress what she sees and feels into the composition. She can articulate her emotions directly.

The term Romantic encapsulates the way of seeing of this American artist. Her paintings abound in Romanticisms, yearning and love; they are always in search of the familiarly enigmatic, of the psyche of man in nature, of the universal poetry which simultaneously fuses science, religion and the visual arts. In American literature, writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allen Poe and also Herman Melville can be ascribed to this school of thought. Nature as a partner in beholding the world, its beauty, its capacity to allow human beings to experience joy, danger and challenges. As reflected in the images of the artist, this nature is endless and boundless, it remains experiential but only as a snapshot, continually transgressing the boundaries of science and philosophy. It represents the great challenge for man, confronted as he is, with its perpetual change.

In the 19th century, in the wake of the Enlightenment, this new fascination for nature as a spiritual being forged a new sensibility which is not to be confused with pantheism. God is not at one with nature, but its creator.

Swartz makes out these paths to nature, conjuring resplendent luminosities in her paintings through their close affinity to light. They reveal a luminism, redolent of that developed by the post-Impressionists who also worked with strong light effects. Reflected in these paintings is her own personal path, her commitment to an intact world. They are imbued with the hope that her paintings can serve not only as a testament to the beauty of nature; for man is rapidly destroying his environment because he is no longer willing or able to control the climate. The paintings by Susan Swartz are a positive antidote to the flood of horror stories emanating from the world's climate centres and the numerous international commissions, which hitherto have been unable to achieve any tangible results. Instead of engaging in endless discussions, the artist confronts us with her images. Sustained by a deep faith in God as the creator of the universe, she believes in the goodness of man. He, who created nature, who created man, gives her the strength to heed her artistic

calling. And although it is addressed in her painting through iconographic allusions, she openly articulates this bond: "If God is the creator, all I have to do is interpret."

The paintings by Susan Swartz hanging in the university church, do not seek to illustrate the site. Restoration of this distinguished edifice, built by the Baroque architect Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, was completed in 2013. In the time of the Napoleonic occupation it was converted into a military grain store. In 1922, the "Große Salzburger Welttheater" by Hugo von Hofmannsthal was premiered here, and the church also now serves as a venue for the Salzburg Festival. This provides the unique setting for Swartz's paintings to engage in a fascinating dialogue with this former Benedictine Collegiate church, with its clarity and associations with Catholic iconography, and also with the meaning of the House of God. In his installation in Salzburg Cathedral, Christian Boltanski examined the ineluctability of death. Here in the university church Susan Swartz shines a light on the beauty of divine nature.

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