

Patter Hellstrom's Sublime Choreographies of the Centered Self

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I: Experience as landscape "Expressive Flow" is the title of Patter Hellstrom's upcoming exhibition of remarkable abstract paintings opening at The McLoughlin Gallery on August 4. The title is apt as it conveys the psychological and oceanic quality of the works. Although at first sight one might be reminded of certain abstract expressionists (particularly Helen Frankenthaler), repeated viewings reveal an entirely original sensibility. The volatility of liquid has been channeled with extreme skill into compositions that are redolent with the rhythms of underlying cosmic processes. One feels that the surface is a laboratory, a theatre to witness the mysterious stages of an alchemical unfolding. The rich acrylic inks slide, stretch and swim across the polypropylene, the visual equivalents of musical sounds. The rainbow itself has been juiced and allowed to spread across the bone-white surfaces. The spectra are free to disengage from their natural orders and recombine in startling ways. There is great drama here of a natural kind. Natural in that the forms are related to one another through the agency of the materials and natural in the sense that these startling forms echo patterns seen at various levels of worldly phenomena. Here vivid washes move like rivers through a field. The roots of trees, bright forks of lightning or the expanse of deltas may also come to mind. During my visit in her studio the artist described grief as a landscape. One of her major series of paintings is called "[Grief Wounds](#)". Their genesis arose from the artist's experience of living through the destruction of the twin towers in 2001, as well as the unexpected death of a close family member who had just adopted a child. In speaking about these traumas the artist kept coming back to the visceral experience of the events, stored like maps in her memory.

Think of something extraordinary that has happened in your life, good or bad, happy or sad. Move through that event like a landscape. There is so much there. The various parts are like stones in the river of the mind. The force of memory crashes up against them. Hellstrom's paintings can be read as internal landscapes, summing up an entire array of emotions, experienced not as words but as palpable, moving events. Think of how often we describe emotions in terms of weather and/or nature: a storm, an earthquake, ice, water or fire. The motions of our inner world find a voice through metaphors drawn from the outer world.

II: World as body, body as world In the center of many of Hellstrom's paintings there is a clearly visible cross-hair, sometimes inside of a circle. A focusing device, it can easily vanish within the veils of paint. She explains that her work is very much about engaging the viewer by rooting him or her in the physical experience of looking. The scale of the paintings often matches that of the body. These bullseyes acts as magnets on the gaze. Works of art can function like mirrors as much as they can stand in for windows. These works in particular seek to connect

through the use of bodily analogies, anthropometric invocations. [Imagining the human body as a map of the cosmic orders](#) is a powerful idea found across cultures. This idea is referred to as the microcosm/ macrocosm model. Perhaps one of the reasons one feels so affected by Hellstrom's sweeping paintings is because of their scale and relationship to the body. The body and its internal components appears often in her work. Organs, bones and even the skull become subjects, celebrated in aureoles of color. The subtle washes are allusive to membranes, malleable masses about to combine or come apart. "Moon Spine" and "Oracle" are powerful reminders of the connections between the inner and outer realms of phenomena arbitrated by the middle-ground of the human experience. As we read in one of the oldest alchemical texts, the [Corpus Hermeticum](#): "as above, so below."

The economic collapse of 2009 and the coincidence of a total lunar eclipse with the winter solstice of 2010 were events that moved Hellstrom deeply. The shock of the first and the beautiful mystery of the second were experiences that called for visual expression, for artistic working-through. Conjunctions of color and form within the paintings acted as a healing force for the artist. This idea is something Hellstrom also discussed at length: that something poisonous can be counteracted through the introduction of something equally strong: art as antidote.

III: Around the wounds The "Grief Wounds" were the first works by Hellstrom that I saw in reproduction. They were also the first I saw in person. On both occasions my response was overwhelmingly physical. There is something at once intimate and violent in their textures. In person I was able to touch their surfaces. The holes were made a by 22 caliber handgun shot by the artist at a local firing range. I was shocked at how small the holes were. Clean and perfectly round as the punctures from an ice-pick, Hellstrom's signature washes have pooled around them, spreading in brilliant flares. One is simultaneously reminded of flames and blood.

Hellstrom's "landscape of grief" becomes a landscape of the wounded body. Trauma can break the surface of the skin, but how do we make visible the broken nature of the spirit, the emotional self when it encounters the violence of the world? How do psychic scars manifest and do they fade? The addition of salt to the paintings during their creation operates on the physical as well as metaphorical level. The granules create a fragile, barely discernible crust near the indentations. The quality of the paint becomes crystalline, scabrous as does skin during the process of healing. The pouring of salt into wounds is an act that can function as either torture or hygiene. The pain is merely a side-effect of the action as it occurs, regardless of the intention of the agent.

IV: Balancing acts and pole stars Many of Hellstrom's paintings refer to centering, of finding equilibrium in the midst of experiential flow. These compositions recall technologies of balance. For centuries the compass has allowed sailors to find their way across dark waters. The graphic representation of the device seen on maritime maps, replete with the [32-divisions of direction, is called a "compass rose"](#). The *fleur-di-lis* at the top represents true north. Hellstrom's "Due North" is built around confidence in an internal pole star, something undeniably accurate and unchanging that can guide the energies swarming through us toward order. An orbit of black and red globules wreathed in delicate halos are attracted to a perfectly drawn circle (and off-center black dot). The viscous and fuzzy phenomenal world is under-girded and pulled into shape by the clear lines of geometry, the unrelenting pull of unseen forces. Similarities between the relationships of the moon on tides and intuition on human action may be inferred. What is that mysterious force that moves us before thought comes into play? How do we make friends with instinct? What unseen power can we call upon in our moments of doubt and confusion?

In "Four Directions" the ghostly lines of the compass seem to flicker in the bold red circles of a target. Blue, black, red and yellow swim vigorously around this orienting quadrant. These circling densities have astronomical qualities: glowing and gaseous as the long arms of distant nebulae where stars are born. Likewise the cluster of dense crimson coils moving through the nebulae reminds us of the intestines in an anatomy atlas.

In the [Aristotelian and Galenic medical tradition](#) the universe was divided into four elements, four qualities and four humors. Up until the 17th century, this concatenation was an important part of medical diagnostics in the West. The body of the patient was echoed in the arrangement of these foursomes which were in turn connected to heavenly bodies. An invisible web of correspondences connected living things with elemental and astrological components. These "gut symmetries" are still felt when our eyes and hearts open under the night sky far away from city lights. We may no longer look to our horoscopes to understand our ailments, but wonder, like fear, still comes to us in the bodily reaction of hairs standing on end or of butterflies in the stomach.

V: Chaos & Choreography During my visit with Hellstrom we discussed chaos and its relationship to the act of putting brush to paper. Chaos is that great rush and whirl of experience. Chaos is the event as it happens before it is ordered, defined, or analyzed. Chaos has a complicated relationship to painting. One enters the space with an intention to create, to allow something to be. A seasoned artist like Hellstrom understands this ritual. The experience arises and finds forms as it is "expressed by flow through the implements of art." Hellstrom studied brush

painting under a master calligrapher in China. The word calligraphy kept leaping about in my mind and I suddenly realized that “choreography” seemed a better description of my experience of her sensuous lines and subtle washes. That marriage of skill and movement, of art and allowing also describes the choreographer’s process. Illustration Patter Hellstrom, “Dance 2”, 2010

In thinking of the dance I imagined the washes as veils, long skeins of silk being unwound through centripetal forces, the cross-hairs becoming a dancer. “Dance 2” is reminiscent of the watercolors of Rodin and others who sought to capture those early mothers of modern dance [Loie Fuller](#) and [Isadora Duncan](#). Speaking of exterior as manifestation of inner experience Duncan said: “The dancer’s body is simply the luminous manifestation of the soul.” And remarking on the tension between the chaotic force that rides the grids of order: “Within us lurks the breaker of all laws, ready to spring out at the first real opportunity.” Illustration Patter Hellstrom “Tantra”, 2011

This push against rules, this playing with chaos exhibited in “Dance 2” is taken to another level in “Tantra”. The energetic streams of color move from purple, black and blue toward yellow and orange as if mimicking the change of colors in the sky from night to dawn. If Tantra is the practice of pleasure through sustained attention (often with a sexual partner) then we can also read this picture as a visual record of simultaneous rising. The ascension of soul(s) from lower to higher states of awareness. The great teacher Osho speaks of Tantra as *a doing by not-doing*: “Everything happens in its own right time, you need not force it. Your force will not help. It will be a disturbance. It may destroy, but it can never be creative. One has to be very effortless, spontaneous. One has to be in a let-go.”

VI: The self in the silent center Illustration Gyroscopes always right themselves How can one both let go and be in control? Hellstrom has found a number of practices that help her do this, not only in art but in life: meditation, reading the great works of various religious traditions (particularly Buddhism) and in simply showing up every day to make art. “I must do this.” she says. “I do not have a choice. If I can’t make art I’ll die.” This is not a hyperbolic statement. In a world where anesthetic living has become commonplace human beings who engage honestly with the vibrant chaos of reality must find anchoring mechanisms. Like a gyroscope moving this way and that but always coming to a place of sane balance, Hellstrom’s painting show that moment, that location where disparate powers can find a sudden accord. Her piece “Venom Krishna” set me to thinking about this moment of reconciling. Here a golden drop has splashed into a river of indigo, blue and turquoise, spreading into the upper layers of the current. In Hindu tradition there is a

story that a giant serpent attacked a river filling it with his venom. Lord Krishna removed the poison simply through his presence.

In a similar tale when the Buddha was tempted by the demon Mara and his beautiful daughters, he was able to transcend the attack through the practice of meditation- through the fullness of presence. The arrows of desire and fear fell at his feet for he had already passed into another realm of understanding. The feelings, the thoughts, the hundreds of moving parts of the universe swirl around consciousness- that point of view we call "our self". To be alive is to be a point of attention among thousands of other points of action- nothing stands still, least of all our thoughts.

This enormous idea, at once so simple and complex fills Hellstrom's canvases- sometimes quietly, sometimes as strong as a tempest. Here chaos and order are always at play. The centering elements of cross and target, whirling figure or blank spot anchor the plethora of rich transformations. Despite the very serious theme of wounds and dissolution, chaos and destruction, there is joyfulness in all of these works. Their brilliant jewel tones and malleable glories of vanishing form seem to be a song of rejoicing in the fact that nothing that is alive can stay the same. The only place of safety and rest is at the center. Here the self sits anchored even as it watches an endless variety of games, of births, of deaths, of resurrections.