

The Mechanical Strokes of the Body

The visual artist Ruth Campau strives to create presence and transcendence by means of a brush, a few colours, and canvases of max. 220 cm in height.

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By Trine Ross

Translated by Michael Münchow

It's about surface, about getting the paint onto the canvas. About repeating and perfecting my movements with the brush to the point of mechanical strokes. The repetition provides the painting with its content." Thus explains the painter Ruth Campau, as the sun stands carved within the windows, almost as edged and distinct as the factory building facing her studio. The simplicity and concentration of impressions are repeated inside where only three works fill the walls.

"It is not the painting as an image that preoccupies me, the depicting and narrative painting; and it is not the 'pure' painting cleansed and minimised, but rather a new an abstract and conceptually orientated painting which also involves the motility of the body, space and the surrounding space.

Ruth Campau's paintings are stripped of illusion, and there is no other trace of reality than the time which is physically encapsulated by the vertical colour strips.

"I must be totally present - otherwise it goes completely wrong, and I have to start all over again. A very minor error, even in the bottom layer, can still be seen in the completed painting and may easily mean a 1000 Kroner note wasted."

Campau paints her paintings while they are lying flat on the floor. Completely flat, otherwise the strokes of the brush become irregular. The canvas is thus vulnerable to an uneven support and open to the movements of the tools and impulses from above.

"I work with an intensified time, since I can't go back and change anything. It has to be done all at once. The work can't be resumed. And it is precisely that presence which to me is essential. It is here that the painting rises above the material and strives towards the spiritual. A kind of transcendence or being, one could say. The concentration of energy lying in the execution becomes the expression of the painting. My presence becomes the presence of the painting in space before the viewer. My paintings are to be presences within a space."

The large format

Campau is born in 1955 and is self-taught. In her own words, she was "rather late" and hence thought herself too old to attend the Academy. Instead, she has travelled a lot, sought inspiration and found her own way to the style she has reached today. Often they are large formats relating to the surrounding space and its architecture. Painting which approached installation.

"To me, it is important to make art. If someone wants to buy any of my paintings, then it's their problem to find a space for it, although it would be perfect to create a painting for a specifically given space, a decorative piece in someone's home or at work."

Campau has never been asked to do that kind of decorative work, although her paintings would work well, both in private home and in a larger institution.

"In Denmark, generally, conceptual painting is not that widely known. People would rather have something figurative and preferably with a touch of Nordic sadness of Danish cosiness, which my pictures aren't exactly about."

"It is more painting as an object that interest me. A painting with an expressive touch, namely the brush stroke, but which is still formal and instrumental in its appearance. The whole principle is here that the body reveals its participation in the painting. I must be able to reach the entire length of the painting and this gives rise to a limit: How far can I with my body reach?"

Therefore Ruth Campau's paintings are a maximum of 220 cm in height.

"I like the large format. The body disappear into a large painting, be completely surrounded by it, and become small oneself. A small format may to a larger extent be contained within the body."

The small details

But even if the execution does not take all the long, the basis of the painting has been thought through very carefully. The relation of the format to space and architecture, its relation to range of the body, and as a strategy the colour layers are constructed according to the basic principles of colour theory so that the painting, in addition to black and white colour layers, also contains complementary pairs of colour. In a painting like 'Red Surface I', green is thus at the bottom, applied quite evenly with a window brush. The next layer is black, and then white, and outermost lies the red colour which gets its depth and variation from the underlying layers.

I like to know that my paintings contain contrasts of colour, and I also think it can be felt, even though it is not immediately visible. My works are simple and pure, but they require both time and attunement from the viewer. It is the small details and the sensibility which provides the experience."

"Whatever associations he or she might get are, on the other hand, none of my concern. They are an opportunity for experiencing one's own presence and an offer to contemplate. These are not painting that scream, and they are not paintings providing answers, although I hope they may give rise to questions about creation, origin and being."

Paintbox

Ruth Campau has recently started the newly opened exhibition space PAINTBOX in Bredgade 65 B.

"Reflections on the status of painting and on painting as a medium is a recurring and pertinent question to all painters. The ultimate painting does not exist, and it is futile to speak of the death of painting. As such, painting is a practice which is continually being defined in relation to the other art forms and to the general development in society at large. The conceptual painting reflects on its own possibilities. Together with five colleagues, I have hence tried to create a framework for this painting, since this is really lacking in Copenhagen."

PAINTBOX is the name of the exhibition project consisting of seven exhibitions. A group exhibition where all the participating artists were presented has just finished. This is followed by six solo exhibitions. The project lasts until March 2000. Ruth Campau's solo exhibition runs from February 4 to 26, 2000.

In addition to Campau, PAINTBOX consists of the painters Michael Mørk, Bodil Nielsen, Signe Guttormsen, Torgny Wilcke and Jasper Böye.

www.paintbox2000.dk