METRO PICTURES

John Newsom, “André Butzer: I Will Always Be A Colorist,” **Flash Art International**, October 2011, pp. 80-84

Flash Art

The World's Leading Art Magazine - International Edition - Vol. XLIV • No. 280 • October 2011 - € 8.50 Italy only - $ 14.95

Poste Italiane s.p.a. - Sped. in A. P. - D.L. 353/2003 (conv. in L. 27/02/2004 n° 46) art. 1, comma 1 / PE / Aut. N. 164 / 2008

E. € 15,00 - B. € 11,90 - P. € 14,50 - D. € 9,90 - UK. £ 6,50

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I WILL ALWAYS BE A COLORIST

John Newsom

JOHN NEWSOM: Knowing that in 1993 you encountered both Asger Jorn's Green Ballet (1960) at the Hamburger Kunsthalle as well as posters of abstract paintings by Gerhard Richter in a local Burger King restaurant in the St. Pauli district's Reeperbahn. How did these two viewing experiences affect and inspire you early on?

André Butzer: Well, Richter at Burger King was first... then I went to the museum to check out some of his pieces in the real, which was a bit disappointing for me in com- parison to the posters. I saw the Jorn painting on an upper floor of the museum as part of the Guggenheim collection that was on display. All of these things then got mixed up in my head: the fast food place, the re- productions, the so called originals, the fan- cy sound of the name Peggy Guggenheim, the Donald Duck face I saw in Green Ballet, and the emptiness I saw in Richter. These things made me decide to try it on my own.

JN: *For those readers who aren't familiar, what did the formation of the Akademie Isotrop in Hamburg offer you in your development? And would you explain its relevancy in defining a particular school of thought in counterpoint to what was going on in Leipzig at the time?*

AB: This came a bit later. This group, or, if you want, this school, was very important for me. I am still thankful for the opportu- nity that I had there to meet people who I could talk to, have conflicts with, and could compete with in a playful but also a serious way. On the other hand, Leipzig was, and still is, not on my map. We didn't know any- thing about the young people there trying to restore something in painting or in art that was worth overcoming during the previous decades, let alone even during the centuries before. But art is a free country!

JN: *When you began your in-depth study of Cézanne, was it for your affirmation in the de- finitive nature of abstraction? Or was there a different attraction for you there?*

AB: Cézanne was always someone I was to-tally afraid of, and in a way, I am still very afraid of him. Then I realized that my fear of him was caused not only by his general and obvious greatness but also by his close- ness to what I wanted to do more than a hundred years later in a very different situ- ation. Twentieth-century art made people learn how to look at so-called "abstract art" in a way that they were originally taught to look at naturalism. This is the moment when I came into this tricky and desperate situa- tion, and my will was, and still is, to destroy and to annihilate this agreement.

JN: *Well said. There seems to be a lot of laws that you implement within your painting prac- tice — rules and logic. Do you set perimeters before the beginning of a work, or series, and then conduct the space within that frame- work?*

AB: No. All I do is follow them. I mean I fol- low the paintings. It feels like I started with the end, and one day I went on painting towards a new beginning from where they came from in the future. I slowly started to get rid of things I first needed in them, things like spray-cans, funny faces, living skulls, ti- tles, thick paint, colors in general, etc. The last thing is not true, as I consider myself a colorist, I will always be a colorist, nothing else. The available and producible palette of visible colors had to be revealed as a natural- ism of its own, though. A color is always, and only, representing itself as a color in conjunc- tion with other colors. So, my vision is to cre- ate this endless colorism through the absence of naturalist ready-made color. Visual art is an optical utopia, so anything visible has to be erased; the depository of anything visible isnottheworkofart,buttheworkofartisa projector of the depository.

JN: *I find the "N-Paintings" really wonder- ful and terrifying at the same time. Why the "N" and what does it mean? Are these figures forced to wander in a perpetual state of limbo forever? Is there, or will there ever be, the hope of liberation? Possibly realized in another se-ries, for these paintings are truly forceful and elegantly brutal. Thoughts?*

AB: What do you mean by figures? I see noth- ing in those paintings... as they are without any reason, theme and motif, although the matrix that repeats itself was originally re- lated to bodies of flesh: a living vertical body carrying a dead horizontal body. Cézanne had this Luca Signorelli print in his studio. I can only see through or with these paintings — in a way you see a threshold. This relates to the projection that I mentioned above. "N" is a holy, probably golden number or let- ter for me, that is a help for artists to create and find their way through their canvases. "N" is its own ruler and knows no earthly measurement and degree.

JN: *"Figures" meaning the little girls and goblins who are depicted in the landscapes outside of the houses with the "N" portrayed above the nonexistent entrances. But let's talk about the color gray. Obviously this is an im- portant subject for you. What is gray for you? What is its importance to your practice?*

AB: Gray is the great potency of all colors. It's obviously not compared to what people have tried to make it out to be, the color of nothing, the big zero or something stupid like that. No, it is the destination of color, like gold, flesh and silver are destinations of color, and all of these together, they combine and preserve color in order to let it really shine.

JN: *Most of your earlier work revolved around a surface structured of very thick impastos. How important is the idea of finesse and vir- tuosity to you in terms of navigating such large amounts of paint? Especially because the ma- jority of impasto painters are very flat-footed, clumsy and wasteful.*

AB: I am so happy now without all of that stuff on my paintings. I had to find my way through all of that mess. Although I already saw myself as the master of control over all of this delicate

ANDRÉ BUTZER, Herr Adolf Eichmann Sahne-Pudding Fabrikant, 2005. Oil on Canvas, 300 x 200 cm. Courtesy Patrick Painter, Los Angeles.

stuff and highly dangerous material, I had to get rid of it. I have learned a lot about physical color; now I merely dream of color.

JN*: How conscious are you of the implica- tions of national identity within the pictorial narration in your paintings?*

AB: Very conscious, so that I am able to abuse my own consciousness. I want to paint, and painting is no storytelling business, so some think there is an aspect of narration here, but there isn't. I took Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Eichmann and who else... and painted them as paintings. They will pollute the canvases until I die, and I am the one to endlessly clean my canvases in front of the audience, but I can't. They will stay contaminated.

JN: *You often speak of modern industry and have a fascination with iconic American in- dustrialists such as Henry Ford, Walt Disney and, might I add, Andy Warhol. Why the fas- cination with these achievements?*

AB: Same answer, same contamination, dif- ferent conclusion. I love seriality, but I have never made a real series. I do change over to the "death side" everyday, in order to get congruent with those who live there. But I bring a different message with me, which is not a text, and I will place it from the inside: this message is "N."

JN: *I've noticed, within painters of our generation at least, that historically we Americans tend to be in awe of certain modes of Ger- manic channels of representation and that you Germans have a strong interest in our American viewpoints of representation. Is this something you notice as well? Why is this?*

AB: I don't know. For most people this seems to be a question of Pop, and how you place yourself within this given framework of possi- ble world fame and world success. That world changed, this is for sure. This axis of domina- tion is destroyed, and that's good. There is too much art with English titles anyway.

JN: *That's a very diplomatic way to put it. You've mentioned to me before that your pro- tocol for painting a work begins with the rise of the sun and ends with the setting of the sun. Your work has a radical mood to it. How is this enhanced or diminished with the fluctua- tion of natural light?*

AB: I almost never use artificial light to paint. There is no better light for me than a setting sun. In the meantime, in order for a work of mine to get finished, it needs a lot of those sunsets in a row, changing natural light and shadows.

Above from left: ANDRÉ BUTZER, Friedens-Siemens IV, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 150 cm. Scharpff Collection, Stuttgart. Courtesy Hammelehle und Ahrens, Cologne; ANDRÉ BUTZER, Grauer Schinken, 2009. Oil on canvas, 170 x 130 cm. Collection of the artist. Opposite page: ANDRÉ BUTZER, Wanderer, 2001. Oil on canvas, 200 x 140 cm. Taschen Collection, Cologne and Los Ange- les. Courtesy Guido W. Baudach, Berlin.

JN*: In your recent exhibition titled "Der wahrs- cheinlich beste abstrakte Maler der Welt" [Probably the World's Best Abstract Painter] held at Hannover Kestnergesellschaft, Ger- many, the use of the word "Probably" is very smart. It lands the reader's mind somewhere in the future. Is the cheekiness of this title meant to be taken literally? Or is the literalness of this title meant to be taken as cheeky?*

AB: It's a major concession to the audience; it seems to weaken what I and a few others believe in, but it helps to create a friendly and entertaining atmosphere for people to start finding their own stance on what I do.

JN: *One of the new additions to your reper- toire over the past few years*

that I've noticed is the use of industrial paint as readymade, particularly in the colorful abstract paintings, and color on gray grounds. This is an interesting contradiction, juxtaposing the nondescript quality of "straight from the tube" application with the seemingly wild abandonment of gesture. This question may seem more of an ob- servation, but I would like for you to expand on this recent exploration of yours.

AB: Here again, I was aware that this was something to get rid of as quickly as possible — in the end it took me more than ten years. I started with this form of application in the late '90s and it always felt non-organic, at least to me, and I needed this aspect so badly. I saw them as cables, electric wires, straws and machinery. They were excuses for what happened in other parts of the painting. Ges- ture is a word that I do not understand to this day, and I will probably never understand what that is. There is no gesture. A gesture might speak of an individual who produces authority behind such a trace or mark, but what I do is not about me.

JN: *In expanding on this somewhat formal material question, these new monumental gray paintings with the two floating black linear rect- angles are heavyweight paintings. How did you arrive at these, or how did they arrive at you? They seem a particularly strong series of works, especially in relationship to some heavy tenor moments of compositional arrangements by the likes of Rothko, Matisse and Mondrian.*

AB: They came up when I wanted to replace the "straight-from-the-tube parts." In fact, the machinery part itself was to be replaced in its most fundamental way: a black line that came out of a tube had instead to be painted with a brush. Sounds like a down- grade at first, but then I felt: "Now you can start painting!"

John Newsom is a painter based in New York. "Crescen- do," his first survey exhibition, is currently on view at The Richard J. Massey Foundation for the Arts and Sciences in New York through December 31, 2011.

André Butzer was born in 1973 in Stuttgart, Germany. He lives and works in Rangsdorf, Germany. Selected solo shows: 2011: Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover (DE); Xippas, Montevideo; Carbon 12, Dubai; Guido W. Baudach, Berlin. 2010: Xippas, Athens; Metro Pictures, New York; Christine Mayer, Munich; Heinrich Erhardt, Madrid. 2009: Hiromi Yoshii, Tokyo; Alison Jacques, London; Xippas, Paris; Mário Sequeria, Braga (PT); Kunsthalle Nürnberg (DE); Max Hetzler, Berlin; Guido W. Baudach, Berlin; Patricia Low Contemporary, Gstaad (CH). 2008: Xippas, Athens; Gió Marconi, Milan; Pat- rick Painter, Los Angeles; Bernd Kugler, Innsbruck (AT); Metro Pictures, New York; Christine Mayer, Munich. 2007: Patricia Low Contemporary, Gstaad; Gabriele Senn, Vienna; Alison Jacques, London; Gary Tatintsian, Mos- cow; Guido W. Baudach, Berlin. 2006: Scheibe Museum, Stuttgart; Patrick Painter, Los Angeles; Gió Marconi, Mi- lan; Kugler, Innsbruck; Max Hetzler, Berlin. 2005: Ham- melehle und Ahrens, Cologne; Gabriele Senn, Vienna; Max Hetzler, Berlin; Guido W. Baudach, Berlin; Christine Mayer, Munich. 2004: Guido W. Baudach, Berlin; Kugler, Innsbruck; Patrick Painter, Los Angeles; Christine Mayer, Munich; Kunstverein Heilbronn (DE). 2003: Max Hetzler, Berlin; Hammelehle und Ahrens, Cologne. 2002: Chris- tine Mayer, Munich; Gabriele Senn, Vienna; Guido W. Baudach, Berlin. 2000: Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin. 1999: Esther Freund, Vienna.