

PAINTING, SPACE AND THE MIND REMARKS ON THE ART OF MICHAEL BURGES

Colour has, in the past, been used as a means of painting, but the 20th gave it an upgrade to being also the subject of painting. There are several ways of treating colour as a subject in painting. Michael Burges has developed his own ways in this artistic context. As he takes colour seriously in itself, not only as a means to an end, he has decided to be non-figurative. You may call it “abstract” or “autonomous” or even “absolute” – any of these terms would be correct, because the paintings of Michael Burges invest themselves into all these aspects.

Non-figurative art wears a coat of many colours. It can be called “lyrical” or “expressionist”, “informal” or “gestural”. The art of Michael Burges doesn’t fit into these traditional categories, because even in one single work more than just one of these characteristic can be found. His painting follows an almost scientific plan and development, systematically exploring the aesthetic possibilities of colour and space and their relations, as well as those of the painting to the viewer and vice versa. The art of Michael Burges, therefore, has been called “the science of painting”, and there are indeed links to the very nature of modern scientific exploration in physics.

Links to the governing principles of Buddhism are also present, but the painter would deny to be either a scientist or a Buddhist. Michael Burges is a painter. That is the level of discourse, not quantum mechanics or any kind of religion or philosophy. If any of such things come into view, one will always have to keep in mind that there may be references, never illustrations.

Colour, space and energy are the pillars of his creations. Michael Burges is obsessed with colour, and the way he treats colour stresses the visual energy of colour, makes it become more apparent than in any everyday context. But nevertheless there is a certain distance between the artist and his abstract creations. However charged with emotion they may seem, Michael Burges always strives to avoid individualistic gestures of self-expression as a reaction to suffering from either the inner self or the outer world or both. Rather we become witness to a refined and well-tempered process of exploration into the question what a picture can be, what are its effects, how it relates to our perceptions and how it activates knowledge. All this adds to the painterly investigations into the proprieties of colour. And there is also a strong musical element in Michael Burges’ art, visible in his way of composition, so using a term like “well-tempered” may be more than just a metaphor.

An important early series are the CESM Paintings, CESM standing for Colour-Energy-Space-Matrix. They show abstract elements, many of them “sort of round”, interacting on the pictorial plane creating a deep, but ever changing pictorial space of multi-focal character. The viewer is forced to readjust his position at every new look. One is able to pinpoint the position of the image as (physical) object in real space, but not the space within. Space and colour intertwine almost like quantum froth. For the eye, the larger round shapes sometimes act as a quiet island in a stormy sea, only to push the viewer back into the waves.

The series of the Refractions/Waves paintings do not only, in a certain way, resemble interfering waves, they serve as modelled patterns for intuitive, i.e. invisible, movements in a space-time continuum, referring, of course, also to light. What they make visible are the interrelations of different systems of order, the order of straight refraction of coloured light on a shaped surface, and, within the framework of the same painting, exploring the properties of light as waves. This is only possible because what we see as colour is not a property of any object, it is a visual phenomenon caused by the surface structure of objects, which will reflect only light of a certain wavelength. But still colours can change under different light. Form, which is a property of an object, won't.[1]

Michael Burges maintains that we have to have an inner kind of image without which we would be unable to perceive images. This theory of equivalence is common both to Western and Eastern philosophy. We can understand the paintings of Michael Burges as a statement on the facilities of response of our perceptive system, which is, after all, not yet fully understood by physiologists. It is therefore necessary for the artist to bring out those qualities in his paintings which are able to lead the viewer to such insights.

In the Virtual Light series this "Gestalt"-principle of our vision, i.e. our mind's trying to match any visual impact with something in the database of former experiences, becomes especially clear, albeit in a paradoxical manner. We are confronted with vertical, soft-edged stripes of interchanging colours with a virtual centre or source, which, of course, is shown to be a fallacy. We cannot really associate any part of the image with things or objects we have seen in the past. So what we do is, and this comes as some kind of surprise, understand the image as a whole as the "object". But we are irritated at the same time, because the parts (like stripe-structures) of the paintings command such a visual/optical presence, such an enormous visual experience. The Virtual Light paintings confront us with the simultaneity of both parts and the whole, without a possibility to decide Humpty Dumpty's question which is to be master.

In the paintings with the "wave" subject, we, the viewers, become witness of the relations between different orders and powers, governing the perception of images and pictorial patterns. In some paintings, the "waves" form a physical element for colour refraction, so that the colours we find physically on the wooden board constituting the painting as an object within the framework of reality are interacting with the refracted light from them, also changing with the position of the viewer. Looking at them, we are constantly forced to decide what to focus: the material make-up of the painting in colours, the overlaid refraction image or the combination of both, which enhances the impression and accounts for its magic and visual attraction.

In some works, Michael Burges sets one kind of order, soft-edged stripes of colour for instance, against an arrangement of the same in waves. But he doesn't just juxtapose the two as two autonomous parts of a two-part painting, rather he combines them forming one overall pattern, thus making the effect of the visual pattern all the more powerful. Stripes and waves, straight and bent forms seem to generate each other.

We cannot determine exactly whether the waves are being calmed down and thus straightened, or whether the stripes are being shocked to form waves. This forces the viewer to make a potentially endless number of decisions and re-decisions. It is a perfect model of what, in the middle of the 20th Century, was termed "stream of consciousness", and, at the same time, our way of seeing the world, which is also an uninterrupted process of different and sometimes contradictory focalizations. All of these are stored somewhere in our minds, but only selected ones – a process we do not fully understand yet – can be retrieved, in order not to drown ourselves in useless information (see below).

Many modern psychologists regard visual thinking to be the basic form of thought, having developed ear-

lier than thinking in words. Often our attention is indeed drawn to the non-verbal, the aesthetic functioning of communication, and the paintings of Michael Burges point exactly in that direction. His works are an attempt at making us understand the process of acquisition and accumulation of knowledge of the world by such qualities of thinking in images. In this way, Michael Burges' s paintings are explorations into our ideas of organization and information, but one which allows equivocality, different simultaneous ways of looking at them and, as a result, understanding them. Many of them are multi-focal, they change with the standpoint and the viewers' focus, as they do not allow one single way of focussing. It's modern quantum physics raising its head here. The organization is apparent on the surface, it's in the vibrations (energy) of the surface as represented by colour and light. The door to associate this with string theory is, of course open, but one would have to be careful, as string- or M-theory may not be the ideal partners for analogies, except on a very general and abstract level.

But it is possible to say that the modern physical notion of vibration is reflected in the optical vibration in the universe of Michael Burges' paintings. They don't, by the way, exclude figurative associations, such as in his series of paintings called Virtual Scenes, which we easily associate with looking through mist, steamy windows or half-open blinds in a room with a view, at a nightly, neon-lit cityscape.

These pictures combine almost everything at a time: Refraction, shining and reflected light, colour as colour and colour as light, colour as matter and colour as energy, a virtual (visual) and a pictorial space, constantly re-inventing and re-defining itself with a little help by the viewer. Their visual impact is nigh overwhelming, and we, the viewers, have constantly to re-adjust ourselves to the varying expressions they convey. The images, as explicit as they may seem, constitute a pool of possibilities, out of which many diverse perceived images are materializing inside our heads.

Michael Burges' work is characterized by his use of strongly contrasting colours (in order to be able to produce that effect, one has to use strong, shiny colours in the first place). But not only that. He blends them and combines them in a way that often associates them with grey, the non-colour of all colours, yet simultaneously the very potentiality of colour (as well as every colour's grave). So we meet the universe of potentialities yet again, a visually self-explaining one, too.

Michael Burges created a highly innovative series, the Virtual Space Works. In them, a painted board is encased in a milky acrylic glass box, the front panel a structured acrylic glass pane (diffuser). So what was painted cannot really be seen. All you see is a very special kind of colourful image hovering in the box, but it might just as well be interpreted as hovering somewhere in space. This is tantamount to de-materialization and therefore a de-focalisation of the image, the eyes cannot mediate any more: What we see doesn't physically exist as an image.

As it is one of the properties of the structured pane to make the image move and therefore change in itself, the viewer cannot exactly locate the image even by altering his position. Contrariwise, the viewer will have to move himself in order to be able to explore the possibilities of the image. So the real location of the image is in the viewer's mind – a sum of the varying images he perceived. So a complex product corresponds to the complexity of the viewer's psychological make-up, but the two are reconciled on the level of aesthetical experience and reflection.

Physicists are unable, because of the Uncertainty Principle, to determine a particle's speed and its location at the same time. The viewer here is unable to determine the position of the image. So the question of "Where is the image?" is transformed into the question "What is an image?". This means that the viewer is thrown back on himself and has to seek refuge in the forest of all kinds of data stored in his mind. The imaginary museums and libraries must somehow be activated, the images show a way to that end.

In his latest series of paintings, the Reverse Glass Paintings, Michael Burges takes up subjects he has been treating before. He combines the subject, such as the CESM- and Refraction paintings, with experiences he made in creating the virtual spaces. But the combination is such that something entirely new emerges. One may recognise similarities, but only to better experience the big differences.

In these works, all colours and patterns and pictorial forms are behind a clear panel of acrylic glass. But they aren't really behind it, they are ON it – reverse glass painting, rescued for art from drowning completely in folkloristic contexts. The colours stand out pure and clear, they gain an almost uncanny presence. The glass panel also serves to unify the appearance: Any painting, be it of the CESM-type, the refraction type or, indeed, a new kind of autonomous composition, shares the bright and shiny presence with all others. That the images are mounted on a block frame and that the panels extend beyond all sides of this frame gives them, like it did to the earlier works, the quality of a distinct and special object as well as an imaginary space.

Again all this serves to interact with the viewer. The Reverse Glass Paintings which look similar to the CESM Paintings do indeed present a multi-focal image, in front of which the viewer has to move and define and redefine his position – a working analogy to life in general. And also we are confronted with the door to the wealth of our inner library, our imaginary museums and data stores of all kinds. Research into autistic people and savants has shown that we record nigh everything we see and hear. Were it not for neural mechanisms of selection, suppressing all information not needed, we would literally drown in useless information, not able to fire our imagination, only burn it to ashes. Savants have access to at least part of those memories, and the multi-focal paintings may also open a doorway, albeit a narrow one, to what is buried deep inside our minds.

The big difference between the Reverse Glass Paintings and the earlier ones is the panel of acrylic glass, as it is an accentuation of the aesthetic frontier. The ragged self-interacting refractory surface of the earlier works is no longer there, instead, the viewer is confronted with a closed, smooth surface. This surface fends off both the colour, making it stay behind, and the viewer, preventing his entering. It serves as a barrier as well as a door. One might say that it is a door opening to dimensions of worlds of emotions and views, in which all the elements, at the beginning, defy a precise definition by the merging of colours and the forms in dissolution or indefinable spatial position. It is only on a higher level – the level of painting – that such seemingly contradictory elements can be reconciled and make a new interpretation or a new position for the viewer possible. It is a situation like from a Kafka story: The acrylic glass opens the vista of a holy land, but at the same time it prevents us from setting foot on it. We feel like a fly bumping on to a window pane. The fly only has a short memory, so it will repeat and repeat the attempt at flying through the pane. We have a longer lasting memory, but still we constantly try to pass through the barrier. We are worse off than the flies, as we don't forget. And this makes these paintings such a fascinating experience.

Furthermore, Reverse Glass Painting delivers a whole gamut of new pictorial forms and elements. The constant change between the position of the elements in front, and in the back, or somewhere non-definably in-between, accounts for a strong dynamisation of the whole pictorial field. This may be seen as wanting a description by a Riemann-tensor, but one might also say: It is already a form of an aesthetic Riemann-tensor, a Burges-tensor, indicating the relative aesthetic value of elements in the pictorial field. But the smallest possible model to fully describe the image maybe is the image itself. Indeed, some painterly elements show themselves, at least to those with some kind of experience in handling colour and brush, to be practically impossible in any other medium than in reverse painting

behind glass. This is, at least partly, due to the fact that the painting process is reversed. Burges starts these paintings where he usually finished in the earlier works. Still the front (for the painter: the base) of any painterly action is visible. It is like looking at a painted image on a see-through canvas, only that everything is reversed. Base is front (or top) and top is base, inside is outside, and still every element holds both characteristics firmly in its hands. But it's not only that. Seen in this way, a lot of elements are indigenous to the chosen medium, what is even more important is that one cannot pinpoint where it is, neither in relation to real (surrounding) space – remember that these images are also explicitly defined as objects –, nor in relation to pictorial space.

Not being able to define a spatial position for any given element shakes the foundations of the viewers' minds. Aesthetically delving into these images leaves them hovering and fading like astronauts who have inadvertently crossed the event horizon of a black hole. Yet these images are also some kind of white hole, in aesthetic terms. Their visual presence is responsible for that.

These works have been developed logically and systematically with the practically scientific precision so typical for Michael Burges. They continue to pursue the question of "What is an image" in the form of "Where is the image". The answer is that the image forms inside our mind. Aesthetics is a form of organisation of elements, be they of semantic character or not. Once the organisation reaches a certain level, we are in for an aesthetic experience. That this is all a matter of perception is shown by the fact that we find aesthetic "structures" in nature, even where they cannot normally be seen. Their "being" is not teleological, it doesn't serve any end. It's only our structure of perception which makes them meaningful. They are Schrödinger's aesthetical cat.

Some of the new paintings treat a central motif, like a white kind of column or a vertical sequence of horizontal green bars. These motifs do stand out and point at their own pictorial contextualisation, but each of them is different, unique. It is not a sequence of equal or identical elements, in fact, the sequence or the central figure will inevitably constitute something like an image within an image. In Michael Burges' painting we are confronted mainly with independent pictorial elements, which means that they would still be aesthetically effective if taken out of their present context.

There is also a new colourism connected to the Reverse Glass Paintings. In earlier works, Michael Burges reflected upon grey as both the death of colours and as the potential for colours. In the Reverse Glass Paintings, practically none of this remains, as there isn't any room for it. In the Refraction Paintings this was possible as the ragged surface of the paintings was "interactive" with ambient light and the position of the viewer. There isn't any surface of that kind, so the reflections on the nature of grey do not take place.

It is too early to fully comprehend what possibilities Michael Burges has created for himself and us. But even the shortest glance at his Reverse Glass Paintings makes it unmistakably clear that he is adventurously leading the way to some promised land we don't much know of yet, except that it's there.

^[1] There is a possibility to exclude black from the range of colours. A thorough discussion of this world lead too far here. See, for instance, Lisa Randall: *Warped Passages. Unravelling the uni-*

verse's hidden dimensions, London, New York etc., Penguin 2006, p. 119 ff; Michio Kaku: *Hyperspace. A scientific odyssey through parallel universes, time warps, and the 10th dimension*, New

York, Anchor books 1995, p. 197; and by the same author: *Parallel worlds. A journey through creation (...)*, New York, Anchor books, pp.56-57, 74-75.