

FUNCTION AND ABSORPTION

Like colored pillows of radiant, soft moss, the colors in Bodil Nielsen's paintings sparkle. The soft transitions between the fields of color shimmer hazily and vaguely. An invitation to immersion and absorption – far away from everything. And yet, something points in another direction – towards a completely different and far more functional way of approaching color. Because there is something about Bodil Nielsen's simple paintings in pure, bright colors that evokes associations to the way a designer or an architect might approach or employ color. And this does not mean that the paintings are particularly hard-edge, nor are they especially shiny or spray-painted. On the contrary, they are light and floating – open and opening.

It may make sense to regard Bodil Nielsen's works in relation to classical concepts in painting – references to color field or formal questions about the figure/ground relation. But it also makes sense to pursue a different path, namely the allusions to design and architecture. Not least because Bodil Nielsen is part of a generation, which has been interested in lifting painting from a tradition and a history that has, at times, been both restraining and excluding – for both artist and viewer. And this trans-medial strategy, in particular, has been one of the tools used in the attempt to equalize hierarchies and introduce painting on a par with other pictorial modes of expression.

Bodil Nielsen herself says that she borrows the 'freshness' from the world of design to 'air out painting'. This is apparent, for instance in one of her trademarks – the characteristic balloon flowers, which are constructed from a fan of transparent, overlapping layers, like in simple textile printing. Here a template and roller is used to mime a simple technique, where color is literally printed on the surface, and therefore bears no immediate trace of the one wielding the roller. It is all about disengaging oneself from the traditional perception of the artist, leaving immortal traces with his brush. But the allusion to industrial design and applied arts is also about the public sphere – about that, which can be shared by more than one, and where every one can take part. In Denmark textile printing or potato printing is probably almost emblematic of the notions of school and spare time sprung from the welfare state of the 1960s.

It is especially the social and democratic aspect, which prompts the inclusion of practices and techniques from design and architecture. And Bodil Nielsen is not alone in this. From the start of the 1990s a wave of contemporary art has flirted with modes of expression rooted in industrial and graphic design. Also quite concretely, as when an Eames chair or a PH lamp forms one of the elements in an installation. But whereas artists such as Liam Gillick, Pae White, Jorge Pardo or Tobias Rehberger, in each their separate way, work with the very overlap between art and design, design in Bodil Nielsen's work is more of an association and reference than a concrete element, meant to reflect the relationship between art and design. She would never put a concrete design object, for example a Panton chair, in a matching bright color next to the painting. Because it is not primarily design as function or object for use that she is interested in.

Compared with other artists, who work with design and architecture, it is interesting that Bodil Nielsen chooses to ignore the functional dimension, which is normally one of the main reasons that artists court the design area – the dream of the functional work of art. But Bodil Nielsen does not attempt to mix fiction and function, because she has no intention of subverting the conceptual space of art. On the contrary, she upholds the potential and the possibility of absorption that resides in preserving art as a world of ideas, and instead contents herself with miming modes of thought and expression from design and architecture – such as

the use of color.

Like the designer, Bodil Nielsen seizes the functionality of color and transfers it to the canvas. The palette is mainly primary and secondary colors, which are sometimes referred to as children's colors – no doubt due to their clarity and forthright character. But they are also the clear plastic hues of the 1960s, introduced in everything from Tupperware to designer lamp shades, which carry inherently the idea of the social and democratic. Because Nielsen's design concept is as Danish as the particular utopian social model, the welfare state, which came into being concurrently with the notorious 'Danish Design'. Like the welfare state, Danish design is founded on the notions of equality and solidarity. And that has the tangible result that Danish design – silverware, chairs, lamps, etc.– are found in all parts and stratas of the Danish population.

In this same manner, Bodil Nielsen's pictures express a kind of painting that provides space – does not take space. This is emphasized in the open composition of the more recent works, where the shimmering fields of color are not sharply drawn, and where the fulcrum is often outside the pictorial space – as if the painting was a random sample of a greater context, which spreads in all directions, as apparent in the characteristic horizontal and vertical section. This is also a strategy that relates to more functional types of expression, such as architecture or decoration in the manner of Poul Gernes, who realized, while working with the total color scheme for Herlev Hospital, that the art of decorating offered the opportunity to realize the dream of collectivity, which had been the driving force and incentive behind a great deal of the experimentation in '60s art – a kind of functional art with political and public appeal.

Bodil Nielsen does not urge the viewer to political revolution, and yet her paintings are founded on the notion that art may be made accessible to more people, and that art can be used for addressing issues that are larger than art itself. Even issues that fall outside cultural and societal space. Because Bodil Nielsen's paintings also contain another movement, where the open fields of color and the infinite composition around the horizontal and vertical axis contribute to the feeling of space and expanse – an offer of a ride out of the social, out under clear blue skies, up into the mountains or out to the coast.

On the face of it, it is not an obvious cocktail – mixing a popular, functional genre with a type of painting, which is far more floating and sensitive, and which invites absorption. But nevertheless, it is this particular alloy that gives character to Bodil Nielsen's paintings and results in the shimmeringly formal and sensually social fields of color. Functional and poetic.

Pernille Albrethsen, Copenhagen, October 2003.

Translated by Lotte Follin