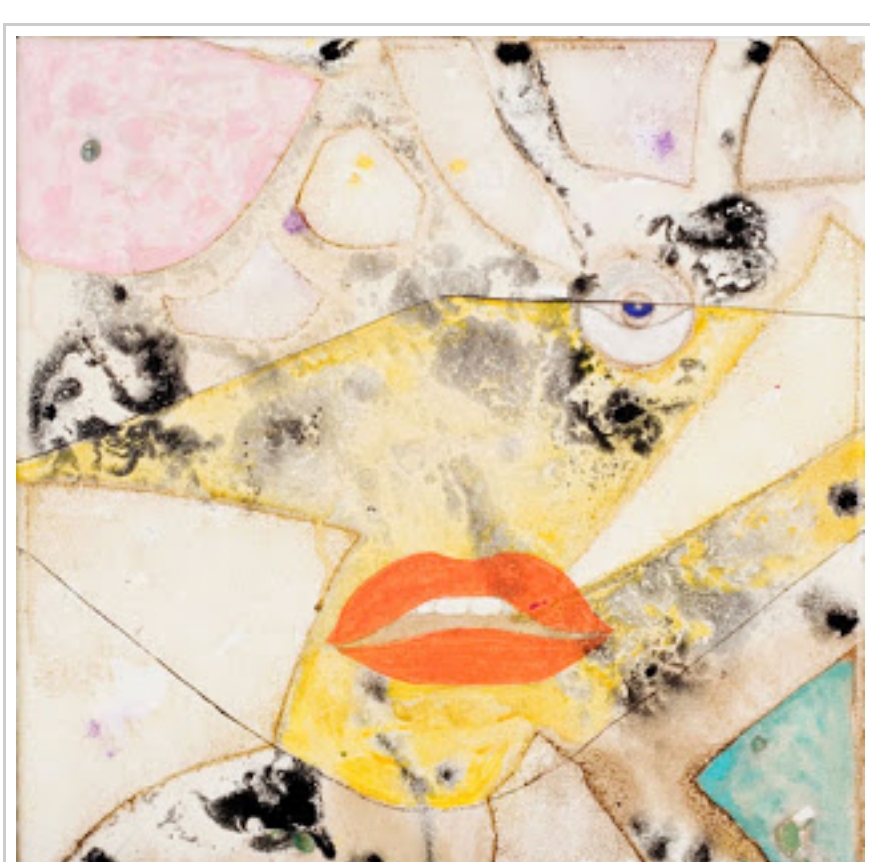


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Life's Stain on the Mind: Essay for Detlef E. Aderhold



When I look at newly made contemporary art, I often feel nothing. I can pass by many galleries, distractedly eye what is being shown, and be left with the same absence of emotion I feel (or don't feel) when looking at food displayed in a supermarket. Nothing stops me dead in my tracks, nothing catches me off-guard, nothing feels as though it is sincerely inviting me to care about it. I have considered what this art wants from me, the looker, if not an emotional response. Maybe it is asking me to admire it, like a nice piece of fresh fish behind glass. Maybe it wants me to think about it, the way I might ruminate on an offhand comment that was made with a smile but felt hollow. Maybe it wants me to note all its distinguished reference points and award it a good grade, like I would a student. Maybe it wants me to project something upon it, so that it can be my mirror, and I can hold it up and see what I love and hate in myself. Whatever the case, much contemporary artwork composed to communicate primarily through its own visibility does not immediately draw me in on an emotional or psychological level. The act of looking at it does not feel like a sacred experience.

When I encountered Detlef's small and brightly hued abstract paintings, in an email, I felt differently. There was something in them that beckoned immediate emotion from me. In his painting "Null Komma Null" (2011) lips and eyes are strewn and scattered about as though they didn't matter, as though no face could make them more or less whole. The lips beckoned in the way lips do, but I couldn't imagine who or what had once stood in front of them and conjured them into reality—these certainly didn't look like the paintings I had become accustomed to seeing in galleries in New York. Was it a man or woman? I had a compulsion to go and see these paintings in person, and when I did, I was not disappointed. It was a cold Sunday, and I couldn't locate the entrance to the space where they were being exhibited. When I asked a stranger for help, the stranger turned out to be Detlef's wife, Irina. This charming and seemingly fated-by-chance meeting made the event of viewing the work even more significant. I loved the paintings on sight—perhaps even sight-unseen—and felt an immediate connection with both Detlef and Irina.

Little did I know, until after I met him, that Detlef is a psychoanalyst—another connection. The examination of consciousness is something I have endeavored to explore for a long time. Maybe my whole life. It's the most important thing to me, and the place where I locate all my value and substance as a human being. It's also the guiding principle of my life. It seemed almost too fantastical to be true that an individual who was also impelled to explore consciousness would have made these paintings. In his artist's statement, Aderhold describes himself as "curious mix of a young and an old artist." He is German, and was born in the middle of the 20th century, and has only recently begun to make his paintings in earnest. Depth of character mixes together with freshness, making his paintings seem old, and new too. Looking at his work, I experience the same feeling I often feel when looking at paintings made in the past. They seem, for lack of a better phrase, breathed into—as though the artist has chosen to animate them into being, versus simply "make" them. Francis Picabia's paintings feel like that to me. Finding work being made now that had reached that same spiritual proximity felt, and still feels, exciting to me.

After viewing Detlef's work on two separate occasions in New York, I thought about Arnold Hauser's writings on Paleolithic art in the first volume of his series *The Social History of Art*. In this volume, Hauser states, "The Paleolithic artist [doesn't know] above all about the technique of composing a face from the silhouette in profile and the eyes en face." Hauser believes that the distinction between art and reality did not exist for the Paleolithic artist—"When the Paleolithic artist painted an animal on the rock, he produced a real animal... He will have had the same attitude to art as Lévy-Bruhl's Sioux Red Indian, who said of a research worker whom he saw preparing sketches: 'I know that this man has put many of our bisons in his book. I was there when he did it, and since then we have had no bisons.'" It made me question how a person could create art that seemed so much in line with this arguably more eternal nature of representation. Could one re-acquire this modality of perception, this old consciousness? Could one paint within this consciousness? Could this consciousness paint itself?

The subconscious mind is a sort of junk drawer. The anachronism of the junk drawer is that everything inside of it is just valuable enough to not be considered actual junk. The items typically have a defined use value, but that use value is so diminished or misunderstood—compared to that of, say, books, which are on permanent display in most homes—that we can't bring ourselves to look at these items. They have to be hidden. What was it, in my own subconscious junk drawer, that made me know—through nothing more than a thumbnail image in an email—that I would want to see these paintings, write on them, meet their maker, and explore their consciousness? Perhaps there was something beyond "features," beyond both abstraction and representation that one could discern from the surfaces of Detlef's paintings. Gazing into eyes, reading faces, understanding what lies above or behind or beyond the casual comments people make in their day-to-day lives. The beauty of psychoanalysis is its devotion to understanding the "who" that exists inside our flesh cocoons. The beauty of painting is that it makes us what we are—the cave paintings demonstrated that. No animal before or since has sought to render its own likeness, or the simulacrum of its own thought. How could I have known that Detlef was a psychoanalyst, mirroring my obsession with understanding consciousness? When I met Detlef and Irina, everything came together like puzzle pieces, a feeling of instant synchronicity and understanding.

The lines, smudges, smoky auras and scattershot in Detlef's recent paintings appear to bleed up and out through the painting, creating a surface that seems to have somehow created itself. Geometric and organic forms—notably, in "Motherboard Square" (2012) the negative space of a quadrangle—hover on the paintings' surfaces like submerged memories floating up from the subconscious. Through methods of transference and frottage on a wet canvas prepped with water or coffee, Detlef leaves marks that seem involuntary, reflecting his interest in "how change occurs through interaction." For his process, Detlef says, "I often incorporate impressions...made with everyday objects—bicycle chains, shards of glass, Lego pieces, or model-train tracks—or natural materials—sand, pine needles, and stones...These objects and materials leave their trace or impression in the wet ground and sometimes yield additional structures that I can work from. After preparing the ground of the painting...the colors selected beforehand are dripped, flung, and energetically scattered wet-on-wet across the canvas. This action-based element develops on the basis of preliminary plans and mental images recorded in sketches."

In Aderhold's *The Motherboard Series* (2012) paintings inhabit a realm both internalized and outer-dimensional, a cosmos both within and without. In the series' hallmark image, "Force Motherboard," a translucent, insectile figure with articulated limbs hovers above—or between—a galaxy formed by slashes, stains, interceded highways of negative space, and celestial pin drops of paint. Aderhold's distinctive approach to layering, blending and segregating form and color, makes it appear as though the paint itself has chosen to spread like a stain, or collect like a puddle of rain. The artist's tonal arrangements—which veer from bright magenta to a greying, dirtied blush—recall, in some moments, an evolving bruise. In others, a porous, pinkish-violet landscape appears struck through with the brutal optimism of yellow, or the challenged grace of blue. We could be inside the body or outside the universe—we are somewhere as yet unmapped.

Pliny the Elder recorded, in the first century AD, a poetic story about what could be considered one of the first abstract paintings. He included this story in his *Naturalis Historiae*—a multi-volume series widely considered to be the first form of the encyclopedia. The story recalls an incident that occurred when Apelles, one of the most well known painters in ancient Greece, visited the home of Protogenes, another famous painter. An old woman, who told him that Protogenes was out and asked to know who was calling on him, greeted Apelles. Seeing a blank canvas on an easel nearby, Apelles responded, according to Pliny the Elder, "'Here he is'... seizing a brush, he traced with color upon the panel an outline of a singularly minute fineness." When Protogenes returned, he knew it had to be Apelles who had touched the canvas, given the delicacy of the outline.

So saying, he traced within the same outline a still finer outline, but with another color, and then took his departure, with instructions to the woman to show it to the stranger, if he returned, and to let him know that this was the person whom he had come to see. It happened as he anticipated; Apelles returned, and vexed at finding himself thus surpassed, he took up another color and split both of the outlines, leaving no possibility of anything finer being executed. Upon seeing this, Protogenes admitted that he was defeated, and at once flew to the harbor to look for his guest...He thought proper, too, to transmit the panel to posterity, just as it was, and it always continued to be held in the highest admiration by all, artists in particular. I am told that it was burnt in the first fire which took place at Caesar's palace on the Palatine Hill; but in former times I have often stopped to admire it.

The abstract gesture is the line that says, "I am here; I existed." Writing on art has always been my clumsy attempt to draw the even more exquisite line—to compose the connection of two souls through the simplest and most direct strategy possible. When I regard the surface of Detlef's paintings, I recall that psychological junk drawer being pulled open and momentarily exposed. Objects float to the surface or descend into the depths, but they are there to be looked at, to connect to, to engage with. In a final remark given to the exceptional painting made by Apelles and Protogenes, Pliny the Elder stated, "Upon its vast surface it contained nothing whatever except the three outlines, so remarkably fine as to escape the sight: among the most elaborate works of numerous other artists it had all the appearance of a blank space; and yet by that very fact it attracted the notice of every one, and was held in higher estimation than any other painting there." Life is a substance that stains the mind. Friendship is the factotum that connects us, and does all the dirty work. The canvas, like the page, appears to us blank, and we fill it in with some form of meaning. The hand touches the canvas as the fingers tap against the keyboard, and both actions make our connections visible. The exhibition space and the publication then make these visible connections consumable to others. In the end, we are brought together to find meaning in these surfaces, each stained with the residue of consciousness.

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