



THOMAS ØVLISEN'S ART OF THE CHILDHOOD MEMORY IN HARD TIMES FOR HUMANITY

The Danish artist on the “puzzle” of art and what (good) art does—and doesn’t—do for the world

What good does art do the world anyway? If you wanna save humanity, join Doctors Without Borders, is the advice of trending Danish artist Thomas Øvlisen. But if you wanna be an artist, make good art that facilitates contemplation, work hard, and don't try to be like Axl Rose. Øvlisen's work is a playful, sophisticated peculiarity in a market bloated with hack abstraction like so many cronuts in the gut of a gluten-free health-foodie fallen off the wagon. Øvlisen's development of a visual puzzle is based on the raw material of childhood memories and he thus explores memory as its own experience. Moreover, Øvlisen embeds cultural criticism in his work—slyly recognizing “the square as a symbol of western culture,” for example.

With a show on the horizon at Klaus Von Nichtssagend Gallery in September, Øvlisen and I had a conversation via Skype about the state of abstract art and the state of humanity.

Interview by Rachel Cole Dalamangas

You're recognized as an abstract artist whose sensibilities are unusual to the history of abstract art.

Well. I never considered myself an abstract painter. For my degree project at RISD, I expressed abstraction as a symbol of our culture, rather than a self-referencing painting technique. You find abstract art everywhere, even on coffee mugs. So you can use abstraction as a symbol of our culture. It's a glorified aesthetic. Since the beginning I was interested in breaking down the genres in art or ignoring them at the least, so I paid equal attention to all 5 visible sides of my paintings.

These ideas gave me an excuse for making abstract paintings. I quickly learned that I also liked making beautiful paintings or good abstract paintings, and I developed the "satisfy my childhood memory" technique. I have always believed in good art.

For your project in the last issue of zing, you asked ten artists to contribute a drawing from memory of a childhood object. What is your "satisfy a childhood memory" technique?

When I started making abstract paintings, I thought about trying to satisfy, for example, a childhood memory of growing up on a lake and being in the lake and looking at the trees in the background. So I started doing these abstract landscapes that only I could identify. But when I could identify that aura and space, then I called the painting "done." My aim was to get that feeling and that specific landscape recollected.

The people who contributed to the project in zing are artists of all genres who have influenced me and made me who I am today. I thought it was quite amazing that,

Margrethe Sørensen, a woman in her seventies made a drawing on a project her father had done was she was a child. Dike Blair did an actual story on how scared he was in his first childhood memory. It's always interesting to define drawing and obviously these artists did everything but draw. The fun thing is that the director from Los Angeles, Brian Lee Hughes who works with film, was the only one who actually did a line drawing from memory, which is what I expected to receive from everyone, and he did a great drawing too.

To return to another statement you just made, can you explain more about what you mean by "abstraction as a symbol of our culture"?

I think that at any given point, art is used to critique our culture, whether it's the artist or the culture looking back in history. For example, if we want to understand what people were doing and thinking during the Renaissance, we look at the art they were making.

To me the square is very symbolic of western culture. It doesn't exist in nature. The prime monument of what we do is put a painting over a couch in the suburbs, solidifying one's achievement of being the happiest family on earth. It is the perfect symbol (monument) of a retarded culture (system) on autopilot. And abstraction, maybe through Cold War propaganda, has become the symbol of our freedom (coercion of others) and way of living.

What was the process for making your earliest works?

How I started making abstract paintings more or less happened by chance. While I was a student at RISD, I spilled black enamel paint and instead of wiping it up, I

painted everything in my studio the same color. Then everything I was working on became abstract. In my degree project, the paintings were all abstract, sanded to the point of almost no paint on the canvas. The idea was a simulation of nature. The effect of the elements raging on our cultural golden calf. The paint I had spilled was enamel and I my sanding was that of the auto body shop. Working with cars or mopeds is another childhood thing.

So when I ventured into image making in my first show, I exhibited the silhouette of Monument Valley with five graphically receding stars above them ingrained in the paint layering. I quickly realized that this use of imagery on my shaped and five-sided wall works rendered them canvas-like. They were just bearers of visual identifiable imagery. The sculptural part disappeared.

Art making in school is like putting together a puzzle. So, for the Monument Valley exhibit, I had appropriated the process of an auto body shop and I had simulated the weather and the elements. I used Monument Valley as the perfect image because it is a natural landscape named "Monument" and it's the perfect example of what is wrong with our cultural belief in dominance over nature. It's like when we cut a big hole in the biggest sequoia and then are like, "Look! We can drive through it! But oops, it died. Hey, let's do it to another one!"

Basically now I'm doing what I like.

I always did what I liked. I always felt it was the only thing to do as an artist. To honestly pour myself into my work. It used to be my childhood, but now I have kids and a great family and I pull from the many joys and strains in my everyday life.

The process and materials are transparent. You get what you see and feel, and my works are not trying to be something else. They are not trying to create an illusion. Now I don't really care about explaining it. I don't see my work as something to get. I want people to experience it and like their own experience.

Do you think with the rise of Internet and the tech boom that progress/devolution in culture is speeding up? How does cultural speed relate to the kind of art that is produced?

For me, I've always focused on making really slow art. It takes a lot of time for me to make work, and it takes a lot of time for the viewer to experience it. There are so many layers of the work and the materials change with the lighting. Art can do that—give you a break. Art can do a lot more than that too. But it is a place for contemplation. I think artists are the last idealists. I guess there's something kind of naïve about being idealist these days because it's tough times for humanity.

On your blog, you do espouse opinions that imply you really do believe in the efficacy of art and its place in the world.

I really do, but I don't try to explain that. Some artworks can just hit you with awe, but I just want to enjoy it.

How does art confront the terrible things that happen in the world? painted everything in the world?

It can, but I think it's very difficult to make art that doesn't border on propaganda. If you make work on such a big topic, it's easy to ridicule both the art and the topic.

I sometimes wonder if I should just join

Doctors Without Borders. I don't think I could save the world through my art.

I don't know if it's escapism, but entertainment isn't bad in tough times. Even if it's just room for contemplation, and a place to free your mind from other terrible stuff.

Of course art is central to humanity. It's cross-cultural and is a unique habit of our species.

It's like smoking. There's no tribe that doesn't smoke. Art and smoking.

But I agree. I don't think art in any direct way saves the world.

A great song can keep spirits high. Sometimes it's just the simple things.

If I can make work in terms of the aura of the work, if I can fill my work with love and happiness, it will communicate love and happiness the other way around. There's no way to prove that, but this is the pure essence of art for me.

That's kind of an old idea of what art is—an object imbued with some sort of magic.

I also think that the whole lifespan of the object acquires aura. I don't think that the process stops with the artist. The work takes on its own life.

The Romans and the Greeks had the idea of the muse—that genius came from the outside. The artist was considered great and honored, but it wasn't doubted that his genius came from the outside, which I think takes a lot of pressure off the artist. I think culture in general is still very modernist in its way of thinking. So obviously what's more important to culture is the

artist, the individual who is the genius. That's not the way I see it and that's one of the reasons I like abstract art. When you see my work, your experience of it is just as important as my making it. Your accumulated memory becomes a part of experiencing my sculpture. There are shapes and forms in the work that aren't quite recognizable but that are evocative so maybe you think, "Have I seen this before?" and then perhaps you start to play with your mind trying to figure out what's going on.

Furthermore, art is an old idea! I am not so sure art changes that much. Content and context are relative terms to experience and production.

On your blog, you wrote about the "idealized image of the artist in western culture."

Mary Bergstein was my degree professor at RISD and I wrote a thesis paper about the role of the artist based on modernist writing by Emile Zola. I was engaging with the idea that the artist is supposed to suffer, which has become a financial issue. The artist is supposed to give up his entire life in order to make a masterpiece and in reality most modernist artists came from pretty middle class, upper class families. They were able to make as much as doctors.

It's maybe easier to talk about rock stars. Nobody has to act like Axl Rose, but half of Brooklyn does. In reality, rock stars turn 25 and start doing yoga. Then by 30 they have kids. Then they go on stage and look and act like they're 15.

It is never sexy to be an addict.

What is your advice for emerging

artists?

Don't do drugs. And in the end, persistence is key. If you really, really want it, just keep on keeping on. The great thing about New York is that there are many pinnacles in the art world. Gagosian is one of them, and that's about a lot of money and hype. If you don't care about that, then there's luckily a lot of people who support other kinds of art.

You have a show upcoming at Klaus von Nichtssagend in September. What's that about?

It's a series of new sculptures. Simple, slanted cubes that happened really randomly and just started growing on me. They're light and playful, and at the same time they're heavy looking cubes. Then I have these flying buttress things that I lean up against the wall. And a few of my boards (DIY surfboards are another childhood thing). I think it's a more calm and mature exhibition of my work. A little bit less experimental (this isn't true, I have been told—it just feels that way to me). I'm really excited about it. artist,