

The complete abstract illusion...

"[...] you did not expect to see such perfection! You are looking for a picture, and you see a woman before you. There is such depth in that canvas, the atmosphere is so true that you can not distinguish it from the air that surrounds us. Where is art? Art has vanished, it is invisible! It is the form of a living girl that you see before you. Have I not caught the very hues of life, the spirit of the living line that defines the figure? [...] And the hair, the light pours over it like a flood, does it not?... Ah! she breathed, I am sure that she breathed! Her breast—ah, see! Who would not fall on his knees before her? Her pulses throb. She will rise to her feet. Wait!"

Honoré de Balzac, "The Unknown Masterpiece", 1831

Something that has haunted visual art since its origin is *the perfect representation*: the painting that was so credible that reality and the artwork could not be distinguished from each other. According to Pliny the Elder's account, Parrhasius was victorious in a contest over Zeuxis. While Zeuxis could paint a bunch of grapes in such a lifelike manner that birds flew down and tried to eat of the fruits, Parrhasius managed to trick Zeuxis with a curtain that was so lifelike that Zeuxis himself tried to draw it aside.

Things didn't work out as well for Frenhofer, the fictive artist in Honoré de Balzac's short story, "The Unknown Masterpiece", from 1831, which I have quoted above. He merely fooled himself and disclosed his madness by conflating his artwork with a real live woman. Everybody else could see that Frenhofer's masterpiece, the work he had been working on for more than a decade, was nothing but a mishmash of abstract brushstrokes: a portrait of a woman that was so excessively re-worked that nothing could be discerned any longer on the canvas's surface. Only one foot, which could be spotted in the one corner, jutting out from beneath the jumble of brushstrokes, testified to Frenhofer's ambition.

However, the anti-hero, Frenhofer, became a heroic figure for the modern artist. In his indomitable ambition to bring forth the consummate synthesis between nature and art, Frenhofer embodied a perfect emblem of the modern artist's frustrations as he tried to invent a new artistic ideal, now that the new medium of photography was handling the task of making realistic representations. And painting's modern ideal was, quite precisely, the abstract composition, of which Frenhofer's abortive masterpiece, in all its far-sightedness, had offered a presentiment: a composition where form and color were no longer means for achieving a lifelike illusion but rather qualities in their own right.

Christoffer Munch Andersen's paintings inscribe themselves within the history of artistic illusion. This is distinctly evident in the attention he pays to the smallest visual details, in the solicitude with which he has reproduced the motive on the surface and, of course, in the motive's illusionistic appearance. However, his illusions harbor no ambition of being conflated or confused with nature itself. The mere dimensions of the pieces serve to counter any such delusion. Munch Andersen's works consciously couple illusion and abstraction by taking up motives that, in their painterly adaptation and processing, can oscillate between the two

positions. The two extreme points in painting's compass of expression collide here in works that succeed in being both illusion and abstraction, at one and the same time. Parrhasius and Frenhofer rolled into one!

Superficially speaking, the motific content in Munch Andersen's paintings is comprised of small and insignificant cultural products, with Danish culinary culture as a central point of rotation. However, the motives also constitute a calculated surface phenomenon, which has been singled out so as to pose as motor for experiments with our visual culture. These experiments have to do both with calling attention to aesthetic qualities in otherwise overlooked cultural products and with painting's self-contained visuality. It's a matter of playing with visuality's history, with both the abstraction that stems from the history of painting and the abstraction that crops up in our dealings with the apparently insignificant objects of everyday life. It's about the perfect representation, which, today, is as much a picture of a picture as it is a picture of nature. And it's about surprising and delighting the gaze, about evoking recognition and provoking laughter in us but also about the new discovery, the rediscovery and the recapturing of our visual culture.

In "The Unknown Masterpiece", Frenhofer discusses art's expression with a great deal of sympathetic insight and knowledge. He speaks about the struggle between line and color. He discusses the relationship between the ideal and the naturalistic motif. And he demonstrates the decisive effect that the concluding brushstrokes need to make in order to bring the motives to life. Frenhofer's ambition is to create the complete synthesis of ideality and lifelike reproduction. It's a life-and-death struggle and in the end, Frenhofer loses both his work and his life.

In Christoffer Munch Andersen's paintings, a similar kind of struggle plays itself out: a struggle between illusion and abstraction. Every now and then, this can take on a dramatic expression. But sometimes – and frequently in one and the same piece – there's also a lightness and a humor, which can be recognized as having stemmed from the 17th century classical Dutch still lifes, where the *trompe l'oeil* craving, the act of fooling the eye, played an important role. Illusion's history, for that matter, is a multifaceted one. It treats of sculptures that take on life and start to walk and it treats of perspective, which was effectively introduced in the Renaissance for purposes of engendering spatial illusions. It is, however, the still life tradition – or the tradition of *nature morte* – which has most directly turned its focus toward making faithful reproductions and it is along this line of tradition that Munch Andersen's work is situated.

Christoffer Munch Andersen's motific world consists of small inconsequential objects, things that *typically don't cost more than a buck and half*, as one of his friends vividly put it. Among his motives can be found a flat wooden ice-cream stick, a couple of beer-bottle caps and of late, a few guitar plectrums. And similarly, a lunch packet, an unopened one as well as one that has been consumed, thin-sliced slivers of sandwich chocolate in light and dark varieties, the frog's-head sponge cake and the milk cartons, the take-out pizza carton and the remnants of two grilled hot dogs with buns on the side. These are well-known objects. Many of them possess a

considerable measure of practical utility value. Several of them have probably also made a journey in and through our own shopping baskets. Others we know from the bakery or from the fast-food joint. But at the same time, most of them are so prevalent in our society that we have a tendency not to pay them any notice at all. On the contrary, Munch Andersen does! In his works, we are moving through the supermarket's shelves with a shopping basket, loaded for a totally different experience than that belonging to consumption. We are on an aesthetic hunt for the small details in our surrounding environment, those that we've grown accustomed to ignoring.

When you interpret Munch Andersen's works in extension of the still-life tradition, there is a conspicuous distance to his selection of foodstuffs. It's not the exclusive cornucopia that's being put on display here, but rather its antithesis. Not *noma* (the gourmet restaurant), but *Netto* (the discount convenience store)! What we have here are mass-produced industrial wares or budget-priced take-away commodities like fast food concoctions and old school baker's bread. Christopher Munch Andersen is playing consciously on the contrast that this sets up in relation to the classic 17th century still life. He chooses a multi-fruit juice as a humorous reference to the past's sumptuous tableau of fruits and a plastic tray for sliced meats as a contrast with the haunch of venison that typically hangs decoratively from the ceiling. Not to mention the beer can's bottom and top, which gleam forth in silver and gold!

In this respect, Munch Andersen is following in the footsteps of, say, Warhol's *Campbell's Soup* cans' motives, even though the interpretative perspective is not quite the same today. The impact that Industrialization had on our culinary culture's aesthetic appearance was present, of course, in the work of the pop artists and Munch Andersen is paying the same attention to low- and popular-culture's products as were his pop-art forerunners. However, today's debate on climate and health issues provides some altered horizons of interpretation. Whereas the Dutch still life, with its sumptuous and natural raw ingredients, pointed indirectly toward human mortality, the problem for mankind in the present day is almost the diametrical opposite one: our industrial production is, unfortunately, neither perishable nor transitory but is, on the contrary, a contributing cause of our being slowly asphyxiated in our own rubbish. The packaging and the containers that are piled up and accumulating in Munch Andersen's pieces accordingly constitute a reinterpretation of the still life's vanitas.

But there's also another reason why Christopher Munch Andersen chooses to portray food commodities in containers and cartons. This has to do with structure – or geometry, to be precise – and this element constitutes the second dimension in his paintings – the compositions' abstract quality – which, much like the motive's recognizability, persistently presses its way forward and imposes itself. As the artist himself puts it, his paintings are extremely constructed. Nothing is left to chance.

His working procedure is as follows: a physical object is selected, isolated and photographed. The object is retained henceforth throughout the entire artistic process as a consultation object, i.e. as a standard of reference, for the finished work. The photograph is further processed and reworked in Photoshop, where the structure is tightened up and the motive might even become adapted, moreover, to compositional principles like The Golden

Section, and it is this painstaking construction that is subsequently transferred onto the canvas in a precise notation. The colors are brought to light from the photograph as well as from Photoshop and are recreated with paint, while the lighting effects and surface-reflections are constructed in the motif. The motives have frequently been chosen because, in terms of composition, they readily lend themselves to being fit into a rectangular or square frame but basically, the MDF panels are cut so as to conform with the motive's format and not vice versa. In some cases, this gives rise to a cogent object-character, in the form of a relief, when it comes to certain flat motives, such as the flat wooden ice-cream stick or the more recent plectrum-pieces.

In this respect, Christopher Munch Andersen's work is situated in extension of one well-known and amusing strategy from the classical still life tradition, where the illusion was fortified by the fact that the painting resembled, even in its very shape, the object it was picturing. One of the more renowned trick-pictures is Cornelius Gijsbrecht's "Reverse Side of a Painting" (1670). The work seems to be intended for being placed in a corner inside the artist's studio, where an unwitting visitor might be so bold as to turn the canvas around, only to have his curiosity rewarded by yet another reverse side of a stretched canvas.

It is not Munch Andersen's intention, however, to generate any climate of confusion with reality's objects; it is rather to establish a relationship between abstract painting's history and a number of cultural products. The game that is being staged with the collaboration of his audience has to do with establishing new couplings between the abstract and the realistic. Whereas the still life painters customarily avoided perspective effects in order to ensure that the illusion would be maintained, regardless of what position the motive was contemplated from, Munch Andersen, in certain cases, eliminates perspective effects in order to render the motive more abstract and concentrated around the canvas's stretched surface. The frontal depiction of the motives simultaneously contributes toward concealing any perspective-related lines that otherwise could turn up. These strategies have been instrumental in getting his paintings to appear both extremely illusionistic and highly abstract.

In several works, there are references to very specific abstract works. The take-out pizza cartons point back at Robert Ryman's white compositions but also toward the tradition of stripe paintings, which is reinterpreted here through the cardboard carton bottom's extremely delicate folds. The series of milk carton's bottoms is another example of a reference to specific works, seeing as they can be interpreted as paying respect to Jo Baer's minimalist edge-compositions. The thin-sliced slivers of sandwich chocolate's delicate wave pattern calls up art's psychedelic visual disturbances to mind, while the leavings on the hot dog tray could be said to be reminiscent of a Kandinsky painting. The mere fact that Christopher Munch Andersen isolates motives and turns them into an aggregate object for a single painting underscores the motives' transformation into abstract compositions. In the same vein, his serial organization of certain motifs sets up couplings to abstraction's typical serial form as well as to pop art's and the ready-made's manner of playing with industrially produced commodities.

His approach to everyday objects can be linked to conceptual art; this is emphasized by the underplayed humorous titles and interrelations between the works. Many works have completely down-to-earth titles, which refer to the motive's point of departure while other

titles encourage a certain viewing of the motive in the direction of either its function or expression. Two capsules can accordingly be either “Stacked” or “Bent”, while beer bottles are “Full” or “Empty”. Coffee filters are presented as “Twisted, brown and bleached”, the multi-juice carton as “CMYK (fruit)” and the black plastic tray as “Black (meat)”.

Stylistically speaking, Christopher Munch Andersen harbors a marked preference for the geometrically well structured. This is consistent with the meticulousness that he invests in the motives’ visual processing and interpretation. Could this be why the frog’s head sponge cake inevitably has to wind up as an assault victim: murdered and battered? Already as a newly-purchased confection, it occurred to Munch Andersen that the sponge cake was too inferior a piece of craftsmanship to qualify for being photographed: it just didn’t live up to the idea of a frog’s head sponge cake. Munch Andersen was consequently compelled, in this case, to adjust the object itself before it could be photographed and further processed as a painterly motif.

In Christopher Munch Andersen's painstaking reworking of the motives, what can be detected is a clear sense of affection for the artistic and expressive qualities in otherwise unimpressive everyday motifs. A number of the motives actually come to be endowed with a kind of aesthetic ennoblement through their way of being interpreted in Munch Andersen’s paintings. By way of example, we can mention the slivers of sandwich chocolate, the hot dog tray and the flat wooden ice-cream stick. Every now and then, there is both an ennoblement and a dimension of consumption at play in Munch Andersen’s motific world, as in the plectrum-pieces, which stand forth as a salute to a diminutive but effective musical implement and, at one and the same time, underscore its use and its consumption through the objects’ wear and tear. Even those motives that we might very well, when actually confronted with the figure, turn away from and perceive as repulsive – the remnants after fights with pizza, hot dogs or baker’s bread – seem to be visually inviting in Munch Andersen’s presentations. We approach the spots with our curiosity intact and willingly go about making a careful study of the remnants that have been left behind in the cardboard cartons.

In the classical art of painting, it was generally thought that the motives ought to be appetizing so as to seduce the audience. Zeuxis painted grapes, Frenhofer the most beautiful woman. Frenhofer’s ambition was to create the most perfect picture of the most perfect woman. By making use of the ideal model, he believed that he could both achieve the faithful reproduction of nature and secure art’s ideal. The ambition failed to bear fruit for Frenhofer. However, Christopher Munch Andersen has actually managed to bring about such a synthesis between reality and ideality. Rather than look for this ideality in nature and create, on this basis, the ideal masterpiece, Munch Andersen brings an illusionistic realism to light by rendering an idealized abstraction of the motive, which simultaneously allows the motive to vibrate and fluctuate on the canvas’s surface. Maybe you can even say that it’s breathing?

This effect is due to a conscious artistic choice, where hard edges are omitted. The illusion in Munch Andersen’s paintings is therefore impressive at a certain distance, but when you move up close, the motive’s sharp edges dissolve and become blurred. The illusion evaporates into the surface’s soft edges. Even if the motives had been transferred to MDF panels in a lifelike size, nobody – in other words – would let herself be seduced into eating the

grapes or into turning the back of a canvas around. This simultaneously serves as a demonstration about how Christopher Munch Andersen, in the artistic process of making decisions, assigns greater importance to his paintings' abstract qualities than he does to the classic play with image and reality. If Frenhofer could exclaim: *Where is art? Art has vanished, it is invisible!*, the answer in the present day would be the contrary: *Where is art? In everything!* – it's only a matter of seeing this and allowing it to come forth in its manifest expression.

You look down into a shopping basket. It's empty. The basket's medium-blue plastic shines and reflects the light from above. The steadily grooved pattern of holes in the basket's bottom is reflected as a series of undulating forms in the larger plastic portions in the basket's corners and sides. The plastic is moving about! At no point in time are you in any doubt that the motific point of departure is a real shopping basket, but the picture is simultaneously a sharp and precise aesthetic composition in its own right.

“Blue (basket)”, 2009

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