

Temps, peintures et nota bene

Jesper Christiansen. The Four Seasons

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Le Bicolore

**Maison du
Danemark**

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"Do remember they can't cancel the spring," the artist David Hockney enjoined reassuringly in early 2020 as the terrible corona pandemic swept around the globe causing waves of upheaval and cancellation¹. And it is exactly this kind of reassurance we take from the seasons: they cannot be cancelled, postponed or reworked. Even with their endless variations and climate differences, they are a recurrent and fundamental condition on which we can depend. Whether we prefer the darkness of winter, the brightness of spring, the heat of summer or the winds of autumn, the seasons change in a fixed sequence, year after year.

The paintings in this exhibition take the four seasons – the universal condition of endless repetition that has always been the defining framework for human existence – and interweave them with specific motifs. Jesper Christiansen combines the seasons with exceptional landscapes and beautiful interiors, to which he adds a lyrical universe with references to literature, history, music and philosophy. This meeting between the season theme and a unique poetic palette with its range of motifs poses new questions of the painting, which Jesper Christiansen investigates with the enthusiasm and dedication of a research scientist². The canvasses send us on mental expeditions in the landscapes and places we know, but also in what the Italian author and philosopher Umberto Eco once called our own literary encyclopedia: the books we have read and the references with which we are familiar³.

The purpose of this article is to zoom in on the works at the heart of the exhibition – the four

seasons – and also to offer the reader keys with which to access the universe created by Christiansen's brush. In this respect, meaning should not be sought via specific references in the individual works, but through overarching connections between work and meaning. Part of the challenge when writing about this artist's work is that listening to the artist is actually paramount: what was Jesper Christiansen thinking, feeling, discovering and encountering while working on his paintings. He is the prism through which every facet of the paintings is refracted, while also being the first person to have imagined, seen and occupied the spaces created by the works. This article, therefore, addresses Jesper Christiansen's artistic practice, themes taken from conversations with him, and more direct observations and analyses of his works.

Spring

In the painting *Op Alle De Ting (Martin A. Hansens cykeltur)* ('Rise Up, All Things – Martin A. Hansen's Bike Ride') a bicycle is parked in the foreground, behind which the edge of an anemone-carpeted forest opens up. The viewer's gaze is drawn into the image by its beautiful myriads of particularities⁴, with each and every detail caringly and painstakingly positioned on the canvas. When we are outdoors, we do not single out the individual petals on a flower unless we zoom right in – and similarly it is impossible to see all the separate elements in the painting at one and the same time. We focus our gaze and scan the canvas from bike bell to anemones, from ferns to tree trunks, all appearing with clarity and endless depth of field. This approach recalls Renaissance art north

of the Alps, in which, unlike in Italy, it was not the overall perspective but the individual objects that defined the space. As the American art historian Svetlana Alpers has shown⁵, northern Renaissance art was preoccupied with textures and surfaces, while Italian art took grand mythologies and religious visual narratives as the basis for depicting the relationship between body and space. A work of the Italian Renaissance will often have one ideal vantage point from which the beholder can take in the painting's space and see the endless depth of perspective. This is not so often true of Renaissance art north of the Alps, where the picture is not a window onto a space of perfectly constructed central perspective, but comprises objects from the observed world.

The stilled or arrested quality of these works is a symptom of a certain tension between the narrative assumptions of the art and an attentiveness to descriptive presence. There seems to be an inverse proportion between attentive description and action: attention to the surface of the world described is achieved at the expense of the representation of narrative action⁶.

The description could also apply to Christiansen's paintings, which similarly focus on texture and materiality rather than narrative action. This by no means implies that his works create a vacuum devoid of action; on the contrary, the items depicted are often associated with everyday occurrences or overriding conditions of existence (the seasons, for example) in which we can place ourselves when we view the paintings. When looking at the Batavus bicycle parked in the forest, we are also seeing evidence of an ongoing action: the bike is parked at this spot and it will shortly carry its owner onwards. Similarly, the beautiful anemone carpet in the springtime-clad forest has a clear correlation with spring overcoming winter: an action-packed battle of the seasons, which always results in victory to the thaw and buds, even though winter might sometimes seem endlessly icy or rainy. The paintings thus involve an implicit challenge vis-à-vis Alpers' clear distinction between description and action. The objects in the paintings encompass plotlines and incipient narratives.

The stories of the objects are interwoven with fragments of text, which are inserted into and around the motifs. The 'Martin A. Hansen's Bike Ride' of the title is a reference to the Danish author Martin A. Hansen (1909-55): in 1949 Hansen had stayed at Malergården (lit.: Painter's Farm, the home of the Swane artist family) in the village of Plejerup, in the Odsherred area of Denmark, where he had taken many a cycle ride; it was also here that he started writing his major novel *Løgneren* (publ. 1950; *The Liar*, 1969). The bicycle thus links to several layers of meaning in the painting and sends us on a mental shuttle between the elements of the motif, internationally-renowned Danish literature and our own experiences of the seasons. Not only do Christiansen's paintings urge the viewer to mind travel, however, but also to tangible action. In interacting with them, we have to perform what he calls *the painter's dance*, a painting ballet, the back-and-forth choreography of which would seem to be very similar to that used by distinguished German art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) to describe the painting style of Netherlandish master Jan van Eyck (1390-1441):

Jan van Eyck's eye operates as a microscope and as a telescope at the same time... so that the beholder is compelled to oscillate between a position reasonably far from the picture and many positions very close to it. ... However, such perfection had to be bought at a price. Neither a microscope nor a telescope is a good instrument with which to observe human emotion ... The emphasis is on quiet existence rather than action ... Measured by ordinary standards the world of the mature Jan van Eyck is static⁷.

The description of the painter's eye, which is extremely myopic while also able to maintain an incomparably broad view, is matched in many of Christiansen's works. However, unlike van Eyck, who according to Panofsky had to shortchange depiction of human emotion, Christiansen's four seasons, although to all appearances devoid of human figures, nonetheless vibrate with human presence. This emanates from the objects depicted, such as the Batavus bicycle indicating a cyclist taking a break amidst the beauty of the

forest, and also from our sense of the painter's extremely attentive depiction of everyday articles, such as pitchers, vases, tablecloths, lamps, books and well-known outdoor settings and buildings.

I call the back-and-forth movement 'the painter's dance', because that is exactly the kind of movement I make while working on a painting – says Jesper Christiansen⁸.

Our movements in front of the canvas are a re-enactment of the painter's to and fro as he works, while also being uniquely our own. Looking at each work, we perform *the painter's dance* as we inspect the wealth of detail up close and then step backwards to reading distance from the text and totality of the painting. Absorbing new elements that contribute to an understanding of the details, we return to the canvas on an intimate voyage of discovery in the meticulous and painstaking recording of the particulars. The choreography of *the painter's dance* gently manipulates the beholder to assume new vantage points, all dependent on the ideal distance to the dimension of each canvas. However, the dance is not only prompted by each separate canvas, but also by the movement between the canvasses. The paintings are passages, links to and involvements with one another. Movement-activating passageways of meaning between far and near, big and small, are constructed within the separate works *and* in complex patterns between the paintings in the series. It is in these intersections of meaning that Christiansen choreographs our interaction with the paintings.

In *Luften over Høve Stræde* ('The Air Above Høve Stræde') we have to get close to the canvas in order to see the detail of vegetation, but move away to see the overall picture from a distance. The work combines a topographical chronicle of the landscape around Sejerø bay with excerpts from the libretto to Haydn's late-Classical oratorio for *Die Jahreszeiten* (1801; The Seasons), which begins with its large orchestra engaging in an aural battle between the harsh coldness of winter and the warmth of spring. Orchestral desks are arranged across the luminous spring-time sky, and our gaze is invited to 'listen' for the

implications. The work adds sound and music to its visual and kinetic dimensions.

The canvasses become more than paintings, they encompass constellations of many art forms. *The painter's dance* is thus not only physical, but also mental, given that we are invited to think *with* and *onwards* about the content of the works. In our imaginations, we can fly from the music-vaulted sound-skyscape to the sprouting soil of the fields, and travel in the temporal transformation of the landscape – changing seasons and centuries – from the middle of the last century, when the bicycle carried Martin A. Hansen around the countryside, to our own present time. The unmistakable Christiansen-esque visual idiom even connects the paintings across his body of works: despite obvious differences, we see a coherence, links and references. The same objects appear with different information, reminding us that the objects are *not* the solution to a visual riddle but explorations of painterly challenges.

The Four Seasons

In connection with the 2010 exhibition *Here, Exactly Here*, Christiansen described his painting method and discussed the fact that his pictures contain many objects, but no human figures. "Shouldn't there have been people sitting on all these white chairs, and shouldn't the chairs have been placed in some kind of enclosed space rather than just floating around on a white canvas? Were the pictures even finished at all?" he asked, with reference to his chair paintings dating back to the 1990s.

He went on to explain that he has developed and restrained this 'lack' by filling the paintings with seemingly inconsequential and random objects. His *The Four Seasons* sequence includes objects found at a flea market, a quotation that has taken hold or the sound of a musical space that has just opened up. The paintings encompass evocative and meaningful objects, quotations and elements; but the meaning presented is not just the one, nor is it unambiguous: rather, the paintings are inviting us to be part of their conceptual space. There are pertinent references to which everyone can relate, literary quotations perhaps mainly recognisable to scholarly connoisseurs,

and then there are the cryptic, private and personal mergings of meaning with which we are not necessarily familiar⁹.

In the painting titled *Longtemps* a door opens out onto a garden, out to the springtime blossoming fruit trees. Indoors, the walls are hung with pieces by Christiansen's artistic role models, and parts of the opening lines of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* are embedded in the motif¹⁰. The first lines of the novel describe how the author goes to bed early, but is soon woken up by the thought that it is time to go to bed. Perhaps the most well-known passage in the book, when protagonist Marcel's memory universe is activated by the taste of a madeleine cake dipped in a cup of lime-flower tea, reminds us how our senses work together. The senses of taste, smell and touch interact with our sight and hearing, and in combination function as gateways for veritable deluges of memories. They resolutely bear "in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection."¹¹ Similarly, each of the manifold brushstrokes on the *Four Seasons* carries a unique component of the captivating constructions on their canvasses. They invite us to sense that which we do not understand.

Painting and literature alike can preserve memories and memory – and provide insight into how ideas have come about. Christiansen continues his abovementioned comments by considering ways in which the subject of *The Four Seasons* might be reflected in a painter's work. It is thus worth quoting a slightly longer excerpt, which also provides insight into his work process:

In a number of instances, I have even chosen to let the black gesso primer be the predominant element in the picture. The 'deleted' elements will often stand out more clearly than the painted elements. I'm a painter who has second thoughts, and I attach particular importance to having those second thoughts as clearly as possible.

— What is deleted, what we cannot reach (but clearly sense), is what we most desire; that is what makes us search for something,

understand something that we might never get to understand, but simply sense.

This 'something' is not an abstract thing while working, 'something' has been painted, deleted, forgotten, re-remembered, brought out again with warm water and scouring sponge, and maybe looks almost a little archeologically 'retrieved'.

— 'Something' might be, for example, The Four Seasons, wrapped in a visualisation that is pictorially so compact, cryptic, like a private code, that the beholder has no chance to decipher it. Should they nevertheless manage to – well, what are you meant to do with The Four Seasons? One can but wonder¹².

Since these comments were made in 2010, the idea of this curious 'something', *The Four Seasons*, has ripened into the season-project presented in this exhibition, inspired by *Les Saisons*, a late work by the French painter Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665)¹³. This inspiration has, however, as we can read in Christiansen's interesting and frank text in the present catalogue, led onwards to many other references, major and minor. I shall now look at the relationship between the two painters, who turn out to have more similarities and intersections than simply their shared interest in the subject of the seasons.

Christiansen and Poussin

Among the last works Nicolas Poussin painted before his death in 1665 were *Les Quatre Saisons*. In the paintings, which today hang in the Louvre in Paris, he associated each season with a biblical story from the Old Testament, while linking it to a specific time of day. Spring couples the rebirth of nature with Adam and Eve in a morning landscape; summer is the midday light and depicts the story of Ruth and Boaz; autumn shows a late afternoon harvest of grapes and other fruit from the land of Canaan; and the twilight winter setting depicts the catastrophic Flood¹⁴.

If we recognise the reference, we can see that *Summer Surprised Us* has parallels to Poussin's summer painting. In both paintings, the divisions

between foreground, middle distance and background are composed with strongly marked horizontal bands of earth, cornfields and sky, and densely-leaved trees function as distance markers in the harvest landscape. Being aware of the kinship between the two paintings is, however, like opening a new mystery in Christiansen's painting rather than detecting a solution to a concealed pictorial riddle, because his quotations and references are never an answer or a final result. They are more like self-elected hurdles, defining interesting principles while giving the artist the opportunity to probe the nature of the painting and to probe pictorial issues. Christiansen explores the secrets in Poussin's paintings, generously passing them on to us in his own paintings.

Even if we did not recognise the Poussin reference, the works afford us an advantageous vantage point into Poussin's ways of seeing. In his book *Nicolas Poussin. Dialectics of Painting*, the German art historian Oskar Bätschmann has pointed out that Poussin worked with two ways of viewing: he distinguished between a simple and natural way of seeing – *aspect* – and an attentive observation of objects – *prospect*¹⁵. In the painter's work, the straightforward *aspect* can be qualified by the contemplative, almost thinking way of seeing. This lifts the work out of the natural disorder of reality and integrates the elements of the picture into a harmonious manifold unity. Rather than comparing details in Poussin's and Christiansen's works, we might consider how *Summer Surprised Us* creates beauty through the purifying prism of a thinking consciousness.

Poussin, too, constructed his paintings via an interweaving of various written and pictorial sources. In Poussin's day, a painter's artistic practice comprised three main activities: drawing/sketching, painting, studying the art of the past¹⁶. His paintings therefore involve elements from pattern books, which dictated the ways in which specific types of motives should be composed, and they also involve references to and selections from other works. Selecting sections of a motif for a painting was also a case of separating them from their setting, reconstructing and changing these borrowings until they became

integral to the painting's – and thereby Poussin's – own articulation.

In interpreting the works one can no longer think of the elements and their significance as keys to the decoding of the paintings. The meaning of a part is not determined by itself but by the whole as it is transformed by and related to the element. [...] Works of art not only imply their own variations – as demonstrated by Poussin's multiple re-workings – but are also passages to other works. The multiple series and groups testify to this¹⁷.

This is exactly the case with Jesper Christiansen's paintings. Their presence, beauty and enigma are not determined by the single details, but by the whole. Fixing on just one note will not help in approaching the overall intention of a symphony; we have to listen to the individual notes as they connect within the whole work. Even if a musician used every single note from a Haydn piece, he or she would still have to create their own melody. This also applies to the visual arts; the best artists have always found inspiration in studying the past.

Throughout the annals of art history, artists can frequently be seen copying and inspiring one another. The references are often well hidden, but in Christiansen's four seasons diverse art forms (literature and music, for example) commingle in such a way that the sources of inspiration provide us with guiding clues. Christiansen also writes words directly on the surface of the canvasses, whereas Poussin's seasons seem to have absorbed the words. Poussin's contemporaries would have been able to recognise biblical motifs, because everyone knew their Bible. A picture would activate the beholder's knowledge of the biblical text, thus rendering the words part of the painting without those words featuring directly on the canvas.

Autumn

One example of how Poussin borrowed motifs is evident in his *Autumn*, which is based on the story of Moses' spies: sent to The Promised Land to gather intelligence about the people who lived

there and about the fertility of the soil, they return with a cluster of grapes that is so big it takes two men to carry it:

[...] they cut a single branch of grapes and carried it on a pole between two men, along with some pomegranates and figs. The entire place was called the Eshcol Valley on account of the cluster of grapes that the men of Israel had taken from there¹⁸.

The two men carrying the grapes feature prominently in the foreground of the painting. They are strangely disproportionate, as if brought in from a different context in order to fulfil a new function. Of Poussin's seasons, the English landscape painter John Constable thought they could have been even more outstanding had the figures been left out. To Constable's mind, landscape had the power all on its own to convey the force and atmosphere of the story¹⁹. The German art historian Willibald Sauerländer²⁰ has shown that Poussin borrowed the figures from an engraving by the Flemish artist Hieronymus Wierix (1553-1619), giving them new significance and new context²¹. This demonstrates yet another kinship between the seasons as depicted by Poussin and by Christiansen, for they both blend their own and borrowed motif sections into a whole with new meanings.

In Christiansen's representation of autumn, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, we are looking through an open window out onto a vineyard, the vines heavy with ripe grapes. Indoors, autumn leaves hang in the air, suspended by an invisible puff of wind. The first time I visited Jesper Christiansen²² he told me about the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) who, when staying in Paris, visited the Louvre where he saw the ancient sculpture of the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*. Rilke was fascinated by the idea that the gently swirled fabric of the goddess Nike's garment is still suffused with a soft breeze from Antiquity. Traces of this 2,000-year-old wind have become a breath of eternity forever harboured in the folds of the drapery.

[...] the Nike of Samothrace, the Goddess of Victory on the ship's hull with the wonderful

movement and wide sea-wind in her garment is a miracle to me and like a whole world. That is Greece. That is shore, sea and light, courage and victory²³.

Similarly, Christiansen's paintings harbour several forms of temporality. The countless brushstrokes, lovingly applied to the canvas, take the time they take. It is a physical job, an endurance test from which the body must take the occasional little break. Every brushstroke is a closed moment, an enclosed time span, evidence that the moment was not wasted.

Christiansen has previously pointed out that his paintings comprise the time it took to make them, the time we spend with the works in the exhibition and the time afterwards during which we carry them in our consciousness²⁴. These times run from the kick-off in the painter's mind, the lead up to the exhibition and then onwards into our futures. The season paintings, moreover, involve a cyclic time: a time imbued with the power of repetition. Spring, summer, autumn, winter – each season creates atmospheres and associations, elements of the ensemble of notes that form the melody line composed by the pieces in the exhibition. And, as mentioned, there is a sense that the transience of the painting is now preserved in the permanence of the brushstrokes.

Time is similarly secured when museums collect and exhibit the most interesting or beautiful objects with a view to preserving them for the future. Christiansen's season paintings have a kinship with this museal time; they, too, store objects for eternity. In the smallest of the works, in terms of size, in the exhibition, the relationship with the museal time becomes absolutely specific, since these are objects that the artist has found at Malergården, the home of the Swane artist family. Ceramic articles of everyday use – springtime blue-white glazed jugs, summer vases with dahlias in bloom, autumn's lovely uniquely-patterned earthenware pots, and wintertime lamps – are woven into new contexts. The paintings reactivate the usage of these items, helping us to eliminate the temporal distance that the museal setting will almost inevitably create between them and us. The paintings therefore become passages

between presence and absence. Absence, because the objects are here without the human hand that selected or arranged them; presence, because the objects are thereby undisturbed, addressing the viewer directly. Not only do the works weave the Swane family's everyday ceramic articles together with Sigurd Swane's poetry, they also create a sphere of possibilities in which we can take a new approach to exploration in the (art)history of the Swane family. The capacity to take a new look at the Swanes' artistic practice reminds us that the aesthetics we experience in artists' works is often also bound to a life, interiors, a world picture expressed in actions and objects.

Winter

As mentioned, Poussin chose the biblical Flood to represent the theme of winter – the all-encompassing cataclysm that the Bible sees as a new beginning for the world. As background for his seasons, Poussin used episodes from the grand narratives that were widely known in his day. Christiansen's narratives are of universal validity in a different way; they conjure up the beauty and materiality of everyday life. It is as if the paintings are conveying the view that “[...] the true secret of happiness lies in the taking a genuine interest in all the details of daily life.”²⁵

Every element of the interior and view in *Winter Comes Home* is depicted with zealous attentiveness. From the pattern of the carpet to the glow of the sky and the details of the doll's house, the painting goes resolutely into the minutiae of daily life – not just to show us the unexpected and extraordinary, which lift us out of the everyday, but also to spotlight the beauty in run-of-the-mill everyday life, which we often overlook. Christiansen's paintings are thus closely connected with the world of things. The objects generate picture puzzles, riddles in things, but the intention is not that we should solve them – it is more a case of passing on an assignment to us: the challenge of working with contexts, differences, language and references, while enjoying the beauty of the paintings.

The lovingly constructed everyday spaces create new meaning relationships: criss-crossing the

sequence of paintings, between beholder and painting, between the painter's universe and the museal space, between the permanence of the seasonal cycle and a moment in an exhibition, between artists one admires and one's own art. They challenge our customary notion of the relationship between art and life: Christiansen's complex pictorial semantic constructions modify the usual understanding of reference usage. While text can include footnotes – guy ropes anchoring the content in a network of references – paintings, as a rule, cannot. This does not apply to Christiansen's work: when inspirational books, motivational artists and objects from the world of things move into the exhibition space, then objects from the real world become material footnotes to the paintings.

The pictures' distinct and harmonious depiction of a recognisable everyday reality might seem far removed from abstraction and geometry. The distance between Christiansen's now extremely detailed and figurative artworks and his almost conceptual chair paintings from the 1990s might thus seem considerable: how do minimalist and constructive art factor into the season paintings? Taking a closer look at *Winter Comes Home*, however, it becomes clear that the canvas still manifests a form of geometrical system – in the tautly composed straightness of the window frames, for example. Christiansen's season paintings are, like the best minimalist art, constructed with equilibria, clarity and harmonies. A precise grid underlies their motifs. “*There*,” says Jesper Christiansen, pointing out series of meticulously composed spots of colour, which become field furrows when seen from a distance, “there's Agnes Martin! [...] Martin shows what a straight line is by imbuing it with such vibrating life that it actually isn't straight.”

These vibrations breathe life into the canvasses. En route to the finished painting, the piece becomes more and more itself. It gains character, wilfulness, it offers resistance. The anatomy of the paintings thus presents an exercise in patience: they cannot be hurried. It is exactly the same in the seasons of reality: each season always lasts for an entire season. Art, however, can open new dimensions, plant budding beauty in a dark

time – and surprise us by giving the seasons new contexts and new meanings.

Stages of creation

At the time of writing, the paintings are still on-going, changing from day to day. The process leading to the finished piece is slow, painstaking and work-intensive. *The Four Seasons* are therefore still underway in the privacy of the studio. Once they are hung, however, it would come as no surprise if the artist moved into the exhibition with them, continuing to work on the canvasses. Jesper Christiansen's work is so physically demanding and time consuming that it carries on into the period of the exhibition. So, I have seen stages along the route to the goal, not the end result.

During these weeks, when the paintings change on a daily basis, it is as if they are drawing closer and closer to a precise specification of space, time and sound. The ebb and flow of the canvasses, between finished, completely raw and areas under preparation, is really special. They start out as canvas, a textile painted with black gesso, mounted on a frame. When only prepared with a gesso priming, these canvasses evoke the endless silence of nocturnal darkness. This gradually changes with the emergence of pictorial elements, text and colours. The addition of motifs such as grass and flowering branches not only renders a canvas more finished, but also takes it into new dimensions of sound, time and space.

Regardless of where and when I have seen the paintings, be it in Christiansen's studio or as quick snapshots on his illuminating Facebook wall, and regardless of the point they had reached in the stages of creation, from the first chalk lines delineating the design or filled with many hours' worth of painstaking brushwork, they have been beautiful. Definitions of beauty are, of course, entirely subjective, but as the philosopher Immanuel Kant has maintained, aesthetic appreciation is a quality upon which we can concur, anchored in shared normative judgements, a universal value. Art today rarely endeavours to add something beautiful to the world, but Christiansen does not shy away from creating unexpected beauty. It might seem paradoxical that an artist whose career kicked off along with the untamed, ironic,

speedy – and often consciously ugly – painting of the 1980s, now immerses himself in compositions within which each individual element is depicted with thoroughness and punctiliousness. "That's where there was a vacant position," Christiansen remarks, and you get the feeling that the conscious choice is also a decision to take up the challenge.

There is also a vacant position in the exhibition. It is ours if we take up the challenge. It is the one the artist gives us: the place where we are pulled out of habits and routines for a moment, so that the seasons, which are now worn-out after showing up throughout the chronicles of human life, nonetheless appear fresh, new and unexpected on the painter's canvas. The paintings invite us to participate in that rejuvenation and that hope. In Jesper Christiansen's work, objects invite us into the canvasses; they have been created with generous care and patience, and in terms of scale they link to the cartographic process that has previously been an important feature of his artistic practice. All the objects on the canvas – the membrane that mediates between us and the pictorial space – are depicted on a scale of 1:1. From the springtime bicycle to the wintertime doll's house, objects in the foreground are almost their natural size, giving us immediate access to the work. We can enter straight into the painted space. The human figure has always featured in Jesper Christiansen's paintings: us.

Footnotes

1. See: *The Art Newspaper*, 18 March 2020: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/a-message-from-david-hockney-do-remember-they-can-t-cancel-the-spring> (accessed March 2020).

2. Jesper Christiansen's body of work deserves far more study than it has hitherto attracted. The most extensive introduction to the artist is found in the catalogue for the retrospective exhibition *GO BACK* (2013), in which Jesper Christiansen's art is introduced by art critic Henrik Wivel, highlighting the cartographic aspect as a cross-cutting theme in the artist's works. In the same publication, art critic Lisbet Bonde examines the status of drawing in Christiansen's work, while the artist himself charts his life chronologically. On pp. 216-219 there is a useful bibliography of reviews and publications up to 2013. See: Lene Burkard and Jesper Christiansen (eds.), *GO BACK*, exhibition catalogue, Naryanana Press, 2013. Of more recent publications about the artist, see: Merete Pryds Helle, Anne Kielgast and Jesper Christiansen, *JESPER CHRISTIANSEN - FORBILLEDE*, exhibition catalogue, Gl. Strand, 2018; *OMBRE FLORE, JESPER CHRISTIANSEN*, catalogue, Maison du Danemark, Paris 2019. The latter publications present new pieces primarily by means of the artist's own texts, introductions of literary texts and numerous illustrations. There is therefore still a lack of lengthier studies placing the artist within Danish and international art history in general, and analyses of the significance of his reference universe in particular. An example of Christiansen's specific status in Danish art history can be seen in Kamma Overgaard Hansen's eloquent PhD dissertation about the 1980s generation of *De Unge Vilde* ('young wild ones') in Danish art. Christiansen is here named in a summary of this generation's representation in Danish art museums, but he is not brought into the body of the dissertation at all; see: Kamma Overgaard Hansen, "*vi har ikke noget at sige, men vi gør det så koncentreret som muligt*" ('we have nothing to say, but we'll keep it as brief as we can'), PhD dissertation, Aarhus University 2017, p. 338. This omission shows quite clearly that Christiansen's artistic output does not fit into fixed templates, but must be carefully processed and elucidated in further art history research. The present short article does not remedy this lack; on the basis of the artist's most recent paintings, the article points out some of the manifest (but hitherto unaddressed) art historical contexts in which Christiansen's paintings can be seen, analysed and interpreted.

3. See: Umberto Eco, *Semiotica e filosofia del Linguaggio*, Biblioteca Studio, Einaudi, Torino 1997 (1984), p. 195, (*Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 127), in which Eco points out that the way in which a metaphor, for example, is understood relies entirely on the cultural encyclopedia of the interpreting subject. For an introduction to Eco's richly faceted encyclopedia concept, see, for example: Birgit Eriksson, "Verdens modstande og påvirkelighed – Ecos encyklopædier", pp. 43-54 in *Passage – Tidsskrift for Litteratur og Kritik*, vol. 18, no. 47, 2003.

4. The term "myriads of particularities" ("partikularitetsmyriader") derives from Professor in Art History Jacob Wamberg's work on landscape images in art, in which he uses the term to describe one modernity characteristic of Gothic art; see: Jacob Wamberg, *Landscape as World Picture: Tracing Cultural Evolution in Images*, Vol. II: *Early Modernity*, Aarhus University Press, 2009, p. 52 / *Landskabet som Verdensbillede*, Passepartouts Særskriftserie, Aarhus University, 2005, p. 344.

5. Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, University of Chicago Press, 1983.

6. Ibid., p. xxi.

7. Erwin Panofsky on Jan van Eyck, quoted in Svetlana Alpers, *op.cit.*,

8. Jesper Christiansen, *OMBRE FLORE*, exhibition catalogue, Maison du Danemark, 2019, p. 32.

9. Not only the paintings themselves, but also the titles are part of this sphere of reference. They allude to such diverse works as Anglo-American T.S. Eliot's almost exemplary modernist poem *The Waste Land* (1922), in which free verse, fragmented images and associative descriptions open up for a poetic terrain's disillusioned depiction of springtime, on to Robert Burton's (1577-1640) tract *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, with its copious translations, which dissects melancholy in all its forms, and the 1983 album *Winter Comes Home* by post-punk band Pere Ubu. The musical universe of the band is characterised by lead singer David Thomas's (b. 1953) experimental approach, and the name of the band is a reference to the absurd and bizarre play *Ubu Roi* by the French symbolist Alfred Jarry (1873-1907). These complex references have a kinship with Christiansen's own approach, given that they also quote, reference and reproduce, but seldom wish to specify reasons and logical contexts.

10. *Remembrance Of Things Past*, trl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1922:

For a long time I used to go to bed early. Sometimes, when I had put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say "I'm going to sleep." And half an hour later the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I would try to put away the book which, I imagined, was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had been thinking all the time, while I was asleep, of what I had just been reading, but my thoughts had run into a channel of their own, until I myself seemed actually to have become the subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V.

11. Ibid.

12. Jesper Christiansen, *Her Netop Her*, Gallerie Møller Witt, 2010, p. 30.

13. One of the best and most comprehensive introductions to Nicolas Poussin's work and ideas remains the 1967 study by art historian Anthony Blunt. See: Anthony Blunt, *Nicholas Poussin*, Pallas Athene, London 1995. The four seasons series is examined in the closing chapter, pp. 332-356.

14. German art historian Willibald Sauerländer was the first to write about the allegorical meaning of Poussin's *Les Quatre Saisons*, clarifying the religious and mythological context of the series. See: Willibald Sauerländer, "Die Jahreszeiten. Ein Beitrag zur allegorischen Landschaft beim späten Poussin", in *Münchener Jahrbuch der Bildende Kunst*, vol. 7, 1956, pp. 169-184. In a more recent publication, Nicolas Milovanovic provides a precise and concise introduction to the works in: *Nicolas Poussin. Les Quatre Saisons*, Musée du Louvre Éditions and Somogy Editions d'Art, Paris, 2014; the book illustrates and discusses the works and provides a brief summary of the most important art history sources.

15. Poussin's description is from a letter to the aristocratic political official and patron of the arts François Sublet de Noyers (1589-1645). The letter is quoted in: Carl Goldstein, "The Meaning of Poussin's Letter to De Noyers", *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 108, no. 758 (May 1966), pp. 232-237, 239. Goldstein links *prospect* way of seeing with perspectival construction of pictorial surface, whereas here I have chosen to focus on more overarching differences between *aspect* and *prospect*.

16. See also: Oskar Bätschmann, *Nicolas Poussin. Dialectics of Painting*, Reaktion Books, London, 1990, p. 16ff (trl. from the German original ed.: *Dialektik der Malerei von Nicolas Poussin*, Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft, 1982).

17. Bätschmann, *op.cit.*, pp. 26-27.

18. Bible, International Standard Version, Numbers 13: 23-24.

19. The discussion about Poussin, of whose landscapes Constable was clearly a great admirer, can be found in an 1833 lecture; see: C.R. Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable: Composed Chiefly of His Letters*, London 1845, p. 327. <https://archive.org/details/memoirsoflifeofj00lesluoft/page/327/mode/2up> (accessed March 2020)

20. Willibald Sauerländer, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-184.

21. An example of Wierix's engraving can be seen in the British Museum collection, available online: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1859-0709-3090 (accessed March 2020).

22. In conversation with Jesper Christiansen, references from the worlds of literature, music, theatre and film mingle effortlessly and coalesce into beautiful oceans of meaning. In connection with the preparation of this article, Jesper Christiansen has welcomed me to his studio on a number of occasions; our conversations have been crucial to my understanding of his work in general and his four seasons in particular.

23. Rilke's description of Nike comes from a letter to his wife, the sculptor Clara Rilke, dated September 16 1902; see: Jane Bannard Greene and M.D. Herter Norton, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1892-1910*, W.W. Norton & Company, 1969, pp. 90-91.

24. Jesper Christiansen, *HAUS STUNDEN*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Mikael Andersen Berlin, 2009, p. 8.

25. See: William Morris, "The Aims of Art", pp. 117-141, in William Morris, *Signs of Change*, Longmans, Greens and Co, London, New York and Bombay, 1896, p. 137. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/signschangeseve02morrgoog/page/n154/mode/2up> (accessed March 2020).

Le Bicolore



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