

Between the Luminous and the Grey

By Ditte Vilstrup Holm

Ruth Campau applies long, straight strokes of paint to the entire length of the surface. She works with her body. The brush is a broom on the end of a long handle. The surface is a transparent sheet of acrylic or mylar film. It lies flat on the floor. Using the broom, she pushes the paint from the edge closest to herself towards the edge furthest away. From top to toe, until the entire surface is covered by a thin layer. It could be a luminous yellow – a recurrent colour in several of Campau's works – a shining silver-grey, or one of the numerous other shades she uses to construct her works. Each surface has a single colour that alternates in intensity and pastosity with the force of the brushstroke and the opacity of the paint. The lines extending along the length of the surface reveal traces of the broom.

The painted acrylic sheets and mylar films are the building blocks of Ruth Campau's art – elements that are cut up, folded, hung or in other ways made into an object or installation. Campau's art practice can be positioned within 'the expanded field of painting' that extends classical painting in the direction of more spatial, installational forms. But the expanded field of painting is more than that. It is also characterised by the exploration of new artistic materials, like the transparent 'canvas' of acrylic and mylar, and the liberation of the specific characteristics of painting, like colour, in the direction of new forms of artistic expression. The expanded field of painting embodies everything painting can when it leaves the framework of the traditional, flat canvas.

The Spatial Expansion of Painting

Ruth Campau's paintings have been spatial and installational from the very beginning. Her artistic point of departure was not in the European tradition of easel painting, but on the West Coast of the US, with inspiration from its vast nature and the experimental spatial art shown in museums there from the late 1970s onwards. In other words, her starting point was the point at which art stopped being an object and started occupying space, both inside the gallery and outside in the city and nature.

In the context of painting, it was not until the 1990s that a concept of an expanded practice was introduced. In retrospect, we can see that the Abstract Expressionists and Colour Field painters took the first steps, because their approach to the canvas as a potentially infinite, expanded surface pointed in that direction – as did their working method, involving the entire body rather than solely manual precision. But it was not until several decades later that the crucial installational steps were taken for painting, at the same time as painting had

proven its ability to survive the ideological warfare that had repeatedly declared it dead and done as a chapter in art history.

In Denmark, Ruth Campau was one of the first to introduce expanded painting, both with her own artistic practice and as the curator (with Michael Mørk) of the exhibition projects *Paintbox* (1999-2000), *Paintbox Extensions* (2003-2004) and *Box 2.0. Art and Architecture in Collaboration* (2004-2005). Ruth Campau herself says it took several years for her to develop her specific form of painting: the use of the broom, the consistency of the paint, and finally the introduction of transparent 'canvases'. During this process she has refined her intuitive sense of the quality of colours, and their potential to interact with each other and their surroundings. Ruth Campau has completed numerous public commissions, and is able to introduce a single coloured surface or structure in both new and existing spaces to great effect. These include her installation of yellow, green and blue sections of silkscreen printed glass at the residential property Nordlyset at Amerika Plads in Copenhagen (2002-2006), and her graphical work on a three-storey concrete wall on the VUC campus in Vejle (2014).

Painting as an Alchemist's Laboratory

In the book *What Painting Is?* (1999) the art theorist James Elkins argues for the parallels between the practice of painting and the occult practice of alchemy.¹ His reasoning is partially historical, and partially speculative. Before the establishment of modern science, there was in fact a lot of similarity between the artist's studio and the alchemist's lab. Both worked with stones and liquids, the painter mixing powdered stones and liquid binders into paint, and the alchemist mixing liquids to create the philosopher's stone. Both experimented with high-risk, highly toxic ingredients.

In a contemporary context, the comparison is more speculative. It is about the practice of painting, or rather how the final expression of a painting relates to its creation: the way the brush has been wielded and the ingredients that have been used. Painting has not become a science like alchemy, which developed into chemistry. The art of painting is still intuitive and tied to the experience of materials. There is no formula for how a painting should be made, but rather a knowledge based on experiments.

In this way, painting can be seen as an alchemy lab, and with the expanded field this laboratory moves into the art gallery. The focus of the experiment is thus no longer limited to the materials of painting, but also includes the viewer enveloped in its visual explosions. This is especially true of Ruth Campau's current exhibition at Overgaden. It shows painting as a laboratory of tests and experiments, where fragments and elements carved out of other works are given life in a new installation.

Chromophilia

Working site-specifically in public space, artists have to relate to pre-existing visual elements. Ruth Campau therefore usually works with simple, precise elements: a monochrome surface, re-working a single surface in a space, or other simple interventions that have a significant impact in an already complex context. The white cube of the gallery, on the other hand, offers the possibility of maximising the capacity of painting to create light, reflections and contrasts. Here the potential of colour in particular unfolds to great effect.

We could call it chromophilia – the love of colour. The potential of colour is central to the work of Ruth Campau. It can be the potential of a single colour, as in *Naphtol Red Light 419* (2001), where the title's eponymous shade of red spreads across a massive 4.8 x 9 metres ranging in tone from warm to cold – a key work in Campau's oeuvre. But it can also be the correlation between many different colours or between the colours and the transparent, light-generating canvasses she works with. In Campau's works there is an intense interplay between light and colour, which rubs off on their surroundings.

Contemporary Colours

Campau's colours are in a sense absolutely modern or absolutely contemporary. They exploit the possibilities presented by contemporary technology, and optimise the effects contemporary colours can create. Artists have done this throughout history, but their conditions and preferences have varied. In the Middle Ages the preference was for the kind of colours that flowed naturally and luminously from sources like precious stones and gold, during the Renaissance the most precious – and costly – colours were those that were difficult to extract from nature, and when science and the Industrial Revolution created artificial colours and delivered them in tubes, entirely new colouristic possibilities opened for modern painters.

Whilst the Modernists worked with primary and secondary colours, with colour wheels and colour scales, the Abstract Expressionist and Colour Field painters allowed themselves to be seduced by the potential of scale. Paint was now produced and sold in large tins, and could be applied to large surfaces. Parallel to this, the Minimalists threw themselves into using new industrial materials like plastic and acrylic, which were better at retaining and reproducing colours. Campau combines both strategies: large surfaces painted on a plastic surface. But above all, it is the colour scheme and the transparent base that make a difference.

As the colour theorist David Batchelor points out, the colours we see today are the result of the petro-chemical industry, electrification and electronics. 2 Contemporary colours have a special reflective and luminous quality: they are

shiny, glossy, metallic, fluorescent and glowing. They are in many ways precisely like the works of Ruth Campau, or vice versa – Ruth Campau is able to fully exploit the colouristic possibilities of the present. Even the grey colour that recurs in her works becomes luminous, metallic and reflective, like a puddle on the tarmac at night. Maybe this is what Yves Klein meant by the painter of the future being a colourist of a kind never seen before.

Ditte Vilstrup Holm has an MA in art history specialising in contemporary painting, and is a reviewer for the online art journal *Kunsten.nu*.

Translation: Jane Rowley

1. James Elkins, *What Painting Is? How to Think About Painting Using the Language of Alchemy*, Routledge, New York, 1999.
2. David Batchelor, *The Luminous and the Grey*, Reaktion Books, London, 2014.