

TWO O'CLOCK SPELL

The anachronicity of the image in Martin Aagaard Hansen's work

Text by Astrid Wang

Modernism used to champion a kind of abstract painting characterised by instantaneity, where the quality of a painting is predicated on its inherent unity, a wholeness in composition which allows it to reveal everything all at once. Independent of both the time of creation- and of reception, the alleged atemporality of painting sets it apart from time-based media. Invariably, this line of inquiry generates new questions regarding the temporality of painting: How can paintings reveal all at once, if the viewer's experience is durational? Can paintings truly be "outside" of time, and if so, how may they represent time?

Space and time are intrinsically related. Insofar as anything exists within a three-dimensional space, it must equally extend into the fourth. Hence, any attempt at identifying the temporality of a painting begins with its treatment of the pictorial space. In *Two O'Clock Spell*, Martin Aagaard Hansen deploys a variety of displacements and reversals pertaining to figure and ground, proximity and distance, and surface and depth. Runaway lines, deliberately erratic splotches, and overworked fields of color disrupt the logic of three-dimensionality, resulting in a sense that something is *off*. It is not just the subject matters the artist portrays, but rather an eeriness arising from the way he constructs images. In stark contrast to the instantaneity of Modernist painting, Aagaard Hansen's work encourages a slower reception, leading the gaze on a journey full of reroutes, reiterations and retreads.

Engaging with the questions of temporality is central to Aagaard Hansen's practice. His works do not figure time as much as they present an accumulation of events, "treating the painting as a surface where something has happened", in the artist's words. This practice exceeds purely formal concerns, it also applies to the representational dimension of his works, where we find a menagerie of deserted cityscapes and rural nowheres, sparsely populated with ghostly figures, oversized insects and dilapidated buildings. It is apparent that Aagaard Hansen is fascinated with liminality and in-betweens, literally and metaphorically. His background in graffiti and penchant for hiking drives him to explore the material leftovers of civilisation. Works such as *Blansueto* and *En udflytter der selv har bygget sin ensomme gård, og selv kan raade for driften af sin jord*, for example, evolved from trips around the area where the artist grew up in Funen, a region of Denmark famous for its natural beauty and problems with depopulation. Painting from imperfect memories, sometimes supplemented by hastily snapped cell phone shots, *Two O'Clock Spell* wields its compositional disruptions to unsettle the boundaries between truth and fiction.

Aagaard Hansen's willingness to work in between visualities, genres and styles, to hybridise various formal and signifying strategies, suggests that the purism of Modernist painting has been replaced by the more eclectic Postmodern category of the image. Georges Didi-Huberman's psychoanalytically inflected semiology comes to mind here, pointing to the "visual" as a crucial property, which is neither the "visible" (figuration) nor the "invisible" (abstraction). Didi-Huberman's attempt to explain the power of images emphasizes how they seem to be animated by their own kind of agency, seducing, repelling and altogether mystifying us. Aagaard Hansen paints the "visual", elements which manifest between figuration and abstraction and escape rational reading and appearing inexplicable.

The title *Two O'Clock Spell* refers to a time of day, which the artist describes as a kind of “nowhere”– too early to leave work, yet too late for anything to begin. A dilated stretch of nothing, endlessly long yet maddeningly brief. In these works, time feels similarly disjointed and surreal – the time of the stories told, and the time of our reception of them. “Whenever we are before the image, we are before time [...] But what kind of time? What plasticities and fractures, what rhythms and jolts of time can be at stake in this opening of the image?”, Didi-Huberman asks. While we contemplate the answers, Aagaard Hansen’s work uncovers this crucial property of images; namely that their inherent anachronicity is an essential condition for their appearance, and one which holds us spellbound before them.

Bibliography

Didi-Huberman, Georges, “Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism” in *Compelling Visuality. The Work of Art in and out of History*, ed. Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg, pp. 31-44. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

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