Color-Sized Holes: Halvor Rønning and the Art of *Disparition*

Early in his novel *10:04*, Ben Lerner, the author and protagonist, visits the Metropolitan Museum in New York. He soon finds himself in front of a painting he always comes to see there, ever since he first saw it as a kid with his mother: Jules Bastien-Lepage's 1879 *Joan of Arc*. In the painting, writes Lerner,

> *Joan appears to stagger toward the viewer, reaching her left arm out, maybe for support, in the swoon of being called. Instead of grasping branches or leaves, her hand, which is carefully positioned on the sight line of one of the other angels, seems to dissolve. The museum placard says that Bastien-Lepage was attacked for his failure to reconcile the ethereality of the angels with the realism of the future saint's body, but that "failure" is what makes it one of my favorite paintings. It's as if the tension between the metaphysical and physical worlds, between two orders of temporality, produces a glitch in the pictorial matrix.*

I was reminded of this scene standing in front of Halvor Rønning's paintings in his studio. Not because Rønning is interested in the Siege of Orléans, or because his paintings feature angels—they're abstract for the most part, so there is little in the way of representational (not to mention metaphysical) figuration. The reason Lerner's account came to mind is that there is a similar sensibility at play in Rønning's work, in which the artist moves back and forth between "orders of temporality" and dimensions of spatiality to the point that it becomes hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. Indeed, that's what the paintings are after, the delicate tensions and delicious nuances emerging between and across them. A "glitch", sort of but not quite, where the concern is not with the index but with possibility. Let me call this play, which Rønning has perfected, the *art of disparition*.

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Rønning's paintings, with 170 cm x 120 cm the size of a 65 inch flatscreen tv turned a 90 degrees, are a palimpsestic combination of up to six layers of creation (in some works it's four, in others five, some six), the result of four different techniques and media. The first of these (or last, depending on how you look at it) is a page cut out from a late twentieth century glossy magazine, often an ad, or feature fetishizing this or that luxurious home interior, consumer object or sensibility. The visual language of late capitalism, of commodity desire. Think *AD*.

Second, the artist paints over the image, using acrylics and pastels to add blocks, blobs and lines to obscure some parts of the picture and emphasize others. In some instances, he cuts pieces out of the page — a brand name, a table leg. This picture is scanned in and prepared, digitally (this is the third layer), for printing with a large scale UV printer.

Meanwhile, the artist composes the unprimed canvas, painting shapes and lines which will interact with the printing so as to here, too, render some aspects opaque, others bright—and a few invisible. A black shape will darken a lighter color, after all, just as an orange will contrast with a purple but disappear against another orange.

The fifth layer of creation is the actual print. In this process, the representational forms of the ads and features meet not one but two coatings of abstraction, whilst acrylic and pastel mix with ink and glossy paper is transposed—and lost—onto textured linen. Crucially, the printing is exposed as a technique of *dissimulation*: since whites register as absences in the digital file, neither the whites in the ad nor the artist's white blocks and lines are copied onto the canvas; they appear as holes, window frames or potholes onto the layer below — be it paint or unworked linen. Occasionally, Rønning's final touch is more paint, now atop the print.

It's a studio practice one could call post-digital or post-simulacral, to use Carrie Lambert-Beatty's term for the artwork in the age of the digital model. Not because it involves digital rendering, though that in itself is not unimportant. But because Rønning's approach to the practice of painting, by hand, in an actual space not a virtual one, and in the tradition of abstraction not (figurative) net art, is nonetheless always already structured in the image of the automatized, virtual workspace of the interface: flat planes, "*windows*", moving over and across and alongside one another, layering, adding, subtracting, recoloring, obscuring.

Willem De Kooning could only paint after a few drinks. Francis Bacon painted like a filmmaker. Rønning similarly paints as if he has just been using a computer. It is a logic that, if not afforded by, has certainly been popularized since the first photoshop was released 35 years ago, and that positions Rønning's work in a surprising and intriguing dialogue with artists like Michel Majerus, Ryan Trecartin og Aleksandra Domanovic, whose oeuvres, however dissimilar in many regards, are equally interested in questions of stacking, multimediality, opacity and transparency.

In Rønning's paintings, the result of this post-simulacral practice is up to six layers of *simultaneous* concealment and disclosure, with the *same* mechanisms responsible for both: the coating of paint that blocks out here is what allows us to peek through to a deeper layer there; the printing process adds and dissolves material in the very same procedure. Miraculously, application equals discovery, unearthing.

It's an altogether unstable relief, an abstract haptic geological stratum thicker and thinner depending on the lines, shapes and colors applied. Some paints and inks are visible in much the color labelled on the tube, but others take on another hue. Blue, purple. Shine, mat. Focus, blur. Smooth, textured. Abstraction, representation, form as function and the function of form. Some layers, like the paint on the magazine cutout, respond to a prior formal organization (the representative picture in the ad or feature). Others, like the first layer of paint on the canvas, in a sense anticipate a future arrangement (the mixed abstract-representative image to be printed). History (what was) and futurity or conditionality (what may come to be), teleology and recursivity, continuity and discontinuity, that is, overlap and intersect here. A palimpsest indeed of "temporal orders", moving into different directions (up, down, top, bottom, right, left, diagonally) all at once.

One finds oneself on unsteady ground phenomenologically, too: where the first plane ends and the fourth begins is difficult to say, each coming into view and receding from sight

imperceptibly, their logics here overlapping, there intersecting, now juxtaposed then a continuum.

Whites disappear: their application digs holes into the surface, not so much acrylic as acid, but there is no trace of this hole-ing, no indexical signage. It's a color-sized hole, a color without color. This, too, is a plane, a "window", but onto what? What's there to be seen beyond the canvas, screen, page — multimediality, intertextuality, a matrix, wiring, a dusty wall or scratched table top?

Bastien-Lepage's Joan has her hand disappear into thin air to touch the divine. In Rønning's abstractions, a wondrous mysticism of the 21st century, color steps into a sinkhole of its own making to expose nothing but the abyss of other colors, somewhere or anywhere in a post-simulacral version of Eames' short film *Powers of Ten*. There is more here than meets the eye; and yet also, as the adage goes, less, and that seems to me to be the point.

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In part, Rønning's color-size holing is — as I think a number of the post-digital or -simulacral artistic oeuvres are — an interrogation of what I have previously called 'depthiness': the intuitive recourse to modernist ideas and images of hiddenness, interiority and profundity to make sense of the world in the wake of postructuralist deconstruction.

Modernism, says Fredric Jameson, may have formally flattened hierarchies, of foreground and background, center and margin — it was paradoxically conceptually all about depth: its paintings and novels made a claim to a deeper experiential or social reality or truth behind them, be it the possibility of utopia (Eisenstein's constructivism), material realism (Woolf's literary modernism), or the artist's state of mind (Van Gogh's post-impressionism). Even metaphysics. Think Joan's dissolving hand, suggested to be touching God's finger behind a coat of paint.

In the late capitalist or postmodern art of the late twentieth century, by contrast, this claim was widely repudiated: art reflected nothing but itself, a pure simulacrum in a global world order from which were exorcised the specters of ideology, the social, history, authenticity — and certainly god — to make place for new idols: pointless and endless circulation, of commodities, of course, but also of surface signifiers, affects. *And* references, eclectic citations: A culture "Lost in the Funhouse", wrote John Barth, distorted mirrors, flashing lights and spinning slot machines everywhere; the "voluptuous… flux", the "delirious stream", the "diarrhea" of "pachinko!" said his near namesake (Barthes, yes) from across the Atlantic.

Mirrors, but no smoke — surface reflection not opacity. As Warhol (in)famously put it: "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface; of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it." Or, more sinister — and appropriate here, given the specter of Joan's hand — Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*: "And though … you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable [that's the mirror-image, to be sure]: I simply am not there." In postmodernism, the hand that pointed to the secret logic of our world turns into the hand that hides nothing.

Depthiness is my label for a common contemporary artistic and cultural practice in which the specter of depth is summoned anew in spite of better judgment. It's the logic of the séance:

the possible communication *beyond* the grave, with a *nether*world or *after*life, through a medium you aren't sure you should fully trust. The critic David Shields ironically calls this a "reality hunger": it turns out what we experience as meaningfully real is, peculiarly, that which cannot be empirically verified as real — and indeed, may well be fictive, or outright false (this is why in a future book I reconceive of depthiness in a political context as a "preposterous realism").

For some, this practice stems from a generational fatigue with the postmodern funhouse — "enough with the cynical jokes already" say the likes of David Foster Wallace and Zadie Smith. But I think there is a more substantial reason for this turn to the logic of the séance, promising the ghost of the real from between a mirror and a pachinko machine: ill health, poor living conditions, a deteriorated environment. It's not that we're bored with the funhouse; we're worried it may be not sustainable, its architecture on the verge of collapse, like most of the funhouse buildings are these days. But without a map of the place, every exit another mirror, every seeming doorknob the handle of a slot machine, we find ourselves unable to go out, to go elsewhere — but for the séance's promise.

What I see when I look at Rønning's paintings, is this *utopian* promise (in the truest sense of the word), this performative fiction actualizing its lie: applications of depth masquerading as its excavation, projections portending to be its discoveries, a geological stratum of openings which turn out to be detours, roundabouts, blockages even, the final plane often a shiny commodity, a glossy medium — but openings nonetheless, momentarily suggesting the possibility of an elsewhere, an alternative order of things.

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Jean-Luc Nancy—the most mystical of the poststructuralists, I suppose—has this typically brilliant argument about landscape painting. A land, he says, is full of life: people, produce, parties. And gods, of course, responsible for all of it. But a landscape, the picture of this land, has none of this: it is empty. Trees, a valley, a stream, but no people, no parties. A landscape, says Nancy, is a trace of a land abandoned by its life—a portrait not of a place but an exodus. Its appearance announces a disappearance.

As I see it, Rønning's work follows this very logic, but in the opposite direction, inverted. Each color-sized hole indexes not an exodus but the arrival of another field of color yet to be configured; each disappearance announces an appearance, like the medium's sleight of hand, a séance, obfuscating one thing to make you see another. Rønning buries the layers of creation to unearth in each of them other qualities, other life, other lives.

Mindful of Nancy's art of specters and apparitions, I want to call Rønning's practice the 'art of *disparition*'. I take this French term for disappearance or withdrawal specifically from Georges Perec's experimental 1969 novel *La Disparition*, in which he wrote a 300 page story without ever using the letter "e". A metaphor for trauma, the point — one reiterated by most philosophers of the time, Blanchot and Derrida especially — was that absence is not opposed to presence; it is what structures presence: the missing "père", the lacking "mère", no "famille" to speak of, figuring every aspect of Georges' life. (It's a more poetic, and serious version of one of my favorite philosophical anecdotes: Kant's oft-cited mistake in trying to forget his lifelong man-

servant and possibly lover Lampe after they parted ways: Kant hung a note on his front door saying “must forget Lampe”, as a result of which he remembered the man every single time he came home… An “age of enlightenment, but not yet enlightened”, I think the phrase was.)

Rønning’s reliefs, these palimpsests of planes, of orders of time and space, these color-sized holes, mark a similar paradox: every disappearance presences a plane of existence, a mode or logic, which in turn may disappear to presence another plane, and so forth, a complex of logics at once separate and thoroughly connected, layered and flat. It is a tracing of post-simulacral *deep time* across flattened space into all directions, a thickening of what had seemed thin. Indeed, I think that what Rønning achieves here, through his stacking and stitching of fields of color and color-sized holes, is nothing less than an archeology of the present, a simultaneous unearthing of the presents pasts and a digging out of alternative possibilities yet to take a firm form. This is not a critical interrogation of the realism just of the beyond the paint, the outside of the text; but of the textural possibilities always already opening and closing within it. Rønning’s painting is not a glitch into other worlds; but a glitch pointing out the world itself is always already other, is so much more than we may have assumed it is.

Timotheus Vermeulen, Professor in Media, Culture and Society at the University of Oslo, has written the essay specially for the exhibition.