

Fridriks self-contained painterly explosions.

Calligraphy unfolds in duration and is the product of gesture. The temporality of a Sesshu is a distension of normal time: skills it has taken the body many years to acquire are mobilized and expanded in a performance that shows itself as both headlong and perfectly deliberate: since the power of decision has been transferred [...] away from codex and from langue to the body itself, the inertia of consultation with the codex, of choice and hesitation, has been by-passed; skill here consists in leaving the brush in the hands of a muscular intelligence.

The viewing subject proposed by calligraphy must approach the image kinaesthetically

(Norman Bryson)¹

Expansive and self-contained, of seemingly atemporal abstraction and reflecting the forms of contemporary reality, reminiscent of landscapes as well as Rorschach tests, full of demons, fairies, culture and nature, seemingly governed by both chance and mastery, analytical and synesthetic, Katrin Fridriks' works invite multiple approaches: physical and metaphysical... .

Arrested duration

Fridriks' paintings function as both traces of processes and immutable results. Their complexity is masked by their apparent simplicity. They master what cannot be mastered – or so it seems. Something which *still* appears to be essentially mobile, fluid, and even overflowing, is literally arrested in each of them. But this is more than formalism. **By fixing mobility, the paintings accumulate energy.** This energy is released each time a spectator looks at one of them. As our gaze follows the path of the paint, we reactivate the motion contained in the process of creation. The painting works as a storage device.

Actions and events

An action differs from a mere event by its intentionality. On the one side we have something that just *happens*, an event. On the other something that is *done*, an action. Whereas we passively suffer events, like the biblical Job, who loses his wife, his children and all of his belongings and can do little more than sit, watch and curse, we *actively execute actions*. Actions are thus linked to mastering our destiny, events to accepting it, to fate. There is an ontological gulf separating them.

While actions are also events – or give way to events – the opposite is not true. Not every event is an action – or linked to it. Paint, for instance, can just drip. But when action painters succeed, they seamlessly integrate human

1 Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1983, pp. 116/117

actions and natural events. Each successful painting of this kind thus makes manifest a series of events that have been mastered. **When Fridriks bends the flow of color, she gives us a feeling of control. Her forms look as if they could not be controlled. However, they have been controlled. They don't move. We are in charge.**

When the American critic Harold Rosenberg introduces the idea and concept of *Action Painting*, he insists on the fact that such paintings must be perceived as traces of actions. He speaks of the canvas as an *arena*, describing the painter as a bullfighter. But while his description introduces an essential shift by insisting on the process of creation as an important element to be taken into account when viewing a painting, it is not precise enough. While bullfighting is about two animal wills, Action Painting is really about human actions and/vs. natural events. Action Painting is about confronting a human will to the laws of gravity and motion². Each successful painting is the trace of a *victory* of human will over the laws of nature. But when a state of grace is attained, it is more than victory, it is *integration* of nature and human will in the process of creation. Such a painting is the trace of a fusion between the creator and nature. As Jackson Pollock explains in an interview, this state gives a creator the feeling that there is no more accident: "I don't use the accident – 'cause I deny the accident", the fact is that "with experience, it seems to be possible to control the flow of paint, to a great extent"³.

Fractals: The macro- and the micro-levels

But the *flow* evoked by Pollock is just one kind of event. Katrin Fridriks goes further. **She does not only control the flow of paint and the way paint dries, but also acts as a trigger for natural processes, chemical reactions, which create fractal structures on the paintings' surfaces. These processes give Fridrik's paintings a quite uncommon depth.** Her works are not only to be experienced from a specific, appropriate, distance. When we approach them, they do not simply disintegrate into paint, but give way to different experiences. As opposed to what happens in traditional, representational painting, where "we don't understand anything about this magic. Get closer and everything becomes blurry, loses its' depth and disappears; step back and everything is recreated and falls back into place"⁴ – **some of Fridriks' works become more representational when you get closer.** The magic is not how the paint gives way to an image when you step back, as art-critics and theorists from Diderot to Gombrich describe it, **but how the micro-level gives way to images that you don't see from afar.** Where we saw a blot of paint arrested in motion, we now see a landscape. **The reason for this could well be the presence of fractal structures in her works,** which reproduce on the micro-level what can be seen on the macro-level. "In contrast to the smoothness of artificial lines, fractals consist of patterns that recur on finer and finer scales, building scale-invariant shapes of immense complexity. Even the most common fractal objects [...] contrast sharply with the simplicity of artificial shapes."⁵ Moss or forest, they both have the same structure, and all of a sudden, what was just a white layer of paint from afar is an opening to the sky.

Using and mastering nature rather than relying on human action alone is thus a way to realize structures whose

2 Cf. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters", originally in *Art News* 51/8, Dec. 1952, p. 21

3 Interview with Jackson Pollock with William Wright, summer 1950, quoted in Clifford Ross (ed.), *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics*, Abrahams Publishers, New York, 1990, p. 144

4 "On n'entend rien à cette magie [...]. Approchez-vous, tout se brouille, s'aplatit et disparaît; éloignez-vous, tout se recrée et se reproduit." (Denis Diderot, *OEuvres esthétiques*, Salon de 1763, X, Paris, 1966, translation: KS)

5 Richard P. Taylor (et al.) "Perceptual and Physiological Responses to Jackson Pollock's Fractals", *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, Article 60, Volume 5, 2011

complexity leads us deeper and deeper down the scale towards miniature than it could be achieved through intentional human action alone. **We discover a new, rich environment for our perception when we go closer. Letting go of the desire of mastering every drop of paint thus is a way to achieve natural beauty in art.**

Activating time in pictorial space

It is a metaphysical cliché that some arts are 'temporal' arts and some are not. And the intuitive if vague metaphysical marker that distinguishes between them is the presence or absence of the *whole* artwork, at any given time, to the perceiver of it. (Peter Kivy)⁶

By incentivizing us to change our points-of-view, both laterally – to see how pictorial matter has been molded, discovering canyons and rivers – and by approaching the surface, Fridriks' paintings mobilize perception time, offering different experiences according to different kinds of engagement. As time passes, the experience of her paintings is constantly enriched. This phenomenon clearly opposes Clement Greenberg's statement according to which “the 'full meaning' of a picture – i.e. its aesthetic fact – is, at any given visit to it, most fully revealed at the first fresh glance” and who adds “that this 'meaning' fades progressively as continued examination destroys the unity of impression.”⁷

Not only does her work oppose Greenberg's judgment, **it also calls into question the idea that painting – perhaps in particular abstract painting – is somehow a-temporal, an art of space rather than time.** The constellation of elements in each of her works thus not only stores energy, but also time. Through its “depth”, each painting offers a differential “temporal program” to be activated by each viewer, reserving not one, but multiple experiences. The difference between the arts of time and arts of space, where the whole artwork is – or not – present as a whole to a perceiver, appears much less natural once you realize that a work does not exist without activation. **In works such as Fridriks' what is true in principle – the fact a painting is there as a whole at any moment of a viewing process,** while a film isn't – stops to be self-evident once the work is put to work. Unlike, for example, a bird by Georges Braque, which can indeed be seized in a split-second, and for which Greenberg's statement might be quite correct, **many of the works by Fridriks need time to deploy their aesthetic effect.** In this sense they are, once more, similar to great calligraphy: “The calligraphic work of Chu Jan or Sesshu cannot be taken in all at once, *tota simul*, since it has itself unfolded within the *duree* of process; it consists serially, in the somatic time of its construction”⁸

6 Peter Kivy, *Once-told Tales. An Essay in Literary Aesthetics*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2011, p. 76

7 Clement Greenberg as quoted by John O'Brian, “Introduction”, John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume I, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London, 1986, p. xxii

8 Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, *op. cit.*, p. 94

Self-containment

While Jackson Pollock has often been recognized as an influence, Fridriks paintings are more self-contained than Pollock's notorious all-overs. **Her works do not seem to result from furious movement around the canvas, but from a series of clear, centered gestures**, sometimes even a single one and some of her paintings indeed look like calligraphic writing in a yet unknown language.

By concentrating the “explosions” in the center of her paintings, Fridriks confers a sense of mastery to them which cannot be attained in *all-overs*, where the paint covers all parts of a canvas in a similar pattern. **Here all the energy is concentrated in an epicenter, a center of gravity**. Many of Fridriks' works indeed look like they had a source of energy at their heart rather than having a form being imposed on them from the outside. The feeling that her paintings *emerge* from the center contributes to the feeling of self-containment they evoke.

Spheres and illegible signs

Where Pollock's works often look like walls or grids, some of Fridriks' paintings are more like primordial oceans, overflowing with colors that make a world, with droplets hitting the white immaculate canvas above; others approach the look of spheres or signs that seem to hover in the air like the words that announce Belshazzar's punishment in the biblical scene painted by Rembrandt, and which only Daniel was able to read.

While drippings dominate Pollock's work, **Fridriks' is characterized by splashes, drops and languagelike glyphs**. Some of her work thus appears like a solution to counter what has been perceived as the perversity of abstract expressionism, centered on the artist's personality. Fridriks' approach could thus be seen as a way out of the predicament which drove Jack Tworkov, one of the first generation action painters, from his “hot' gestural painting” of the 1950ies and early 60ies to his “cool' measured painting” after 1966⁹. While Tworkov chose a more geometrical style to cool his paintings down, Fridriks' paint looks like it had been frozen while it was still hot. Where Tworkov didn't find a balance between his early and later style, Fridriks' education in Zen calligraphy and her self-developed technique allows her to combine the expressive power of gestural painting with the calm of Zen art.

Performing Space

Now what are space and time? Are they actual entities? Are they only determinations or also relations of things, but still such as would belong to them even if they were not intuited? Or are they such that they belong only to the form of intuition, and therefore to the subjective constitution of our mind, without which these predicates could not be ascribed to any things at all? (Immanuel Kant)¹⁰.

Talking about space in painting is not self-evident. After all, Modernism taught us that “a painting, before anything else is a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order”¹¹. Good thing we got over it.

9 Cf. Andrew Forge, “The Knight and the Barrier”, *Jack Tworkov Fifteen Years of Painting*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1982

10 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A23/B37-8

11 “Se souvenir qu'une peinture est [...] une *surface plane* recouverte de *couleurs en un certain ordre*”

Yes, Fridrik's paintings are flat. But not only. The paint sometimes gives them *relief*, they are molded. And they often look less flat than they are. They also can be part of an installation which is, quite literally, spatial.

In the context of the 56th Venice Biennale of the European Cultural Center - Palazzo Bembo, the artist created an *environment* (or installation) with 1 large scale painting 180x280cm and a Magnifying glass hanging from the ceiling allow the viewers to take a more *distorted* look at the painting, potentially inducing nausea. The explosive black and white paintings are part of a series of paintings on the *Stendhal Syndrome*, so named after the French writer Stendhal (Henri Beyle) and which describes an intense state of excitement and uneasiness which can be induced by seeing too many works of art. Stendhal describes his experience of first seeing Giotto's frescoes in the Basilica di Santa Croce (Florence) in 1817 in these words: Everything spoke so vividly to my soul [...]. I had palpitations of the heart [...]. Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling...". "Perception of the Stendhal Syndrome vs. Gene&Ethics - Master Prism" installation is not only conceived as representing the syndrome in question. They are supposed to allow visitors to experience something close to the condition described by the writer.

In this sense, the magnifying glass act like devices which amplify the experience of viewing the paintings, but can also trouble it. But it is by troubling us that they do more than just representing a syndrome, they make us perform it. However, they can also be approached from a symbolic rather than pragmatic perspective. Fridriks' works particularly invite us to adopt multiple viewpoints and vary our distance, realizing micro- and macro-viewings alike, to *glance* and to *gaze*.

Invading space

As for the depth of individual paintings, it can indeed be said that paintings by Pollock exemplify the flatness of the canvas that Modernism was so eager to preserve of all illusion of depth. Where most illusionist paintings hollow out the surface to create a feeling of depth, the movement is also opposite in Katrin Fridriks work. **Her forms dance in front of the painting's surface, they move into our space, the space that lies visually before the painting, rather than receding into the space that lies behind it. Some of her glyphs look like they had been drawn directly into the air. They approach us**, like a work by Delacroix, of which Charles Baudelaire said upon first seeing it, "it is as if a magical atmosphere had walked toward you". Such are the paintings of Katrin Fridriks: both traces of bodily actions and self-contained; both flat and full of relief; both fixed and containing time; both arrested and in motion.

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Paris, November 2013-2015