

“Kill your darlings”

about my work

That much I understood. Doing away with the cliché of art. What is painting and what does it mean to me today? To answer that question, I had to start by killing off my favourite illusions and by not getting tangled up in sentimentality. To commit a murder of that sort, I had to go straight to the roots – right to the point where, historically, my very first point of reference to painting is buried.

It was Cimabue, “the master”, who literally took my breath away in the basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, 700 years after his death. For me, he is not only a painter but a magician whose mystical force leaves its image behind when it is gone, so that it can touch the core of human existence with an aura of universality. Touching something that defines our spiritual existence, transcending something - this is a particular concern of mine.

To begin one layer after another must fall away from my ego, like peeling an onion. Until nothing is left but the soft green shoot. Layers, like veils, that settle over my perception and cloud my vision of purity.

There is a backdrop to this - and it is precious. Clarity, strength and feeling - all abstractions - so where does the journey lead?

“You are my Rothko painter”, noted Sean Scully. He should know. Rothko, the epitome of aura painting and a god to millions. His painting is immortal - but why? He touches the observer right where it hurts the most - the soul. Hysterical egomania has had its day. Here you can find something really enduring - something that can't be bought with money. In these times of hysterical art hype, what hasn't yet been preserved in formaldehyde? Truthfulness! As a painter, you just have to try to show who you really are. I show myself in the flow of my paintbrush. Vulnerable but uncompromising. Letting go, forcing nothing - sometimes it works. A surface that attracts the observer's gaze, but then forces it back to the horizon. What's behind that?

Robert Ryman, greatly admired, introduced a sort of sobriety in a profound and nourishing way. The colour: white, is that all? White - clarity, no embellishments, no sentimentality, but it's there. It's sitting right under the surface. “You have it right under your nose. You feel it. Something sacred.” Just leave out everything meaningless. I'm concentrating on what's essential. Two areas that come up against one another. Is that all? But look at how they come up against one another. Everything I possess is in the line - this is where my feeling and my concentration lie. And the colour comes

and joins in. Layer upon layer. The colour: grey. A mixture of black and white; the origin of things. Three years of grey, now with the addition of deep colour. Monochrome at first - I don't want to rush things. This is the only road to take - for me.

The process of creation is important to me, not just the finished painting. I work with layers of paint. Usually, I start with a Venetian ground. A kind of homage to fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian painting. Often, I then place a brilliantly colourful intermediate layer over that and then paint over it again, with brown for example. Like everything which is suppressed - in the psychological sense as well - its energy can nonetheless be felt. Applying the paint to the canvas, directly, with detached concentration, has always been a thrill for me. It's what I like to do most. Delicate, subtle differences which result in the process of painting fascinate me. The process of painting excites me. So the motif is never boring for me. I express through the brushstroke; I try to put everything I can into it.

And finally, my “master”, Sean Scully. He taught me. Whose painting is more physical than his? Who else combines strength with steely determination as brilliantly as he does in his work? That tenderness, that soft green shoot is just perceptible here too. He nourished me, challenged me when I wanted to hang back and stop at my limits.

Nature is my sanctuary, my source. This is where I can lick my wounds when I'm tired. I'd love to transfer the feeling I have here onto the canvas. It's so soothing. The sight of grey clouds against a grey sky. Water and sky forming the horizon. All monochrome! What else is there?

Clarity, an uncompromising approach, tenderness. It goes to show that there are some things that can no longer be bought and sold. Let other people laugh – there's still something left that's worth making an effort for.

Belief is not sentimentality. Painting - what appears to be always the same thing. Achieving mastery by repetition. The same form everywhere but different every time. It's like diving with a school of whales. Once you get over your initial fright where all the whales look the same, you suddenly notice that there are differences after all. They're all the same but each one is different. Tenderness, elegance and finesse are the weapons available to me. Step by step, I'm hoping to come closer to truthfulness.

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