

SUSANNE KNAACK: AMID THE FLUX

There is a special and some have argued unfathomable psyche related to the working practices of artists in their studio, a sort of covert inner state of consciousness often appears where chance effects create a hidden and unpredictable sense of private imagining. In the imagining case of Susanne Knaack it is an ability to create paintings without the conventional brush and all the variously related atelier conventions. Yet in so doing she is nonetheless able to realise images that possess a haunting beauty and subtle penetration. At the same time a unique and challenging visual effect is created by the fact that Knaack's paintings are almost invariably executed in achromatic black, various greys (colour without colour) through to an achromatic white. This said at the same time there is a Heraclitus-like propensity towards subtle semi-glaucous surface appearances and to painterly feeling of flow and flux. In consequence an evocative intuitive process is established by Knaack's mastery and application of an expressive use of painterly perception. We know from the Ephesian thinker's often quoted paradoxical statement that the constant aspect of existence is that of change, for "all is flux nothing stays still."¹ It adds to the expressive power of the artist to re-envision those arrested moments in the flux of the changing realities of perception, to create similes, and in so doing justifies the continuous state of self-reflexion that is so central to the actual living of a creative life.²

In the Knaack approach to picture making the psycho-physiological procedures of flux and flow are central therefore to her working practice, and added into this are the necessary and unpredictable variables of the studio situation that are allied to the circumstantial conditions of directed chance. Hence the parameters to the procedure

are variably reliant on the extent to which the use of the material flow of paint can be manipulated and controlled by the aptitude and dexterity of the artist. This idea of using the material surface as the point of motility rather than brush controlled application of acrylic paint—moving the grounded framed canvas around—is not without historical precedent as seen in the earlier tradition of American stain painters of the post-war period called high modernism.³ Though in that instance they were interested as much in the paint's unpredictable impregnation as staining of the untreated canvas or loosely woven raw cotton duck.⁴ Similarly placing the canvas on the ground in the first instance is synonymous with the tradition begun by Pollock and the rejection of easel painting, and was continued with the so-called post-war field painters.⁵ But in other respects Knaack's approach is markedly different, that is to say, insomuch as she intentionally generates a greater optical flooding or flux effect. Equally she is more ambiguous about the nature or status of frame and surface ground. The resulting appearance is of visual blobs or globular areas of paint, and these create a pictorially granular and washed amorphous sense of comminuted fragments or textures. At the same time Knaack generally favours the framed vertical format that is traditionally and psychologically antithetical to an aerial or field surface approach posed by what is commonly called the landscape format. In distinction to the earlier mentioned movement(s) where there was a foregrounded concern with a so-called 'off the frame' approach, in this instance the artist places less emphasis on issues of canvas cropping and presentation.

The intentional performative use of a pouring technique is significant as a simile of appearance and eventual visual realisation.⁶ This is particularly noticeable in the most

recent series of untitled works executed by Knaack that tend to be more abstract and stressing a greater sense of visual liquidness (globules and splashes) in their pictorial outcome. In earlier paintings the tendency was to manipulate the paint flow into imaginative landscapes stressed by a sensed tonality and an imagined horizon line defining a top and bottom to the works. Another important aspect though obvious and implied as self-evident in most respects, is how the manipulations are subject to environmental gravity and atmospheric effects. In other words the viscosity of liquid is always subject to the environmental conditions in which they are used, and this is particularly relevant when using a pouring technique. The positioning of the canvas support plays a vital part, held vertically the pouring technique creates running rivulet effects shaped by the most direct gravitational field—this was as it was used by artists like Morris Louis. However if held at various degrees of angle the paint depending on its consistency tends to flood outwards. Whereas if the support is simply left to lay on the ground the paint tends to create a puddled effect on the canvas surface. If held at a low incline the surface might become overwhelmed and the paint uncontrollably break over the edges of the surface field and so on. All these considerations are subject to moment-to-moment manipulative adjustments as made by the artist. At the same time there is the considered use of the layering of the black, white, and grey paint onto the surface, whether used wet-in-wet or subjected to various degrees of drying before further applications. All of which carry consequential inferences as to the outcome of the finished painting, and the diluted use of a controlled paint consistency is a vital consideration in all its various aspects. And given the larger size of the canvases sometimes used by Knaack, and which are usually moved from behind, a precarious balance has to be achieved between the performative process and the painting's controlled realisation.

If the pouring process is a fundamental consideration in the formal approach to Knaack's painting, the conceptual side is relevant also since it becomes the basis for the artists' aesthetic judgment as to the finished status of a painted work. It is a romantic and obvious trope to speak of the use of controlled chance effects, something known from the Alexander Cozens' invented process of creating imaginary landscapes from chance configurations of ink blots dropped onto a paper support in the eighteenth century.⁷ And similarly the use of *sfumato* (smokiness) or blurring of forms and boundaries as is commonly asserted in Romantic Art practices of the nineteenth century.⁸ It is this that leads us towards the atmospheric feelings that are generated by Susanne Knaack's paintings. From her earliest work in the mid-90s, the idea of informality has permeated all her works. While they may at times evoke landscapes, seascapes, cloudscapes and the like, that have always avoided the descriptive in favour of a prevailing sense of atmospheric immanence. And through the use of black and white, so commonly associated with the traditions of landscape photography, it is only because she spontaneously uses paint her sensory feelings for pictorial states of amorphous consciousness is attained. It is therefore paradoxical that Knaack's fictional allusions to landscapes, as paintings created from an arbitrarily chosen and abstract viewpoint, should generate such powerfully persuasive organic affects. And in the most recent seemingly phenomenological-existential Wols-like paintings, with their quasi-aerial viewpoints looking down onto seemingly complex bespattered surfaces, are themselves expressive of dynamic facture and strangely atmospheric and hypnotic vicissitudes of variable contrast.⁹ The increased tendency towards an organic and/or biomorphic inscapes as seen in recent paintings, furthers the painterly enquiry that Susanne Knaack has consistently followed throughout her

studio painting practice over the last twenty years—the pursuit of materially expressed experiences fused with visual states of abstracted consciousness.

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The study of liquid as flow and flux is called 'rheology', and attributed to Heraclitus's surviving fragmentary statements, and coined commonly from the aphorism as *panta rhei* (everything flows, is in a state of flux") by Simplicius of Cilicia (c. 490-c.560). For the writings of *Simplicius: On Aristotle et al* (published in twenty-nine volumes by Duckworth, London, 1989-2011)

2

Arthur Schopenhauer 'On the Inner Nature of Art ' Chap. XXXIV, (Supplements to the Third Book), *The World As Will and Idea* (1819, 1844), "Every work of art accordingly really aims at showing us life and things as they are in truth, but cannot be directly discerned by every one through the mist of objective and subjective contingencies." quoted Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (eds.), *Philosophies of Art and Beauty; Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1976, p, 452 Both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche embraced (though from contrary pessimistic and non-pessimistic viewpoints) the thought of the Heraclitus of Ephesus, see, Matthew Meyer, *Reading Nietzsche Through the Ancients (An Analysis of Becoming, Perspectivism, and the Principle of Non-Contradiction)*, Boston and Berlin, Walter De Gruyter, 2014.

3

The gestural or 'stain' painters were first called the Washington 'Color' School (a precursor was Helen Frankenthaler, and works seen in her New York studio in 1953, by Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, later adopted by Jules Olitski) by the theorist of Abstract Expressionism Clement Greenberg (1909-94), see, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Boston and London, Beacon Press, 1961, and Robert C. Morgan (ed.), *Clement Greenberg, Late Writings*, St Paul and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2003. These critical essays are a summation of all the different positions in post-war American Abstraction, up to and including the triumph of the 'stain' painters in the early 1960s. See Karen Wilkin, *Color as Field, American Painting 1950-1975*, Newhaven and London, 2007, also Stuart Morris, and Laura Garrard, *Colourfield Painting: Minimal, Cool, Hard Edge, Serial and Post-Painterly Abstract Art of the Sixties to the Present (Painters)*, Maidstone, Crescent Moon Publishing, 2007.

4" The idea of the poured paint impregnating unsized cotton duck and raw linen (canvas), was an attempt to get away from the surface aspects of painting, thereby integrating the processes of making materially evident within the finished image, see John Elderfield, *Morris Louis*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1986, the earliest poured paint precursor was Joan Miro, who used the technique of raw canvas throughout the 1920s, 30s, and 40s

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See Harold Rosenberg, *Art on The Edge*, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1983. It was Rosenberg who first coined the terms 'action painting' introducing a suggestion of the performative into the making of paintings, whereas Greenberg coined preferred the term 'color field' painting.

6 Since the post-war period use of 'pouring technique' has been assimilated and used internationally, a leading exponent being the former Turner Prize nominee Ian Davenport (b. 1966) who has used since the 1980s, the very moment when the aforementioned American masters' use was being historicised, see Martin Filler, and Michael Bracewell, *Ian Davenport*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2014.

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"Alexander Cozens, *A New Method of Assisting the Invention of Drawing* (1785), see *Alexander Cozens, A New Method of Landscape*, with Michael Marqusee (intro.), London, Paddington Press, 1977, and for context *Alexander and John Robert Cozens*, Newhaven and London, Yale University Press, 1986.

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Jean Clay, 'The Blurring of Form', chap. III, *Romanticism*, Paris (Fr. 1980, Eng. 1981), pp. 172-211

9" For the existential *informel* and Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze (1913-51, called Wols), see P. de Bieberstein Llgner, T. Kamps, E. Rathke, and K. Siegel, *Wols: The Retrospective*, Kunsthalle Bremen and De Menil Collection Houston, Munich, Hirmer Verlag, 2013.