

Painting Matters

It's about painting. But don't let that statement give you any wrong ideas. Kristoffer Zetterstrand isn't digging into the physical limitations of the media specific. Why limit painting to physical support anyway? There are a lot of interesting artists who are working with painting without actually putting paint onto a canvas. And there are equally many artists who put paint on a canvas, without being particularly interested in painting. Zetterstrand, however, paints. Then again, his art isn't about a tongue-in-cheek blending of high and low in order to bring Painting down from its historical pedestal either. Zetterstrand is far from the standard postmodernist artist on a reevaluating quest. True, his figurative paintings often contains an unorthodox mix, where figures and styles from computer games meet with canonic images from art history. But I don't see this mix as an assault on high-brow culture. I rather understand them as images from two different worlds that have that in common that they meant something for the artist. Zetterstrand's act is about opening up, rather than narrowing down, what painting can mean today.

Contrary to what the imagery from the computer world might suggest, Kristoffer Zetterstrand concerns himself with quite traditional subjects and techniques. He isn't "acting out" on the canvas, but follows a series of preparatory steps before conducting the painting. He is meticulous with the handicraft sides, and like the traditional painter, he plans the composition with detailed sketches before beginning to paint. But his means can be quite uncommon. For instance, he likes creating the compositions in the 3D-programme Maya.



QUILT

In 2002 Zetterstrand painted the series "Free-look mode", where he depicted a very particular moment in the on-line game Counter-strike, a "squad-based shooter game" as game theorist Steven Poole so amply put it in the book Trigger Happy. Free-look mode is what the player experiences after being shot dead in the game. Instead of being thrown out of the game at once, the gamer, for a short while, gets a angelic view of the game, where one gets to see where the other players are and how the settings look. But all this vital intelligence is now useless to the gamer. Being dead, s/he cannot act upon it.

There are many interesting aspects of this view. For one, the computer game is constructed so that it will only draw what the gamer can see from the inside. That is, if there is a room that the player can reach only from the inside, it will not have any texture on the outside. There are good reasons for this: building something no one can see would mean wasting a lot of work time. Likewise, letting the computer draw something that isn't needed for experiencing the game would mean squander with computer power. But in Free-look mode you get to see the computer game from the "outside". And that outside which isn't drawn, it is

black, void. How much blackness you will see depends on how this particular setting is constructed, but in Free-look mode the scenery will always exist in an empty space.

In the series "Free-look mode" Zetterstrand is making use of the pragmatic aspects of computer programming to make paintings that create a universe of their own. Turning these particular scenes into paintings makes them into modern vanitas motifs. The void surrounding the world can be seen as the nothingness modern man has replaced the religious heavenly beliefs with. A secular void that also comments upon Jean-Paul Sartre's famous statement in *Being and Nothingness* that man is the origin of nothingness. Man "escapes" Being, by constantly not being "there". Indeed, being thrown out of an on-line game experience is an epitome of this.

Herein lays one of the keys to understand Zetterstrand's use of computer games. He finds a situation where the world of computer gaming can reflect upon something we normally would find in art history (like the vanitas motif). Not that Zetterstrand suggests that the "painters" of contemporary art are to be found in computer industry. He is after all making paintings himself. But I do think that Zetterstrand consciously, and sometimes even unconsciously, search other fields (not only computer games) to insert life into already well-known paths in the world of painting.

In "Free-look mode" the images were solely picked from a computer game. But the settings were carefully picked. In a couple of paintings Zetterstrand departed from some "Italian" scenery, where one could find milieus and decorations that immediately reminded of historical paintings. Other paintings had something Edvard Hopperish about them. Thus, Zetterstrand finds references and constructs traces that multiply the connection between the images, styles and techniques in the paintings. Like elaborated rhetorical messages they communicate on different levels and address different of the viewers capacities. They comprise of a web, if you like, connecting quite dissimilar objects that in the end form statements about painting. Maybe they are more like patchworks than a web.

These quilts of art history and computer games say something fundamental about how Zetterstrand uses the computer as a tool. It has to do with accessibility. Like Lev Manovich have stated, there is no point in making a new image, because it already exists. The point is to find it. This database kind of logic, where all the images you could think of are within reach through the computer of was virtually impossible to comprehend just ten or maybe fifteen years ago. And as you no longer are obliged to use art history books to find images from art history, it becomes easier to think up new combinations. It also has to do with the way you make information searchable: if you tag an image of a horse "horse" without accounting for if it is a painting, photography or an image from a game, you disregard old habits of classifying.

REALISM

After "Free-look Mode" Zetterstrand has been blending imagery from video games with images from art historical resources. This odd mix between high and low resolution reveals Zetterstrand's interest in realism. In the painting "Graham" from 2003, Zetterstrand put a three-dimensional image of cabbage next to a very flat, pixelated image of King Graham from an early version of *King's Quest*. In "Pointer" from 2008 he repeated the gesture by letting a pixelated karate computer game fighter be confronted with a photorealistic, oversized hand, which points its index finger to the fighter. What we are dealing with here is, obviously, two very different ways of realism. In the painting *Graham* we might recognise the cabbage or the cucumbers from art history. In fact, the entire environment surrounding *Graham*, both the box shape he strolls in and the fruits and vegetables he encounters are borrowed from the Spanish Baroque painter Juan Sánchez Cotán.

The cabbage and an apple hangs in a rope from the upper part of the box, while the cucumber balances on the edge of in the lower right corner. Thus, the box plays quite few roles here. Reminding of the shallow space platform games, it forms a bridge between the world of Cotán and the world of *King's Quest*. One could say that it is realistic in both worlds. The realistically painted cabbage, however, hanging from the box "ceiling" (just beneath the apple) is more surreal. While it certainly looks the way cabbage can do in a realistic painting (but perhaps not as something we might find in a grocery store, it has a too delicate shadow play for that), it doesn't behave realistically. On another level it is very realistic, since it does look like the cabbage painted by Cotán. Placing it on the floor of the box would perhaps make more sense in the real world. But as an image of this particular painted cabbage, it is more real the way it is. The same might be said about the cucumber. But as it is placed on the very edge of the box, it transgresses the realism of the

painting and confuses the border between the world the beholder lives in and the world that the painting tells about. Again, Zetterstrand blends art history with computer games to make the well known new and interesting. In both Cotán's and Zetterstrand's painting the cucumber transgresses two different kind of realism. On the one hand we find the kind of realism which is realistic because it sticks to the story, to diegesis, which makes Graham possible in a two dimensional world but unrealistic in a three dimensional one. On the other hand we find the realism of world the viewer and the painting co-exists in. In between we find the cucumber, which seems to suggest that it belongs to the reality of the beholder and the painting, rather than the diegesis of the image. Like many other trompe l'oeil paintings the cucumber is stuck between what we think we know (it is painted) and what we think we see (it looks real). The same hold true for the hand that takes on the pixelated karate fighter in "Pointer". Here, Zetterstrand blends the realism of the early computer games with the style of photo-realism, and places this against a back-drop from early romanticism.

Thus, Zetterstrand does not only borrow images from randomly picked sources. He chooses them very delicately, in order to activate several meta-levels. One of these meta-levels is questioning what realism is. This is indeed one of art history's most discussed topics. Already in the first century after Christ, Pliny the Elder wrote about the tale of the Greek painter Zeuxis. The ancient master managed to paint grapes so lifelike that birds tried to pick them, but he got fooled himself by his competitor Parrhasius, who's masterly painted curtain Zeuxis asked to be withdrawn. But in front of Zetterstrand's paintings, we aren't preliminarily confronted with paintings that strive to look as realistic as possible. Nor are we dealing with the kind of realism of the 19th century Realists, who saw realism as a means to break away from the historical and mythological paintings, demanding that a painting could be realistic only if it concerned itself with contemporary subject matter.

In Zetterstrand's paintings we will have to accept something as realistic if it looks like it does in its original context. And as the original context more often than not are images that have been made to look as realistic as possible, we get kind of a map over how realism have and can look like. Look for instance at the ways Zetterstrand depicts fire. It can be an almost unrecognizable pile of rectangular yellow-and-red shapes that does look like fire in an old game. It can also look like fire does in 18th century paintings, or like the photo realism we find in Gerhard Richter's paintings, a mix you can find in "Set on fire" (2009). The realism in Zetterstrand's painting depends on how realistically he has chosen to interpret the original image. The surreal cabbage looks real because it looks the way it does in art history books. Graham looks real because that was the way he looked in the computer game. But he is also unreal because he only looks the way he does in the computer game. Unlike in the game he can't move.



Like trompe l'oeil paintings, the success of computer games depend on us getting involved with them. If we don't at some point believe that curtain to be real, we only see it as a more or less skillfully made attempt to fool us. Likewise, computers, as Janet Murray had it in Hamlet on the Holodeck, "...are liminal objects,

located on the threshold between external reality and our minds.” In painting after painting Kristoffer Zetterstrand examines how this threshold seems to be in a constant flux. But unlike some art historians, he doesn't conceive of the changes “realism” has gone through as a development where we get better and better. Why, we did accept Graham as real, although he was far less realistic than a 300 hundred years older hanging cabbage.

STAGE

If Kristoffer Zetterstrand is playing the game of realism, directing “actors” found in various internet searchable sources, then the paintings are the stage where the game takes place. Indeed, almost every painting is built like a stage. Look again at “Pointer” and you'll see how the large hand's shadow kind of folds over a 90 degrees edge. Or wind the tape back to “Free-look Mode” and you see that almost all the scenery is surrounded with what I earlier on called a void. Or, for that matter look at the painting “Wanderer” (2008), where Caspar David Friedrich's well-known wanderer are placed on a stage that reminds of the mountains he overlooks in the original painting.

Zetterstrand isn't opting for immersion. His game of realism has more to do with Bertold Bercht's *verfremdung* effect than that of a movie that tries to make us forget that we in fact are placed in an armchair at a cinema. But it is more to this game than merely revealing the tricks of the trade. Each “trick” is so closely examined that it becomes an object in itself. Zetterstrand isn't trying to empty realism, leaving it depleted and/or showing it to be a futile task. He is more like collector, discovering more and more variety the more he looks.

Lately, Zetterstrand has elaborated with yet another meta-level. Instead of only letting the images act on a stage, the artist has added a much larger person in the painting, interacting with the stage. In “Artist and Still Life” (2007) we find a large scale self portrait of the artist (wearing a painter's coat) beside a small, three-dimensional stage, placed on a cheap looking furniture. This “painter” is occupied by arranging the scene we find in Piero della Francesca's painting “Baptism of Christ”. It is a most fitting scene for a self portrait. “Baptism of Christ” is probably the painting Zetterstrand has quoted most of all.

Making a painting into a three dimensional model mean that you have to translate two dimensional figures into three dimensional shapes. Since Zetterstrand at the same time tries to be true to the realism of the original painting, the figures will look rather flat, like props from a set design. In “Artist and Still Life”, Christ is already in place, and so is the pigeon of the Holy Spirit. The man undressing behind Christ is almost in place, but he is turned the in the opposite direction from Pieros painting. St John is still in the artist's hand, on its way to its place in history. The surroundings is similar to the one in the Quattrocento masterpiece, but the graphical resolution is low.

Moving up in size has let Kristoffer Zetterstrand elaborate with the meta levels. In “The Game” (2009) we find a man overlooking a three dimensional model of a landscape. In one corner, there are realistic paintings of a continuing landscape, but inserted in the landscape we find figures that don't seem to belong in either size or realism. One of the mountains is a volcano, and as it is placed on the edge of the landscape, we can see it in cross-section, following the lava down to the depths of the earth. Beneath, a cut-out, black and white drawing of a skeleton is painted as if we saw the paper from above. The image has been given a realistic shadow and seems to be, given that we accept the inner logic of the scene, to be hiding towards a staircase, that in its turn leads to another flat-looking character (in full color), who guards a pipeline.

In configuration after configuration, Zetterstrand lets various modes of realism clash and cross-fertilize each other. The way he borrows images and respects the logic of them, (well, not without twisting and turning it a bit), reveals a thorough interest not only in realism, but of art history and the craft behind the masterpieces. Maybe this is why I often feel closer to art history when looking closely at Zetterstrand's paintings, than I do at many museums. In some way Zetterstrand manages to bring the images, as well as the efforts behind, to life.

Zetterstrand's game it isn't about immersion, but it is indeed about seduction. The *verfremdung* effect notwithstanding, the play that takes place on Zetterstrand's stage is a genuine love story.