

In between.
Aapo Nikkanen

Foreword

In this text I will discuss a style of painting that I've named here as in between painting, which refers to the space in between abstract and figurative. I will compare old and contemporary paintings and present one of my own as examples. Although my body of work is not restricted to just painting, I've left out sculptures and installations to narrow down the subject. I will also touch the themes and process behind my work and talk about the technique I use and why I use it.



Spencer Sweeney – Poets Cafe (2005)

Lately I have been exploring the space between figurative and abstract, and that's where I'm going to start off from. I say space, because I am interested in the area where those two meet and blend into one. But first of all, I want to make a distinction: I am not talking about that style of painting which combines just parts from the both worlds and has been somewhat popular in the last decades.



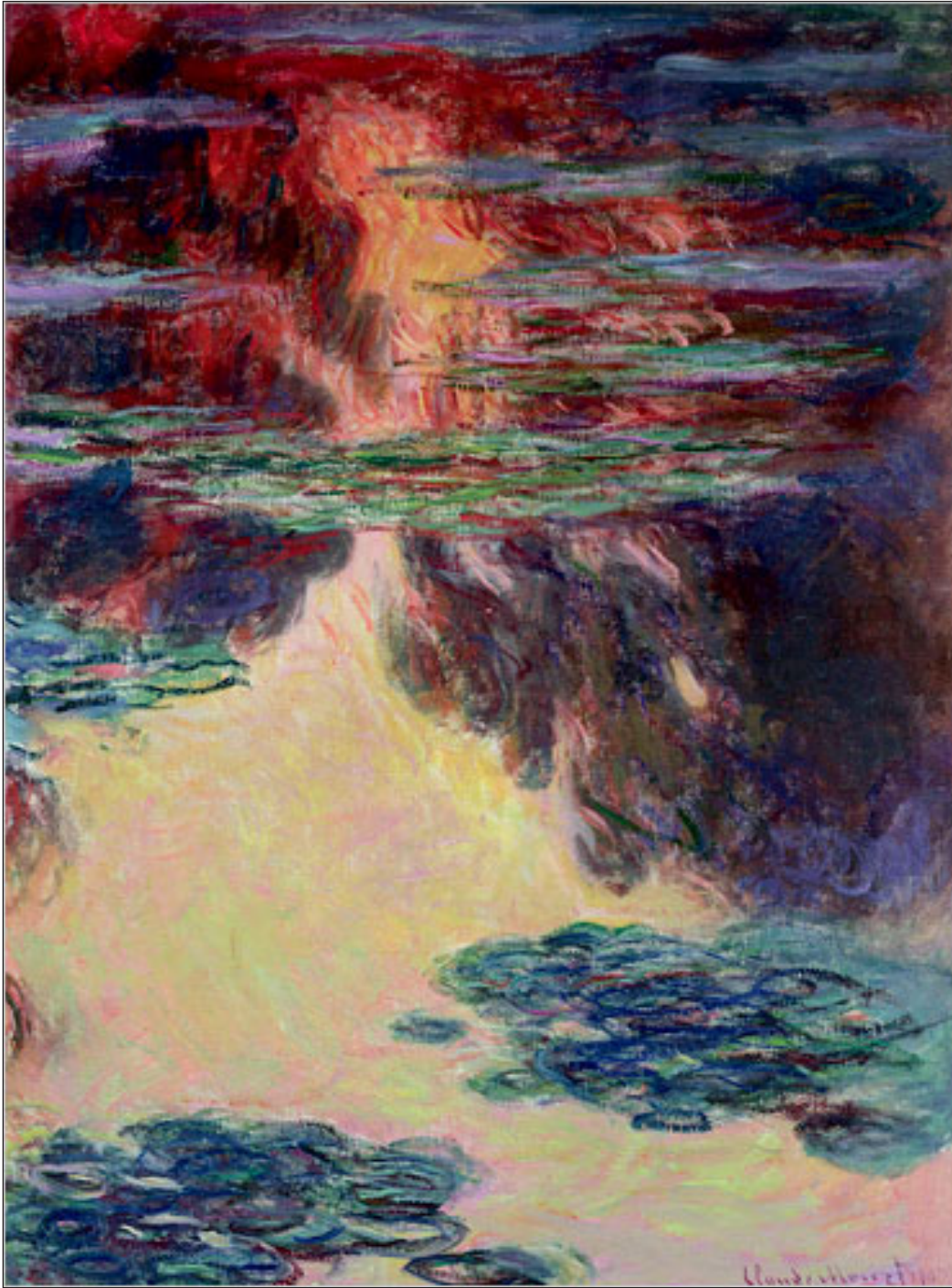
Peter Doig – White Canoe (1990)

With this style of painting there exists always some figurative element that fixes the picture into a place. Be the place as imaginary it will, the image remains fixed into something. This reference point gives the picture a different position and uses a different language of that what I am

seeking for. It is a decision where a figurative painting is emphasized with abstraction (or vice versa) to reach a certain conclusion, but it is not in between the both worlds.

What I'm talking about is that anorectic space between abstract and figurative, in where one could potentially make a fusion of the two that would be something completely different from a mere collection of abstract elements composed with figurative ones. For instance, I see some of these qualities in Miros work, or in the late work of Monet, who I am going to use as my first example.

Monets late work made in Giverny, the series called Nymphéas, was very inspiring body of work when I stumbled upon it for the first time. In some of the paintings one can see a pond, but I've selected the example among the ones in which only the name can really direct to the figurative image. Even when knowing that the image contains waterlilys, it is utterly impossible not to see something else as well. While in Doigs painting the canoe is a canoe, and in Sweeneys painting the house remains a house, in Monets case the lilys can either be lilys or something else. They give the viewer the freedom of choice.



Monet - Nymphéas (1907)

Finding examples of this kind of painting has been a bit of a task, since most of the contemporary painters close to the field seem to fall in the first category described in this text. Also the separation with purely abstract and in between abstract and figurative painting is largely a subjective opinion. I've found out that a landscape is one integrative factor with this in between painting. Another example I would like to bring to the table is Scott Everingham.

In Everingham's paintings landscape is present and they bear a resemblance to Dalí. Just as Dalí gave multiple choices to view an image, so does Everingham. The difference is that Everingham is moving in between the figurative and abstract worlds. His paintings give the viewer the power to see what the viewer chooses: in the landscape you might see a face or doors among other things. The fact that the viewer can make the choice by connecting the dots is an important factor. That is something I try to achieve as well.

This quote is taken from an interview of Scott Everingham and it sums up my point quite well:

“I want to make spaces that you can step into and experience, like a regular space that you recognize, and yet keep everything suggestive. Suggest architecture, suggest human figures and life.”

(Source: <http://canadaindie.com/2009/11/interview-stephen-smart-presents-scott-everingham/>)



Everingham - Leftovers (2010)

Suggesting things is a good way to put it. It leaves the control of the plot to the hands of the maker, but donates the freedom of choice to the viewer. Giving a setting and then letting the viewer wonder in it while making his own conclusions is something that I am interested in. Freedom of choice also means freedom of understanding. Understanding an art work in contemporary art scene can be a difficult task. In a scenario where multiple “answers” are given, it is more likely to find one and feel satisfied, correct? In practice this means that instead of making one painting inside one frame, I try to make ten.

There are artists who make their works based on the facts, using traces of past or present, or parts of some information as the base of their work. Julie Mehretu is one fine example of this – she takes bits and pieces of information from here and there and layers that data creating a new whole. Then there are artists who create their own worlds from scratch. I am more interested in the latter part. There is a difference between abstracting facts and making them up. Artists like Scott Everingham, Dana Schutz or Cai Guo-Qiang are among those who I feel related to, as they are masters in giving an option to the ordinary of life. Just as the renaissance painters gave a window to another world, so do they, and so do I wish to do. The difference between the renaissance painter and me is that I am not interested in giving a clear view. I don't want to hand out a map, but just to point into the right direction.

For me, staying in between the abstract and figurative worlds grants a possibility to represent something otherworldly, even spiritual, or something that may be described by these words. I chose those words because I feel that's what a lot of my works have been telling me lately. I feel that the humankind has a basic need for spirituality and the need doesn't disappear even if the establishments lose their credibility. I come from Finland where the amount of young urban population leaving the church has skyrocketed in the last decade. This combined with a long tradition of pagan beliefs

dating well before the arrive of christianity is something that I suppose has strengthened my will to create my own dogmas instead of accepting the existing ones.

I start my works with vague ideas. Creating works with this mindset helps me to give the works more emotional subtext that would be possible if I would plan everything in front. The fact of not knowing the exact end result of the work lets the work grow more organically, a thing that shows in outlook of the painting as well. I am looking for an outcome that looks as if the paintings have somehow created themselves, as if they somehow grew on the canvas or constructed themselves.

The transparent technique utilized with acrylic colors donates a great deal in search of this outcome.

The technique also adds a new level to the whole "let-the-viewer-choose" scheme. When in Monets case the viewer has to make a choice to see either waterlilys or something else, but not both at the same time, here the viewer is given much more freedom to wander in the picture and make his decisions of perception inside these see-through layers, a thing that also provokes a bigger illusionary space of depth.

This difference that I am talking about can visualized by imagining a switch, most commonly seen on simple electronic machines, having two positions: on and off. This is how the painting of Monet functions: the first position is that where the lilys can be seen, and in the other position they are given up to see something else. These two instances cannot exist at the same time. The use of transparent layers changes this: the two can exist at the same time and therefore give the viewer more freedom and create a different illusionary space. The stripes in painting The Flag are, in fact, multiple things simultaneously.

The downfall of this style of painting seems to be the documentation of the work which is seldom complimentary to the actual painting in the

reproduction of depth and color nuances. It is also question of the size, which in this case does matter.

Sometimes people ask me when a painting will be finished, and I always answer that I don't know how long it will take. I know when the moment arrives and the piece is done, but will it take two days, two weeks or two months is impossible for me to say. After the first stroke they have the lives of their owns. It is a way of working that, at least for me, transfers more content into the piece.

Jackson Pollock described the process very well:

When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.

(Source: Jackson Pollock: interviews, articles, and reviews. Pepe Karmel, Kirk Varnedoe. Page 18.)



Aapo Nikkanen – The Flag (2010)

In the painting titled “The Flag” I played with the concept of a flag. It can be seen as reference to flag as an object, as a reference to abstract painting in the mid 20th century or as a reference to the flags made by Jasper Johns. Still, these references would be much harder, if not impossible to make if the work would be titled something else. It does not resemble an ordinary flag, nor an abstract painting of the fifties, nor the flags by Jasper Johns by any ways. The viewer has been given the power to make these references by naming the painting as “The Flag”, just as in the paintings of Monet the viewer is been given the power to see waterlilys by titling the works accordingly. To me it is not that important to make the references mentioned, but to emphasize the figurative.

And that it does, naming the work as “The Flag”. It is easy to see the three stripes as in a flag. It is a play as well: a flag is usually an abstract image, but it receives a figurative meaning when it is used to represent a country in geography for instance. If the picture is an abstract, the meaning often is not. A flag is both abstract and figurative simultaneously, so it is perfect for my purposes.

In one point of view the work is about the concept of a flag, and so it should not be compared to some particular flag, but to all flags. We are living in an era freed by the internet, where the borders are vanishing and domestication is reducing everywhere and in every sector of life. I have moved more times that I can remember: cities, apartments and finally a country. I don't really possess any “home city pride”, so I wanted to make a flag that I could believe in. It is a flag not from this world, but from somewhere beyond where such thing could be hanged high, or possibly be seen as a religious artifact.

Another point of view is that of the religious artifact. The flag is in relationship with the Tibetan prayer flags. The Tibetan prayer flags are sacred and they promote peace, compassion, strength and wisdom. To be accurate, the flags themselves are just pieces of canvas, but the symbols and mantras on them are sacred. It is the creator of these symbols that makes the piece of canvas something else than just a piece of canvas. It is his believe, in this case joined by others, transferred to the canvas that donates the flag its power. So just by believing, I can make my flag a spiritual artifact as well.

The painting remains inside the area where it merely suggests a number of things, among which there are the presence of a landscape and a possibility to see faces by connecting the elements. It leaves the final choice to the viewer, stating only the idea of a flag which already is open to multiple interpretations.

Conclusion

In the search of new perspective in painting I've ended in the grey area in between abstract and figurative. In the same way as modern physics shows that one particle can actually be in two different places at once, I hope that this style of painting can demonstrate the possibility of multiple representations at the same time. Although the themes behind the works are more or less timeless, they merely suggest things leaving the final choice to the viewer.

As I don't believe that an artwork should come with a manual, I hope that this type of painting would make my works more self-explanatory. They are not situated in this world, but come from somewhere else. Using a largely intuitive process contributes to this outcome: when it is the painting who tells the painter what it needs the act is actually a dialog. With who, no one knows.