

“Zonation” in the Art of Hans Jørgen Henriksen

Rare is the painter who can be profoundly influenced by the ideas of an illustrious predecessor without sacrificing his own visual originality. One such painter is the Danish artist Hans Jørgen Henriksen, who makes a passionate case for what he calls “zonation painting” and backs it up with a virtual gallery of impressive examples on his website ZONERING.DK.

“I use zonation as a term picked up from other areas,” Henriksen states, “from contemporary groundwater protection activities in Denmark, where authorities and waterworks in these years are mapping the vulnerable areas, which need additional groundwater protection, in order to be able to assure clean drinking water resources abstracted from the groundwater system (Cezanne’s motif).”

Although something may be lost in translation not only from Danish to English, but from scientific to artistic terminology (particularly in that abrupt parenthesis at the end of the preceding sentence), Henriksen makes a poetically evocative analogy by likening Cezanne’s pioneering contribution to pictorial organization in modern painting with the vital quest for “purity” in the cultivation of drinking water.

Granted, Henriksen may muddy the waters slightly (if one may succumb to an obvious pun), when he claims to use zonation “for

letting emotion and the unconscious take on form,” since the emotional content in non-literary painting is so subjective as to be invariably elusive. Fortunately, however, the compositional and coloristic integrity in his paintings is such that one need not justify — or even fully comprehend — his theories in order to appreciate his work.

That said, a point about how Henriksen’s interest in water cultivation manifests literally in his art could be made by citing paintings such as “Stream from the future” and “Freshwater Cycle.” Both are sweeping semi-abstract landscape vistas in which shifting neo-cubistic shapes are dynamically juxtaposed with flowing aquatic bodies and shimmering jewel-like colors. However, equally luminous in their own manner, are “The Family,” and “Deal Makers,” centering on symbolic figures simplified in a boldly generalized expressionist manner. In these works, the Cezannesque planar underpinnings are not as clearly visible; however, the “zonation” occurs on what one might call a more molecular level, by virtue of the chromatic modulations and variations of brushstrokes that meld the figures with the picture plane and unify the entire composition.

Indeed, Henriksen’s figure paintings transcend the irony and preciousness of much so-called Neo-Expressionism to marry the raw intuitive power of Der Blaue Reiter school to an intriguing personal symbolism. Especially



“Fresh Water Cycle”

successful in both regards is “Targetmen,” where clustered, abruptly cropped figures, one with an ominous circle on his chest, appear to be part of an urban crowd, although a couple of them appear either partially or fully nude. Just as striking is “Legs, Leaves and Figures,” in which potentially jarring dislocations of scale are offset by subtle color harmonies that the artist achieves with a palette dominated by orange, violet and blue hues. Here, the term “zonation” could suggest different points of view and levels of reality brought into balance solely by virtue of artistic vision — or what Cezanne is quoted as calling “a continuous process of reconciling multiplicity with an overall unity.”

Hans Jørgen Henriksen provides many thoughtful explanations for his artistic motives on his website, all worthy of serious consideration. In the final analysis, however, his paintings speak eloquently for themselves.

— Maurice Taplinger

Adam A Keeps the Faith of Pure Painterly Power

A woman artist with an intriguingly incongruous, attention-getting name, the Italian painter known as Adam A appears at first glance to be a stylistic relative of both the Cobra group and A.R. Penck, given the seemingly intuitive neo-primitive energy of her iconography. Looked at from a more homegrown angle, the work on view on Adam A’s website (essereadama.com) could also seem a direct extension of Italy’s own Transavanguardia movement of the late 1970s, given the vital new spin that she puts on the visual vocabulary of Expressionism as it was revived in the late 1970s by Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, and Enzo Cucchi.

Yet the more of her work one sees, the more one realizes that Adam A is a true original who holds no allegiances to any particular school or tendency, having evolved her own distinctly international answer to how, in an age that often seems dominated by robotic technology and multimedia, the venerable tradition of painterly figuration can remain a valid vehicle for simultaneously conveying a sense of contemporary angst and timeless beauty.

The refreshing directness and power of Adam A’s work is immediately evident in her painting “La Vita,” which celebrates the richness of life and love with two starkly simplified overlapping heads inscribed in a

raggedly elegant line akin to that of the late American graffiti prodigy Jean Michel-Basquiat and set against a vibrant orange ground further enlivened by a variety of rough symbols and muscular gestures. Adam A, however, moderates her spontaneity with a European aesthetic refinement that imbues her work with its own special tension.

A more pointedly political feeling comes across in “L’Ecologista,” another painting by Adam A, in which a rectangularly stylized semiabstract figure dominates the composition, posturing histrionically amid a flurry of vertical black strokes that could suggest a waist-high field of charred grass and vigorously brushed circles within squares which could seem to symbolize the harnessing of solar energy or its opposite: the imposition of our geometrically rigid schemes on the organic beauty of our natural resources. Is the dominant figure in “L’



“La Vita”

Ecologista” a noble knight set on saving the environment, or a buffoonishly hapless ecological Don Quixote?

Adam A’s combination of bold, cartoon-like simplification and vigorous “action painting” leaves all such questions pending. The viewer is obliged to engage in a lively dialogue with the painting in order to arrive at a subjective interpretation that makes him or her feel vitally involved — almost like a collaborator with the artist!

Even more important than the many political, philosophical, and historical issues raised in the paintings of Adam A, however, are their purely visual, tactile, and coloristic attributes. In compositions such as “Fecondazione,” “La Sostanza” “Mondo,” and “Confronto,” primitive stick figure surrogates for the human image, starkly stylized heads, fragments of scrawled text, an animated array of overlapping circular and oval shapes (sometimes borne witness to by veritable hordes of stylized eyes) make up the artist’s abundantly teeming private world.

Thankfully absent is the self-protective irony that hobbles and trivializes so much postmodern art. For Adam A obviously prefers to commit herself fully to her unabashed painterly passion, which invests all of her compositions with intrepid intensity.

— Maurice Taplinger