

The Many Faces of Pictorial Gestures: Magnus Clausen in Conversation with Gabriel Gee

Magnus Frederik Clausen & Gabriel N. Gee

ABSTRACT

In this discussion between painter Magnus Frederick Clausen and art historian Gabriel Gee, Clausen reflects on the gestures used and explored in his pictorial practice. Starting with a reflection on the joint transparent and opaque quality of painting, Clausen evokes the use of repetition to reflect on the production of sameness and difference, intervisual dialogue and individual imprint. The painter describes his tools and methods, depicting an alchemic connection between past and present visual expressions. Processes of addition and subtraction, on as well as around and behind the canvas are highlighted, in a portrait of the multi-folded visage of Clausen's pictorial practice.

KEY WORDS

Pictorial gestures, repetition, difference, over-painting, visual language

Gabriel Gee: Broadly speaking, what does the term 'gesture' evoke for you, in relation to your practice as a painter?

Magnus Frederik Clausen: I'm not exactly sure what the term means, but what comes to my mind is that I see the gesture as that which stands between the idea and the result. The result can then consist of the many different faces a gesture can have. I'm not particularly interested in the same gesture all the time and from that thought, I build some of my work. For example in the series *Kastellet 2012*, I worked on six paintings exploring the same motif¹. Each painting painted differently, just following my mood of the day over a period of one year. The white one from that series (fig.1 *Kastellet 2012, study 3* 2016), was an exercise in making the same painting with the same gestures, everyday, but that morphed into one single painting.



Fig.1 F.M. Clausen, *Kastellet 2012, study 3*, 2016, 41x54cm, enamel, coal, canvas, stretcher bars

The idea comes from the old academic paintings, where you had thin layers of oil superposed one upon another, giving transparency and depth; but in this case the transparency is added to a very flat image - the motif is almost in the style of an illustrated comic drawing. I repeated the same gesture every day over a period of five days; so the painting consists of a coal drawing, which is the black grey part, that is painted over with white enamel. The enamel paint is applied in a thin transparent

¹ *Danmark*, Code Art Fair, August 2016, <http://mikkelcarl.com/index.php/curatorial/danmark>.

layer that blurs out the coal drawing and makes it appear cloudy. The day after (when the enamel is dry) I repeated the process and after repeating the same process for five days, the painting was done.

GG: I couldn't help thinking of Claude Monet's series of haystacks, in which the French painter worked on several paintings at once to capture one specific moment in time. While clearly different from your exploration here, there is a parallel in the concern with time and repetition.

MFC: I like Monet's work, but it is not something that I had in mind. Some of the works in the series have references to Danish art history, such as to Jens Adolf Jerichau and Asger Jorn. These works have not been made from a meticulous study of Jerichau's and Jorn's gestures, but from a mental recollection, investigating how I remember and recall their works as a painter and how I imagine it would be if I was painting next to them. The thing that binds all the works in the series together is the motif, a man walking. Yet the variations end up not talking about the motif itself, but about how the painting is painted by the painter and things that are outside the painting, such as feelings, mood and history.

GG: If we go back to your first point, that on the one hand there is the idea, and on the other hand there is the result, and gestures are what connects them together, you mentioned that you were interested in how gestures can lead to different outcomes, and I remember you had told me that when you started painting, you had proceeded in a very empirical fashion, splashing and trying as it seemed fit! But is there a way that you can, retrospectively perhaps, differentiate between different types of actions, categorizing them in a way, so that we might see different 'portraits' of gestures involved in your practice.

MFC: The gesture leaves a mark and it is very difficult for me to get rid of that mark and paint like somebody else, at one point, you can always see it is my painting. There is some sort of a fingerprint inside the gesture, that is very difficult to escape. Marcel Duchamp mentions this fingerprint as "the arabesque of the hand", which he also tries to escape from in his painting the *Chocolate grinder*, and I guess that this idea of escaping the artist's fingerprint led him to develop his readymades?² Let's try to look at some different ways of approaching painting: the blue-pink one (fig.2 *Untitled* 2017) comes from two pieces of materials; a piece of wood and a piece of linen. The linen is a cut out from another painting I did, and the wood I found in another artist's studio, already painted in pink and white. These two parts are glued together in a composition. When I enter into the production of this painting the linen and the wood are already leftovers, so there is no actual painting process involved in the making of this painting. This gives me the opportunity to look at the gestures in a more sober way. This other work (fig.3 *Untitled* 2017) was made from a found plastic sheet, which I used as a mixing palette. I have an interest in used mixing palettes. When you mix colours, you are painting unconsciously since it has no aesthetic value. In this case I decided to turn the mixing board into a painting. But I wanted to add a physical and conscious gesture to it, so I flipped it upside down - painted surface down against the floor, and dragged it around with my

² Tristram Powell, *Rebel Ready-Made – Marcel Duchamp* (1966)

foot. I did this because I wanted to paint something consciously without the hand's delicate movements and the control of the eye. So the floor started to inform the gesture; or rather the connection between the floor, the plastic sheet, the paint and the foot started to inform the gesture.

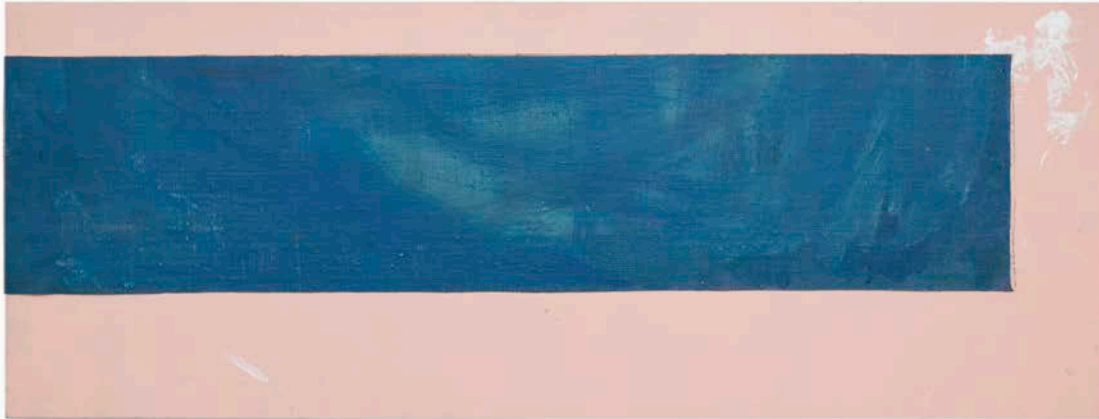


Fig.2 F.M. Clausen, *Untitled*, 2017, 34x90cm, masonite, linen, oil, acrylic, enamel, glue, pencil

GG: You mention a process of erasure, and in your practice you use both additive and subtractive processes; by using subtractive gestures, the painting can include a form of loss.

MFC: Technically I use products that can dissolve paint, brown soap, toilet cleaner etc... It's something that I have been exploring with a colleague of mine, testing different materials, sandpaper as well. These products are difficult to control, as they can be very aggressive, and you don't know how effective they are going to be... But they give the possibility of going backwards, through a historical process. Sometimes in the process of painting, if I'm not guided by an idea I can be persuaded by the painting, in many different directions, and I can easily produce many layers of paint... before realising that underneath there was something interesting, I want back. It's difficult to get back exactly what I had using these products, but I get something else. When making these back and forth actions, I always finish the paintings by adding. I don't finish by subtracting. It's similar to writing a text, you erase something, and then make a new dot. I think I finished that painting (fig.4 *Untitled* 2017) by making the yellow dot.

GG: There are also similarities with an archaeological enquiry. With the additions of layers, images come to cover previous images.

MFC: Yes, though I often think of painting as similar to cooking. It also comes from a need or lust. And when you are cooking you put in spices, and then acid, more acid, too much acid, more chili, salt and at one point you arrive at something, that you feel can be served to somebody else... but

you need to add a glass of wine! In the same way in painting, the gestures are not all contained within the painting itself, as soon as you present the painting in a context it starts to build new narratives with other paintings displayed in the room, or with the architecture around it. That's one of the qualities of painting.



Fig.3 F.M. Clausen, *Untitled*, 2017, 71x44,5cm, HDPE sheet, oil

GG: There is a leitmotiv of difference and repetition, in such an embodied practice. You are looking for different faces, or differences, and you can arrange paintings so that it will create differences in the way that the paintings resonate, but at the same time, they attest to some unity, and in those echoes one can find a repetitive force. In the example you mentioned, working over five days, whereby you go through the same process every day, that seems to be playing with repetition, but in order to find some differences.

MFC: To go back to the culinary analogy; if you make the same spaghetti carbonara every day for dinner, with the same ingredients, it won't however taste the same every day. If you could have the result of a whole month of cooking spaghetti carbonara, and you could perceive it all at once, you would find that there are variations. When trying to talk about gesture as something between the thought and the result, and trying to obtain the same result, an older result at some point starts to

imprint some kind of variation. So time has an influence on the nature of the gestures. Trends also plays a part, in time, in history, and contribute to defining the gestures that we are making now.

GG: In another work you used a sketch by Pierre Bonnard, which you worked from, altered, and then used as a motif, to be explored through different canvases. How do you go about incorporating pictorial history and its gestures in your own practice?



Fig.4 F.M. Clausen, *Untitled*, 2017, 31,5x25cm, canvas, oilsticks, acrylic, oil, stretcher bars

MFC: There is a tradition in Denmark of over-painting; painting over other's paintings, defacing them, destroying them, while at the same time building new narratives out of it. Since the old paintings I'm interested in working with are too expensive for me to possess, I used a digital reproduction, and overpainted it in photoshop. I know some painters will not make work from others paintings, finding it impossible to build a new narrative. For me it can be the just the same. I'm interested in the various ways of making an image, including making an object which explores

the tradition and history of painting, but which can also at the same time almost retrench out of it, in order to simply explore the nature of visual language.

GG: The other day you mentioned a painting your little son had also worked on, adding generational gestures to the painting.

MFC: Yes, sometimes if I see him making something, I bring it to the studio and try to copy it! He has a lack of technique, of course, but children have a different way of painting, and there is also another layer of visual history. That's a burden you have to deal with when you become interested in painting images, and for sure he already has seen many more images than I did when I was his age, as we are now bombarded with images. Who knows what will happen with future image makers!

BIOGRAPHIES

Magnus Frederik Clausen was born in 1981 in Hillerød, Denmark, and currently lives and works in Copenhagen, Denmark. Clausen has a background in biology studies and communication. He has been awarded The Danish art counsel working grand, The Danish Academy in Rome; 2012 and 2014. His art has been exhibited in galleries and institutions in Berlin, Rome, LA, NY, Copenhagen, Paris, Poznan, Warsaw, Arles, Düsseldorf, Cologne, Helsinki, London and Nairobi. These exhibitions include amongst others: 60th berlinale, DE; 56th Venice Biennale, IT; Accademia di Romania, IT; Tranen, DK; the National gallery of Denmark, DK; Overgaden, DK; Kunsthal Charlottenborg, DK; Arti, NL; Luma foundation Arles, FR; Maison du Danemark, FR. From 2006, he co-founded the Copenhagen based artist space TTC Gallery and 2016, he co-founded the nomad artist run space JIR SANDEL.

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Gabriel Gee is Associate Professor in Art History and Visual Cultures at Franklin University, CH. He recently published *Art in the North of England, 1979-2008*, London: Routledge, an Ashgate Book, 2017. His interest in contemporary painting has led him to investigate the history of the John Moores Liverpool Painting Prize; an overview of this study entitled "Painting within itself: the JMLE" is to be published in 2018 in the *Journal of Contemporary Painting*, and he is currently working on a book project on the prize's history.