

Sunset Boulevard

by Ruth Campau

1

Take Uranus, for instance
Or Saturn
The Sun and the Moon
Venus and the lines of the mount of Venus in the palm of my hand
pointing the way among the fallen leaves.
It is autumn
and I am in Gudhjem

2

Each work begins with a depression. Darkness and sadness. I walk around in the darkening atmosphere for days. A prison that has followed me all my life. Thought I had moved on, but I hadn't. The conclusion is obvious: there is nothing I can do about it!

3

A bubble has emerged far out on the horizon. On the surface. I gradually paint my way out of it. Out of the cobweb. Out of the loneliness. Out of the undergrowth.

4

It's noisy. There's so much noise in the world, so much racket. So much darkening and greed. There isn't enough oxygen to go around. If only I could set up a single blue screen – would it provide some shelter? Would it provide a momentary break from the wind? Some calm? Would it protect the warriors from their enemy? I realise that it helps me if I try.

5

On Naoshima – an island in Japan's Seto Inland Sea – I visited the Lee Ufan Museum. I was already familiar with Lee Ufan, but at the museum I saw Ufan's numerous studies focusing on the relationship between material and perception, more than on expression, representation and intervention, which Western artists were absorbed with. These many paintings whose blue (and red, but especially blue) brush strokes begin at the top and continue in a straight line down across the canvas until the brush runs out of paint. This type of study resonates with me. It is a declaration of intent to study this! It's that simple. Let's look at the small

variations; let's look at how much paint a paintbrush can hold. Let's see what happens. Leaving us there in our own awareness. Help yourself.

The artistic trend is called Dansaekwa or Tansaekhwa, meaning "monochrome painting". It emerged in the mid-1970s in South Korea, which is also Lee Ufan's native land. The trend was more than just a minimalist project, and it arose from a holistic Korean philosophy of life. The Dansaekwa artists were aware of the pain and mental anguish experienced by the people of Korea after the Korean War. These artists believed that art should unburden, even calm the beholder, soothing the wounds like a balsam, momentarily bringing the beholders out of their anguish and perhaps even making them feel better.

This idea fascinates me. My own concentrated, meditative strokes have the same retroactive power over me personally. They calm me, and I momentarily let go of all the chaos filling my life. I push the mound of paint away from me. I spread it out and away. A cleansing of sorts. A healing.

6

I place the broom at my foot and push the paint away from me. The body is my engine, and I try to perfect my brush strokes into long, straight, concentrated movements so the broom can delineate its soft sweeps of paint in one long, unbroken flow. The paint dries fast, so I have to decide whether the brush stroke is exactly where it should. In other words, the brush stroke's 'potential'. Should it be more opaque or more transparent? How much light should be able to pass through it? The brush stroke mustn't be inconsequential; it must evoke something or convince me of its *raison d'être*. Time becomes a decisive factor. This is a here-and-now situation. My brush stroke becomes an imprint of a brief interval of time. Of the intimacy within the brief period of time that it took to paint it and decide whether it was OK.

I'm usually quite slow at making decisions, by the way. But the situation creates tension. It compels me to abandon my thought processes and surrender myself to my sensory perception and intuition. It becomes an action painting of sorts, where my body is also making many of the decisions. The flow! The ritual! The breathing!

7

For years, my maximum format was three metres, as my body couldn't reach any further than three, even with a broom extender. I've now worked out how to walk along the sides as I push the broom through the paint – as long as the format isn't too wide, that is. It must be possible for me to walk up and down along both sides to reach into the middle – with my arm fully extended. I did this for the Sunset Boulevard installation, for instance, where the longest painted Mylar panel measures 9.6 metres.

If the length of the format is challenging, the width of the format is not a problem – it's endless! In principle, I could keep going forever. Stroke upon stroke. The sections of the painting base (whether acrylic or Mylar) can be invisibly interconnected. In principle, this enables me to paint a painting that could encircle the Earth. And round again – and again. I consider my paintings as never-ending – or rather they have a never-ending quality. And as such they become part of something bigger that is unfathomable to us. But we can experience parts of this infinitude and try to allow our imagination to reach even further. Perhaps I hope that, in so doing, my paintings will embody something essential.

8

Horizontal versus vertical. I'm fond of breaking down the dimensions – I like how this lets me disappear into another universe. To me it's like disappearing into a landscape – something that envelops me and must be experienced by my whole body. Not just something I see with my eyes. It doesn't need to reveal itself at first glance, but it must force the onlooker to walk around it and/or into it. Like being in a painting with a colour perspective, glazing, overlaps – all of which are effects from the painting that I set up quite intentionally. I open up the painting so you can see what's in front of it and behind it.

9

I began by working on acrylic sheets in 1999 after I grew tired of the materiality of the canvas. The canvas sucked all the light out of the colour. If I painted on acrylic, on the other hand, I could get the light to expose the colour so that it radiated. I could apply the paint in a thin layer on the acrylic so I could dissect the colour. Like examining a blood sample under a microscope to study its contents. Under a magnifying glass, you see an entirely different microscopic image, which is where you find its properties, Yes, but also its intrinsic nature – and beauty.

I was also fascinated with a computer screen's rendition of colour, for the very reason that it backlights the colours. I wanted to optimise the colour's intensity. Find my way into the wildness of the colours. Find my way into the hysteria. Or into the sedative quality. That's why the acrylic panel worked so well. It could communicate colour because it allowed the light to break through. Glass – completely clear glass, that is – can do the same thing. And then I discovered Mylar. A polyester film of sorts. Or what they call a copolymerisation of ethylene glycol and terephthalate. I call it Mylar because that's what it is known as in New York City, where I lived for a while. Painting on Mylar, a type of polyester film, is like painting glazing on a painting. You can see what's underneath. Many people think that the focus of my work is light, but it isn't. I exploit the light. To make things visible. Light evokes realisation. And, to me, freedom and transcendence as well. I also make room for a spiritual dimension.

10

I simply loved the blue sky that always floated over New York. If the Sun disappeared, it came back in a flash. It changes, it pulsates. The city buzzes, hums, rumbles and hisses. It was enormously liberating. You could remake yourself again and again. Switch moods just like THAT!. Standing in Times Square is truly a disturbing experience for your nervous system. Being surrounded by all these colours and neon lights has a profound, uncontrollable impact on your body, which replies by emitting endorphins throughout your body – that's what happened to me, at any rate! I felt a profound sense of happiness surge through my body.

My stay deeply affected my artistic style and expression. I discovered exciting new materials that I couldn't buy here in Denmark. Chinatown was unique with its synthetic profusion of vinyl, Mylar, glitter, mesh, etc., etc.

To me, New York City is the quintessence of Andy Warhol and his 'factory' where every boundary was broken down, and mass culture entered the scene without petty regard to whether it was genuine art. Advertising, design, fashion, performance, film. The Campbell's tomato soup can. The silver pillow. Elvis in

silver, Marilyn in neon. I felt like a teenager in response to all that glitters, all that wildly changes and is unabashedly silly.

That's when I began painting on Mylar. Suddenly I could create paintings that softly extended from wall to ceiling. This made large installations possible. Landscape paintings. Or large-scale sunset paintings, like *Sunset Boulevard*.

11

But the biggest impact on my art came as far back as 1976 when, as a 21-year-old, I visited the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, long before I had visited the National Gallery of Denmark, and long before I had ever been to Copenhagen. My American sweetheart at the time took me in to see the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art where I saw real art for the first time in my life. And there I was rendered speechless by a big installation by Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz. A big installation (or assemblage, as it was also called) that you could walk around, into, discovering new aspects and encountering strange new things and objects that altogether embodied a powerfully critical break with the world of capitalism. American installation artists were seeking to break with the modernist vision of artwork as an absolute, self-reliant entity. They allowed the use of multiple media and expressions in their works that occupied the space far more. Spaces and settings that could be architectural, institutional or social. It was my first encounter with installation art. It had a profound impact on me.

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At the same museum I also saw paintings by artists such as Frank Stella, Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly. The many American painters of the post-war era boldly expressed themselves with coarse brushes, if they even used a brush at all. Household paint was used, and Pollock's 'drippings' introduced a style of action painting. Here and now. The rebellion was embodied in their attitude: take it or leave it! My American sweetheart and I drove through the States with innocence and the future in the trunk. California's openness and bright sunshine came roaring into my awareness, and whenever we were greeted by "How are you doing, guys?", I felt so far away from my native island of Mors back in Denmark that I could hardly believe it was true. My hair was blowing in the wind along Highway 101, and as we drove through the southern states of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Florida, my horizons expanded more and more – the endless vistas rolled past, all the while the ground plan of my house loomed in the rose-coloured desert haze. All of it was arranged on my inner palette.

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Later on, my focus shifted to painting across an expansive panel, where Katharina Grosse became my singular role model. But the powerful colour schemes of other contemporaneous German artists – such as Isa Genzken, John Armleder, Tobias Rehberger, Anselm Reyle and Katharina Fritsch – have also been inspiring to follow.

In a slightly more cultivated and austere vein are British painter Liam Gillick, French painter Daniel Buren, and my good Dutch friend Jan van der Ploeg.

Personally, I'm probably somewhere between an austere conceptual approach and frivolous pop art. I feel almost like an alchemist in my studio when I can explore and experiment with combining the right ingredients at my leisure – and boil it all together in a pot.

At my workshop, I have all sorts of colours, films and glitter, as well as thousands of colour samples, discarded cuttings from old works, sheets of Dibond, mirror acrylic, nail polish, radiant sheets of acrylic, foam, cardboard and paper, gold leaf and brocades, even volcanic ash from the eruption of Mount St Helens in the state of Washington, which I had the good fortune to see. And I even have a number of tins of Diamond Dust. Isn't that a beautiful name – Diamond Dust? It's synthetic glitter made of glass, but there are minuscule bits of diamond crystals in the universe – diamond dust – that are continuously falling down upon us in microscopic amounts that we can't see.

14 (Mors, c. 1961)

Glowing yellow, orange and red – a flaming sphere touches the fjord. The fjord, which is usually dark blue, grey or greenish black, lights up and is now gleaming in the calming colours of sunset.

I look at the sphere through the window overlooking the avenue, a window my father had installed because he wanted to watch the sunset from our living room window. He had asked the architect to make a big window facing west, even if the only thing it looked out on were big trees. Then my father felled the trees to give us a beautiful avenue of grass down the slope towards the large meadow where cows grazed in the evening, and this was the exact same spot on the horizon line where the Sun set on Limfjorden, bathing everything around it a yellow, orange and red veil of haze. The fjord, the avenue and the trees were coloured and transformed – infusing the light with a calming, peaceful atmosphere all the way into the living room. Then darkness fell, purple and black.

I admired my father for his aesthetic achievement. For taking pains to bring light and beauty into our daily lives. For appreciating irrationality. For knowing that it means something. Knowing that we would get something in return. It opened up a chamber of my heart filled with yellow and orange – as well as one with purple and black.

Back then, I didn't think about what a sunset could mean besides the end of the day and that a new day would dawn tomorrow. That, metaphorically speaking, a sunset can signify how something is nearing its end and dying. As we all do. As we all must. The day will come. When? It's easier if I say: Happily, we don't know when, because knowing that, of all things, would be a heavy burden to bear. And death is a difficult word that we use only with great care. But we can talk about the colours.

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A colour like yellow is many things. I love titanium yellow, which is slightly muted, but if mixed with neon yellow, it works. Or perhaps start out with a primrose yellow – yummy! I love cool yellows. Preferably mixed with a little black, making it a bit toxic and acidic. Moist. Dangerous.

I don't feel I'm trying to keep up with any current trends through the colours in my art. But obviously I capture a spirit of the times in terms of the technological development of the specific colours that are available. The actual manufacture of colours is growing and developing, and I like keeping up with this. New iridescent and metallic colours are being introduced into the market and attracting my attention. Gels

and media are being developed on a large scale, giving colours all sorts of characteristics, such as transparency and porosity, for instance. If I can force out or conjure up a new intensity in a colour, then I'm pleased.

Without noticing it, I'm suddenly attracted by a different colour – a deep blue, perhaps. Something like a midnight blue mixed with a bit of highly pigmented Dioxazine. A Payne's Grey with Vampirella (can you imagine a deep, blueish-black mixed with vampire blood?).

I regard all colours as possibilities and, thus, as having equal importance. All energies are important and have the right to be developed. But the colours of a work are the most irrational, because their effect is so inexplicable and non-verbal. Yet their mystical quality is preserved exactly within this realm – of the non-verbal.

16 (Gudhjem, October 2021)

During my stay in Gudhjem, I experienced how the sea swells up and turns blue, like in a Lergaard painting. As in "Green Landscape by the Sea" from 1941. Even though I knew that Niels Lergaard had lived on Bornholm, I always thought when I was younger that Lergaard had painted a Mediterranean landscape, perhaps from Greece, with all that blue sea and those brown slopes! But now I understand why he painted the way he did. The same thing happens here. This is how the sea is experienced here. It rises up and creates a new horizon.

It's October. The clear light of autumn paints the sea blue. I mean blue with a capital B: a great big capital B. And the landscape stands out razor-sharp with the colours Yellow and Red and all the nuances of Orange between Yellow and Red. The sky above the sea is constantly changing, and the nuances become one long seductive sequence of visions. And when darkness falls, it gets dark. Black. Pitch black with the roaring sounds of the sea. The horizon disappears. I want to paint the space on the lower floor blue. Lergaard blue!

17

The Bornholm Art Museum is situated near the Helligdomsklipperne cliffs along the north-east coast of Bornholm. The cliffs were named after a sacred spring that once flowed down to the coast here. The water in the spring was believed to have healing properties.

The architect who designed the new art museum (built in 1993) has preserved the narrative about the spring by incorporating a channel in the granite through which the water can flow (what a beautiful idea, in my view!). The spring bubbles up in the foyer and flows through the entire building, down through "Gaden" which the atrium is called (I would turn it into a boulevard, but that's just me).

For my exhibition at the Bornholm Art Museum, I wanted to produce an installation that relates to the island in a site-specific manner and to the magical narrative reflected in the museum and its location at Helligdomsklipperne. I wanted my work to join forces – visually and spiritually – with the sacred spring which the architect let bubble up all the way into the architecture. I wanted to install my work in the atrium so it billows its way down through Gaden, in the same air space between the museum's characteristic effect of daylight and the similarly distinctive groove in the floor through which the spring flows. I envisioned using simple techniques to install my painted swaths of Mylar so that the entire work merges into one big magical universe of colour.

The colours of Sunset Boulevard need no explanation. But to perceive the colours, you will need your body and senses. I can't know with certainty how the installation will end up working, because I can't hang it up like a normal painting and evaluate whether it works. But I can bring something into play that in my view can communicate a sublime universe of colour and light to the beholder. The skylight in the atrium is so intense and well-organised by the architect that the light and shadow conditions themselves are experienced as an inherently architectural work. So my work should preferably merge with the architect's work and add a third dimension. Which doesn't mean that my work couldn't be set up somewhere else, but that there is scope for something quite unique to occur right here in the Bornholm Art Museum.

The visitor is free to interpret the formal technique I use, but I hope that the progression or walk down Gaden has an in-built potential for transformation. That its encirclement and complexity have the potential to urge the beholder to reflect on the magic of life. "Sunset Boulevard" is a visual view of the day's rhythm – from cold brightness to deep darkness – but it can also depict an entire life story.

18

The dark room on the lower floor gives us a break. In this space, no conversation is needed.