

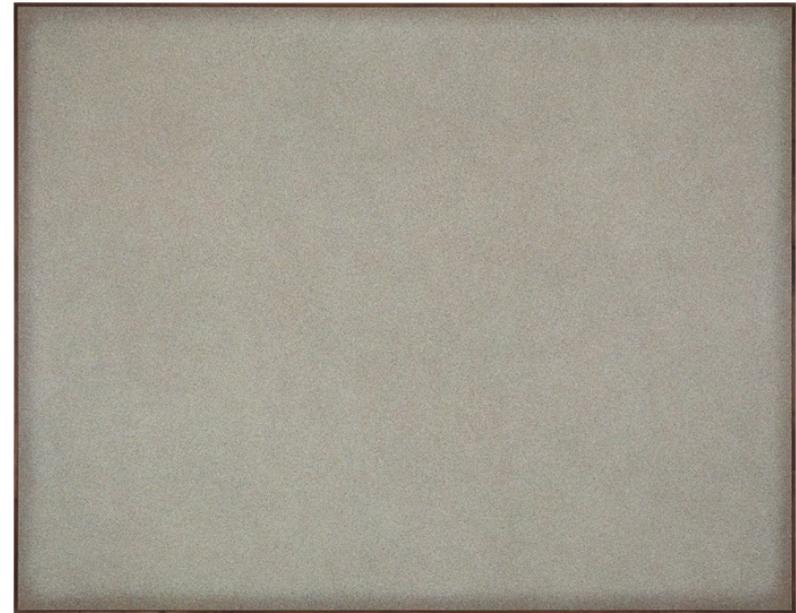
## Abstraction's Political & Infinite Range

*The Paintings of Paul Fägerskiöld*

For Paul Fägerskiöld, a picture is a living object – a subject – that propagates itself through the consciousness of the observer. His latest series of paintings evolves into an almost infinite cosmos. This cosmos opens the door for observation, and for the poetic and intellectual creation of meaning. The fewer concrete details we perceive, the clearer our introspective view can become. Fägerskiöld's most recent work is a kind of painting of dissolution, with colours melting together, forming illusionistic glimpses of an inner world. Under the surface, abstraction becomes representational. There is a slow deliberation to his work that makes it simultaneously easy and difficult for the observer to grasp the scene. What begins as a monochrome can dissolve into splatters of paint that evolve into a picture. Or the process may be reversed, from picture to monochrome and back again – and yet again. Whether the surface is representational or not is up to the observer to determine.

Perhaps we always judge the time in which we happen to find ourselves to be the fastest and most fleeting. And regardless of how we perceive time, Fägerskiöld's later paintings create some breathing space in our lives. His time-consuming working method seems to influence the way we read his works, instilling in us a nearly spiritual experience. At the same time, however, we should be a little careful about making references to a sublime spirituality. Instead, Fägerskiöld's work is based on concrete explorations of colour theory, cognition, and language. The titles of several recent paintings – such as *RGB* and *RGB-Y* (both 2012) – exemplify his interest in colour theory. The primary colours red (R), green (G), and blue (B) are used as the foundation for colour mixing in which the point of departure is the lack of light. Fägerskiöld adds among others yellow (Y), until we finally arrive at white. The paintings progress from darkness to illumination. The white, the free, the boundless invites interpretation. As observers our challenge is to liberate ourselves from our preconceptions and allow our senses to soar.

<sup>1</sup> Kristensson Uggla, B. *Slaget om verkligheten – filosofi, omvärldsanalys, tolkning* [The Battle for Reality: Philosophy, Context Analysis, Interpretation], Brutus Östlings bokförlag Symposium, 2002:27.



*Untitled, 2012, Akryl på duk*  
/Acrylic on canvas, 242 × 313 cm

[Philosopher Enrique] Dussel plays with words, and asserts that Europe never *discovered* the Other, but instead *covered over* the Other to make it part of the Same. In other words, America was not discovered as something particular, but was instead reduced to a clean surface on which Europeans could project their own desires (and fears).<sup>1</sup>

Fägerskiöld's paintings awaken our own desires, inviting us to make from them an image and content of our own. At the same time, as the quotation above reminds us, it is important to be aware of the political action in this process – how the act of creating our own worlds can be the product of our own prejudices and preconceptions. The challenge is to allow imagination to confront reason.

It is tempting to site pointillism as a starting point for Paul Fägerskiöld's latest series of paintings. Undeniably they remind us visually of the direction art was taking in the late nineteenth century, when artists such as Georg-



Untitled (detail/detail), 2012, Akryl på duk  
/Acrylic on canvas, 203 × 242 cm

es Seurat and Paul Signac, building on impressionism, created the scenes in their paintings by dabbing countless dots of unmixed colour onto the canvas. Fägerskiöld paints methodically, allowing spray paint to cover the canvas in layer after layer using the broadest spray nozzle and by not aiming it directly at the canvas. The spray paint is applied systematically until a composition emerges that can at first glance be perceived as an abstract monochrome.

Paul Fägerskiöld's paintings take time to construct. I use the term *construct* deliberately, because his working method may be described as an almost mechanical procedure. The creative process itself is less important, according to Fägerskiöld, and I can't help interpreting that as a reaction against painting as action – painting in which the performance of the creative process is considered just as important as the actual result, the most well-known example of which is *action painting*. But it is what happens next, in the meeting with the viewer, which is most interesting. The philosopher Alva Noë points out the importance of engagement, curiosity, and experience for the perception of art. And when we experience art we also come in

contact with the world around us.<sup>2</sup> Fägerskiöld's paintings may be perceived as demanding in this way. As an observer I must participate: the appearance and construction of the paintings vary with my physical distance to the canvas, and also with my inner sensory condition. That demands engagement and conscious contemplation.

But Fägerskiöld's work also includes clear references to historical painting. These are seen, for example, in conscious choices such as allowing the outer edges of the canvas to form a border for the picture. This creates the sense of a picture of a picture, at least when viewed at a distance. For the same reason Fägerskiöld allows a thin wooden strip to frame the canvases. After all, he works with painting, one of the most referential forms of artistic expression. And in an earlier series of paintings, *Minimalistic Landscapes* from 2011, there are conscious references to classical landscape painting: horizontally oriented canvases with clear horizon lines. At the same time, Fägerskiöld chooses to work in a larger format that also suggests historical painting. In *Sky Line*, a black line runs along the top edge of an unprimed canvas and forces the viewer to look up to see the horizon. Another in the same series, *Golden Gate*, is a stylized representation of the railing of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, and at the same time a nod to Caspar David Friedrich's well-known paintings of men gazing out over the horizon. But in contrast to historical or traditional landscape painting, Fägerskiöld's suite of paintings shows abstract landscapes simplified and built up of large fields of colour. And perhaps this is most clear in the third painting from the series, entitled *Poppy Field*, in which a large rust-red colour field covers about two-thirds of the lower edge of the canvas, creating a landscape view toward the horizon. The title also makes reference to Monet's painting *The Poppy Field, Near Argenteuil* from 1873 in which a field of poppies is built up of dots of colour in an essentially abstract manner.

In a larger group of paintings from 2010-11, using white paint on an unprimed canvas, Fägerskiöld has painted flags of countries that no longer exist. Among them we can note the German flag of the Third Reich (1933-45), the flag of the Swedish-Norwegian union (1814-1905), and the flags of a number of colonies that are often forgotten today. We can sense in them a political interest, and these paintings of flags refer to a collective memory and the importance of iconic images such as flags. But by painting only in white, Fägerskiöld eliminates a layer of information from the picture. Given the histories of many of these countries, the fact that he chooses white in particular could be seen as a reference to the white flag of surrender. As observers we are reminded that everything is constantly changing, that his-

<sup>2</sup> Noë, A. *Varieties of Presence*, Harvard University Press, 2012:1-2

tory and time never stand still, and that the idea of a nation can seem rather superficial in terms of aspects such as national borders, colonization, and linguistic differences.

A tangible interest in the role of semiotics in society may be detected in some of Paul Fägerskiöld's earlier series of paintings. Perhaps the clearest example is *Stolen Messages* from 2010/2011. Signs and short phrases are taken out of context and thereby given new meaning. "We Want Internet" is spray-painted in black over an unprimed canvas. Today, when we take Internet access for granted, especially in the western world, the phrase may seem banal. However, Fägerskiöld has taken it from an image sampled from a sign seen at one of the demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Cairo. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been cited countless times as central and indispensable tools for the demonstrations of the Arab Spring that began in 2010. These media forms made it possible for demonstrators to get their messages, including calls for democratic reform, out to the surrounding world. Awareness of this reference changes Fägerskiöld's painting. Suddenly we are all reminded not only of the *right* to express ourselves but also of the physical *possibility* of self-expression.

Another work from the same series shows a red cross with numbers and letters placed in the inner corners. At first glance it looks much like a mathematical formula. And considering Fägerskiöld's interest in hermeneutics, I see the painting as a commentary on the positivistic, measurable view of the world that often seems to dominate social discourse in Sweden. However, the cross and the characters do not in fact belong to the world of mathematics; these are the markings placed on many houses in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina's inundation of the city in 2005, when thousands of people died and many homes were lost. A human tragedy, caused by something as incomprehensible and indomitable as a natural disaster, has been transformed into a cryptic, unfeeling formula whose characters indicate, for example, the date rescue workers searched the house and which agency conducted the search, but also how many dead bodies they found inside. Fägerskiöld has pointed out that the count of the dead was often shown later to be inaccurate. And the question that arises then is how important the rescue workers thought it was to actually search these "abandoned" houses.

Yet another painting from the *Stolen Messages* series shows the two letters W and M separated by a vertical bar. I read it first as a separation between men and women, but the message in fact has been taken from another context entirely – it comes from a street construction in New York. In Fägerskiöld's work, nothing is what it first appears to be, and at the same time it is everything at once, and when he without hesitation copies a sign used by a gang to tag its territory, he closes the circle in terms of the function and meaning

of language in society. He who owns the language rules. At the same time, an ostensibly abstract idiom can mean everything and belong to all of us. But perhaps the painting with the words "White Guilt" scrawled over the canvas in white and black spray paint is the most powerful reminder of the inherent power and significance of both words and colours. Robert Smithson writes:

If colors can be pure and innocent, can they not also be impure and guilty? [...] The word "color" means at its origin to "cover" or "hide." [...] That color is worse than eternity is an affront to enlightened criticism. Everybody knows that "pathetic" colors don't exist. Yet, it is that very lack of "existence" that is so deep, profound, and terrible.<sup>3</sup>

Paul Fägerskiöld's work is an evident example of how colours can appear. Sometimes his paintings are merely pictures of pictures. But therefore they are, at the same time, so much more, their meaning so much larger than that alone. Perceiving this as observers requires that we have the courage to open ourselves to the free flow of thoughts and to resist limiting ourselves to what we can physically see. For this reason, I believe that Fägerskiöld's recent series of abstract paintings composed of dots are just as powerfully political as his earlier work. They are impure and guilty, and tell stories with the help of just a few words – if any at all.

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<sup>3</sup> Smithson, R. "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," *Artforum*, September 1969, p. 30.