

What We See, or What We Seem

Richard G. Carlsson
& Linda Hofvander

*Excerpts from studio conversations between
Richard G. Carlsson and Linda Hofvander*

Richard G. Carlsson: I have always liked the notion of an artwork as a representation of something else, of itself, and of the person who made it. That might be why I find the exhibition title so appropriate, because it associates to, among other things, the gaze as taking place in opposite directions – that the artwork reflects ourselves as much as it reflects the motif.

Linda Hofvander: And that the image affects the gaze as well.

R: That's right. The first time I saw your work, I was struck by how the focus was not on the motif, but rather that the motif was being used as a means to visualize perception, and perhaps primarily the active, contemplative gaze.

L: Precisely. The photograph is a documentation of whatever is in front of the camera at a given moment, but my aim is to speak of the act itself of observing, and the nature of the narrative it conveys, and to avoid associating it too much to an object with its own story. So I started reducing and creating my own objects specifically for the photographic narrative. Using the camera and truly seeing without a predetermined gaze is essential to me. On a higher level, it has to do with my relationship to reality.

R: I see both of us as firmly grounded in our respective media, and a key part of our expression lies in our focus on the fundamental preconditions of both the image and the medium itself. As a painter, I have to relate to the act of painting, its gestures and dynamics – to work with a material that offers resistance and demands total concentration. Especially with regard to my abstract works, the time spent painting can vary considerably. Changes are made at the spur of the moment, sometimes everything falls in place right away, and at other times I might have to redo the whole thing after a long period of reflection. I assume it's different for you. Capturing the image may take a split second, the time it takes to press the shutter button, but it can take quite a while before you have a tangible piece in front of you.

L: Yes, but I can definitely relate to how you describe the inherent resistance of a medium, as well as a

llowing the limits of a medium to influence the work process. I work with analogue photography, with a large format camera, and for me that definitely entails “handling” something. Yes, it might only take a brief instance to take the picture, but it's a charged moment that demands my full concentration. Then there's the next step, of transforming the negative into an image. A whole new set of questions is brought to bear, and new decisions have to be made regarding size and shape. One of the strengths of photography is the fact that it doesn't really have a predetermined size. Although I do eventually decide on a size for each image, this is one of the last decisions I make, and it's an intuitive and investigative process in an interaction with space, body and motif. Size can radically change an image. How do you decide on the format and size of your canvases or boards before starting to paint?

R: When it comes to my studio interiors, I normally choose a smaller format that allows me to paint the entire painting wet-on-wet, and preferably in one session, so as to quickly capture a fleeting light or mood. So, in other words, time and the material characteristics of the medium dictate the format here. But when it comes to my abstract paintings, I often choose a larger format that can interact with the architectural space of the studio or gallery.

L: You're a very skilled and consistent painter. Do you ever feel that you stand a risk of becoming too confident regarding your painting? And what do you do to ensure an unexpected outcome?

R: I often compare the act of painting to playing in an improvised music ensemble. You have to be alert and responsive to what happens at the spur of the moment. The material has a life of its own, and chance occurrences happen all the time. I like the feeling of precariously balancing on the thin line between total failure and success, and that keeps me focused. Complacency, however, always ensures failure. I never think in terms of flaunting “skill” for the sake of it, but see it as a tool for dealing with the unpredictable nature of painting.

R: You sometimes work with photography in relation to objects. I get the impression that the impetus for the objects stems from the need to create something in relation to which a specific situation can arise, in connection to either light or spatiality that you want to work with photographically. These objects have over time become autonomous works in their own right, and not merely motifs for your images. How do you view the relationship between the objects and your photographs?

L: I work on my pieces in a step by step manner. I often start by making the object I intend to photograph, primarily in order to undermine the indexical, where the images are both constructed and real. At times I have even chosen to exhibit the objects I have photographed in order to highlight the gap that emerges.

R: I have a similar attitude when it comes to my abstracts in relation to my studio interiors and the surrounding space. For me, the encounter or “gap” constitutes a narrative of sorts.

L: It's interesting how we often interpret photographic images as transparent narratives from reality, and tend to overlook their properties as physical objects. But I find it important and exciting to reflect on how the “gestaltung” of the photographic image both influences and is a part of its own narrative. And that is why I can at times see a point to making an image not intended for the wall, but that possesses other spatial qualities.

R: I find spatiality as a metaphor very intriguing. For me, there's an aspect to the phenomenon that bears a strong connection to presence and time. I spend extended periods in a secluded room, engrossed in work, and cut off from the rest of the world. And when that physical space becomes an image, it acts as a metaphor for an inner mental space.

L: I see the image's space as something that arises in the mind and in the interpretation of the image. A space that emerges where one can address the ambiguous gap between fact and fiction, and reveal illusions without forfeiting the magic. Through recognition, the concrete spatiality offers a connection to reality, and it's vital for me that the situation I convey is indeed real.

R: I see our artistic processes as being quite similar, at least in the initial phase. We both get our visual ideas and impulses from our immediate surroundings, and process them in a direct and intuitive manner. There is something straightforward and direct to the expression. Although there is an aesthetic aspect to what we do, it's of secondary importance. I can sometimes get a little frustrated when I hear someone referring to my paintings as “beautiful”, because I dislike the idea of the aesthetics standing in the way of more important issues coming to the viewer's attention. There is a rawness to our works that has to do with showing the piece for what it is. In my case, paint on canvas or board, with traces of the creative process still visible – in the form of paint running along the sides of the painting, the base coat shining

through, the accumulation of paint in the form of clumps on the edges, and so on.

L: I think the rawness also adds an important nuance to the pragmatism of the image – it's real and not all too ordered or tidy. These traces of the work process become part of the piece, and hopefully can entice the viewer to start reflecting on what's actually going on in the image.

R: I often see your works as quite painterly, that they at times refer to painting as much as photography. Among other things, there's a new series you're working on that I see as a tip of the hat to Malevich.

L: Well, I've always been interested in, for example, how we perceive spatialities and interpret shapes in images – how the images possess both a flatness and depth, and in this context painters such as Malevich are both an inspiration and a reference. The paint is a distinct material to work with, but I think one can have a similar approach towards the surface of a photograph. In painting, there is often a focus on the gaze and light, and I can relate to that. Light is not only a precondition for photography, it also sets the tone and nuance of the narrative. But light is a key aspect of your work as well.

R: Very much so. In both my abstract and figurative works my focus lies to a large extent on the rendition of light – both the light that emerges in a specific color relationship, as well as the naturalistic light of my surrounding environment. That, and a focus on the immediacy and physicality of painting is what primarily constitutes the core of my painterly approach.

L: It's been very exciting having these studio conversations and discovering unexpected similarities as well as seeing how our ideas have previously coincided on a number of occasions. I personally find it invigorating to step out of the specifically photographic approach and observe my works juxtaposed to another vocabulary. Our ambition has always been to present the exhibition as a solo show. What do you expect will happen in the exhibition space when we exhibit our works together?

R: I see two separate but closely related approaches both merging and clarifying each other. Or as the Swedish work title of the exhibition “De sammanflätade rummen” hinted, as two threads sewn into a common weave.

