

“Perception of the Stendhal Syndrome”

For the 2015 Venice Art Biennale exhibition “Personal Structures” by Global Art Affairs Foundation, Circle Culture Gallery would like to propose a work by Icelandic artist Katrin Fridriks. We strongly feel that Fridriks’ work encompasses all aspects that are addressed within the announced concept and will further contribute to the exhibition by extending its scope with her exceptional artistic approach of bringing together a unique painting technique and a very profound subject matter.

Within human experience, time and space are inextricably entangled. Together they form the basis of our everyday life, and moreover, link it to the very beginning of life and thus existence itself: the big bang. It is this interdependence of the two concepts and their primal genesis that is in the center of Fridriks’ artistic practice. Throughout the history of painting, many seminal art movements have originated from the preoccupation with this relationship, ranging from the first narrative pictures of the Quattrocento to Impressionism, and most prominently Cubism. Yet, since the introduction of time-based media within the arts, many artists (and curators) have oriented towards preferring the intrinsic quality of time within film and video to address this essential issue. By means of developing an outstanding painting technique, Fridriks has overcome these limits of the medium of painting and expanded it by the category of time.

Experiencing Fridriks’ paintings can best be described as if witnessing a natural wonder, such as the eruption of a geyser, at this very moment. However, Fridriks does not actually depict such an event, but rather transcends the experience itself by capturing what can be termed the essence of the occurrence. On a more abstract level, this very essence categorically relates to the origin of the evolution of the universe from a singularity: It is this mode of energy that the paintings convey. Although banned on canvas, the paint only seems to have come to a temporarily halt, before continuing to swirl, swoosh and splash over the edges of the canvas – and into the space of the beholder. Rather than capturing a moment in time, her technique evokes a feeling of movement. The most prominent predecessor of working on a canvas placed directly on the floor to apply paint by physically moving around it, is the American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock. Ensuing from this seminal practice, Fridriks has developed her genuinely own technique, which is a combination of chemical and technical experiments with different qualities of paint and a choreographical act of painting. It is the interplay of the medium, the timing and the artists’ body that encompasses the fluid and organic quality of her work.

We would very much like to place Fridriks’ oeuvre within the context of the discourse that the series “Personal Structures” by Global Art Affairs has established within the past decade. For it is not only her artistic practice and the encompassing and engaging effect of her work that correlates with the issue of the interrelation of “Time – Space – Existence”, but also the philosophical matter of the work. At the beginning of every philosophical consideration stands the question of the point of view. With her installation, Fridriks takes an explicit stance towards this issue, as it is each individual human being that stands at the center of her art. She furthermore states, that her work only exists when being experienced.

The installation we propose for the upcoming edition of “Personal Structures” therefore pinpoints Fridriks’ approach to her work – and thus the world. “Perception of Stendhal Syndrome“ comprises one of her large-scale paintings (2,80 x 1,80 m), which will be conceived specifically for the exhibition space, a custom-made sculptural magnifying glass that is suspended from the ceiling, leaving a distance of 4 m between the lens and the canvas, as well as a small 50x50cm photograph of her performance “Dust of Galaxy”. The effect of this installation is tremendous, as the possibilities of viewing the work are multifaceted: Each visitor will have a complete unique experience when approaching the work and every slightest move will generate an entirely new image. Depending on the distance between the visitor and his/her gaze through the lens onto the canvas, the framed sections will be enlarged by various degrees, resulting in a recreation of the perceived image, as well as a deformation of the rectangular shape of the

canvas. This sensation will trigger instantaneous reactions, even when approached from further distance, and result in a preconscious involvement of the viewer. Due to the counterintuitive fact that the enlargement grows with distance, each beholder is forced to reverberate his/her own position within time and space instantaneously. By annotating the installation with a small documentary photograph of her first performance “Dust of Galaxy” from 2002, which shows the artist herself in a fetal position, sheltering a painted helmet amidst the womb of a large machine, Fridriks emphasizes the inherent conditions of each individual life as an existence within the universe.

The installation provides an experience of her work that at the same time allows for a macro-perspective and micro-perspective of the painting, thereby revealing the full scope of the mastery of Fridriks’ skills.

Conventionally – that is without the magnifying glass – the first impression of the series “Stendhal Syndrome” is a painting depicting energetic trails of deep black color on white ground. Its basic conception of two tantamount halves with a vertical axis running through its center alludes to the images of the Rorschach test. The abstract patterns furthermore employ what the Rorschach test is based on, the tendency of the human brain to find familiar shapes and attach meaning to it: one can find eyes gazing back at the viewer or even an entire wild creature within these contingent structures. However, just as in the case of the Rorschach test, this is only the entrance to an entire world, which ultimately is determined by the imaginativeness of the viewer.

The title of the series “Stendhal Syndrome” refers to a psychiatric disorder, which is associated with an overwhelming aesthetic experience while contemplating a work of art. It was first described by the young writer Marie-Henri Beylem under the pen-name Stendhal, who underwent a seizure after visiting the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence in 1817: „Deep in the contemplation of sublime beauty, I reached the emotional point where we experience heavenly sensations. When I left Santa Croce, I had heart palpitations. The life flowed out of me and I was afraid I would fall.“ With her installation, Fridriks refers to the possibility of such an intensive aesthetic experience, evoked by the beauty of a single work of art.

For over more than one decade, Katrin Fridriks has experimented with the single elements of painting and consequently developed her genuine painting technique to contemplate and express existential questions in life. For example, in her series “Gene & Ethics” and her enlarged drippings as in „Riding awareness - Nobel Messenger“. Fridriks practice encompasses a wide range of forms of artistic expression. Although she now focuses on painting and installations, her work also comprises performance and land art, such as the land art work “Energy Flow”. Although she now focuses on painting and installations, her work also comprises performance and land art. The proposed work, “Perception of Stendhal Syndrome“, thus constitutes the essence of her artistic career at this point, and we therefor consider it a congenial contribution to the intriguing concept of “Personal Structures.”

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