

FACES – TRACES

Filip Haag's Latest Paintings

~~Were I to simply begin this text with word following on word, gradually achieving an approximation of Filip Haag's painterly approach, then I would suddenly realize that such a beginning would turn out to be a path that doesn't serve any purpose, essentially a one way street, were I suddenly to become aware that as yet I have no goal to arrive at with this text, nor wish to foresee any ending at all, then I would cross out what had been written so far, overwrite it, and thereby, in the literal sense, write it off and, in what I am doing now, I am almost starting anew.~~

Upon closer inspection, I realize that at least one phrase must remain: Filip Haag's approach to painting. And I note that in the now crossed-out yet somewhat confusing beginning I have, in a way at least, imitated his method.

Pegasus. Haag's approach – one could indeed call it a strict concept of openness or freedom – essentially revolves around such age-old questions as: What inspires artistic ideas? How does a work come into being? When is a work a work? When is a work finished?

To paraphrase Filip Haag's poetic working process with an ironic twist – before it is traced step by step, word by word, sentence by sentence – we need to refer to some verses from Heinrich Heine's *Atta Troll*:

Only its own zest obeying,
Whether galloping or flying,
In the realm of fable bustles
My beloved Pegasus.

[...]

Gold-beshodden are the hooves of
My petite white wingéd pony,
Strings of pearls make up the bridle,

Carry me to where thou wilt!
Over aery precipices,
Where cascades, with fearful shrieking,
Warn of the abyss of nonsense!

Carry me through silent valleys,
Where the sober oak trees tower
And on twisted roots there trickles
Sweet the ancient font of legends!

Let me drink there, let me moisten
There mine eyes - oh, how I pine for
This most lucid wonder-water,
Which can make one seeing, knowing.

Experiment. Filip Haag undertakes the execution of wondrous transformations. He makes odd decisions and as a result his paintings appearing to us as fantasies. These paths resemble an adventurous trip, an expedition from the unknown through the unknown into the unknown. For several years, he has been following an essentially experimental trail that has long occupied him in his work. He tackles it in a way that allows him to consistently surprise and outsmart himself. As an alchemist of art, he has, for example simulated natural processes, initiated photochemical processes on light-sensitive paper for the formation of landscapes, diluted ink with alcohol and with a match set it into formative motion, or cast sculptures that formed themselves in water.

He has therefore adhered to the principle that no handwriting should be his own. As a result there arose a complex dialectic of inspiration and chance; what happens to him by chance is thanks to a recurring idea that never creates the same thing, nor allows the same thing to take form. Lying behind this concept is his unquenchable curiosity to discover what novel, unexpected or entirely unfamiliar may emerge.

(Corresponding to this is Haag's restlessness, which has for instance led to his extensive travels throughout India and Kyrgyzstan over the years).

Failure is an inevitable part of a risk taken by anyone who gives in to the vagaries of chance and the unknown. In his most recent publication, Haag aptly quotes Samuel Beckett: "All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

Impromptu. There is nothing gloomy about Haag's work; on the contrary: as with Heine's Pegasus, the attempt is associated with pleasure. The same is true of his most recent series of works, where rather than rejecting handwritten notes he sets things in motion by introducing a plethora of handwritten texts, immersing them in a meandering flow of images, thus exposing them to a never-ending state of indecision. (In finger painting, the papillary lines on the fingertips are worn away, so that the uniqueness of each fingerprint – a personal signature – paradoxically vanishes in an abundance of style and handwritten script.)

Haag takes a canvas and, it seems to me, without hesitation begins applying paint, sometimes making broad brush strokes, other times working directly with his fingers, observing what emerges, eager to see what will appear next. He sets the canvas aside for days, weeks, months, occasionally even years, then takes it up again, considers the possible directions to be taken, sometimes begins from scratch, and either continues with the picture's colours, textures, and rhythms—or discards them entirely, turning any further painting into a revision, akin to unrestricted improvisation. And once again, the canvas is set aside. And once again, each potential failure may serve as a catalyst and justification for another revision.

Transformations. The intermediate stages – possibly disappearing by the end of the process – are photographically documented by the artist as moments in the 'making-of'. It is astonishing to see what metamorphoses a painting can undergo in the course of the work being carried out and over time. A good example is the painting *ALLERWELT (Lasomosa)*, created in 2022/23 and measuring 120 by 190 centimetres, which went through nine preliminary stages (figs. pp.12&13). To begin with, the picture features amorphous, single-cell black spots distributed on an upright canvas, which gradually become denser and merge into an almost totally black surface; there remain just a few last bright spots (which persist throughout the various changes all the way up to the ninth stage); comparable to a stormy yet luminous morning, the golden, brightly lit painting later takes on a greenish hue, contracts into a dull mass, and now the colour flows, becoming more diffuse in the fourth stage. Then in the fifth stage, like an apparition: a face whose eyes continue to gaze out at the viewer in subsequent stages, but the image becomes spiky through the application of thin dark fingerprints, only to then – when turned on its side to become a landscape format – transform into an alpine landscape in which something teasingly peeks out (the eighth stage): The "mountain", which is not really a mountain but a condensed patch of colour, is converted into a form pierced by light, extending into almost half of the picture, contrasted on the left by dark, vibrantly drawn lines.

The final revision introduces to the painting a gold-enhanced¹ abstract structure, which can indeed resemble a landscape. Embedded in this structure are architectural-like golden forms meticulously painted with the finest of brushes that in the tenth stage complete the landscape, forming the tectonics of valleys and hills that emerge in a supernatural light. Unfolding before our eyes is a large-format painting that in itself gives the impression of being a miniature.

Thus, this canvas has gone through its metamorphoses, which could be described pictorially as experimental/abstract/gestural/expressive/non-figurative and miniaturistically representational.

Associations. The transformations other canvases undergo are in completely different directions, as in the case of *UNRUHE (Chumenoumau)*, painted between 2018 and 2023 (pp. 26&27), where one sees a cascade of golden rain emerge from four colourful non-figurative vertical formats that end in a final, now horizontal stage, flowing from above into darkness. Or in the case of *LAND UNTER (Umorium)*, where (pp. 10&11) the diffuse impression of a Big Bang culminates in the seventh stage in a geometrizing, though in visual terms, equally disorienting architectural landscape. The development can also progress from a poetically delicate, non-figurative abstract – is that a cloud over a landscape? – to an uncanny head shape reminiscent of an ancient bust seen against a geometric background. And likewise in *NICHT SO BALD (Kalatawar)*, painted between 2019 and 2025 (pp. 30&31).

The paths and detours that Filip Haag takes are ultimately unfathomable – and this is reflected in the dual titles assigned his works. These consist of an apparently clear, coherent element and (in brackets) an onomatopoeic neologism, in which, as in *Chumenoumau*, a Bernese German expression can easily be hidden. In any case, the assigning of titles seems to follow mechanisms similar to the painted metamorphosis. This is a process of constant association. The concept of association is inherently linked to the question of how free and spontaneous these compositions and continuations are or, conversely, how forced.

This once again raises the question of artistic impetus. This cannot be determined simply by following the principle that impressions are always flowing and cannot be fixed — and that even the final stage is not immune to once again being swept up in the flow and a whirl of new impressions.

“Mystic Writing-Pad”. Can the multilayered nature of Filip Haag's pictures be understood as a kind of sketchpad, similar to the one Freud describes in a 1925 essay with the unassuming title “Note on a “Mystic Writing-Pad”? In it, Freud explores the question of how memories can be preserved, noting that a piece of paper, while relatively durable, is too limited; and further, that a slate tablet allows one to make any number of notes, but each time something is written down, what was previously recorded must be erased. “Some time ago,” he writes, “a small device under the name Mystic Writing-Pad came onto the market, promising to accomplish more than a sheet of paper or a slate tablet. It is meant to be nothing more than a writing tablet from which the notes can be conveniently removed.” The novelty of that then unusual writing tablet lay in the fact that whatever one wrote or drew became visible on the celluloid layer on top of the underlying thin layer of resin or wax. Then when a strip of cardboard was passed between the celluloid and underlying layer, the image on the celluloid layer was erased. However, traces of the previous notes remained inscribed and thus preserved in the resin or wax layer, albeit in an ultimately jumbled, layered arrangement. Freud compared this tangled layering to psychic memory.

Erasing and Overpainting. Is the artistic process underlying Filip Haag's paintings to be understood in this way – albeit metaphorically? Or rather, in a less psychological sense, as an intriguing technical procedure

¹ Gold is in the literal sense of the word an iconic colour, sparkling, shimmering, precious. Following phases of conceptual colour reduction, Filip Haag consciously uses gold as a kind of irrational antidote. This use of gold cannot be compared to that in the works of James Lee Byars, who saw in gold the emergence of perfection.

comparable to a palimpsest? A palimpsest is an ancient or medieval manuscript from which the original text has been scraped or washed off in order to reuse the valuable material, usually parchment, to overwrite it, because traces of the previous text cannot be completely removed. Upon closer inspection, this results in peculiar, grotesque structures.

All of this may help to more precisely perceive the complexity of Filip Haag's painterly approach, but is by no means exhaustive. Especially not when one tries to imagine all the traces in digital processes that would be analogous to the sketchpad or palimpsest. As accurate as that may be, it is unimaginable.

A final face. Once again a failure, both in thinking and writing. In Haag's work, the joy of experimentation can be felt – and seen. Alongside failure and the act of starting over or even beginning anew, which he accepts, indeed embraces, and alongside a noticeable skepticism and reflection, what stands out is his urge to narrate and imagine things over and over again, exploring what is possible with canvas and brush, fingers and paints. He dares to pursue figuration that, as landscape, face and figure, possesses a certain commitment that draws on tradition, yet also challenges it.

Every transition and stage is a kind of vision, something that surprisingly can be seen, not an accident, but the appearance and emergence of a possibility. The term vision is only properly understood in this context if one also mentions the plural: visions. These can certainly also be faces, but more often a face is that which comes into view and thus comes to mind. These are visions or, indeed, apparitions. The perhaps most famous vision in the history of art (and painting) is Albrecht Dürer's 1525 watercolour *Dream Vision*, which was accompanied by an emphatic explanatory text:²



Visions can therefore be nightmarish and dreamlike, wonderful or beautiful or ugly or frightening or surprising or exciting. Haag operates in this atmosphere of suspense – and that is precisely what is so exciting.

² In the modern English translation: "In the year 1525, after Pentecost, during the night between Wednesday and Thursday, I saw this vision in my sleep: I saw many large masses of water falling from the sky. The first struck the ground about four miles from me, landing with tremendous violence, with an exceedingly great rushing and splashing, so that the entire land was flooded. I was so frightened that I woke up before any other masses of water fell. The masses of water that later appeared were also very large. Some fell farther away, others closer, and they dropped from such a height that in my imagination they seemed to fall slowly to the ground. But when the first water that struck the earth arrived, it fell with such speed, with a rush of wind and a roaring, so terrifying that when I awoke, my whole body was trembling, and for a long time I could not compose myself. However, when I got up in the morning, I drew here (on paper) how I had seen it. May God turn all things to the best.

In the end, however, the only thing that counts is the last vision, the only thing still to be seen. There, the artist has brought the process to its conclusion.

~~(Or should I cross everything out again? And start anew?)~~

No, I should not continue writing once again. And yet I would like to note something, to ensure that nothing is deleted or overwritten, but rather to arrive at a (preliminary) point by using a Filip Haag quotation: 'For me, it's a question of evaluating or discarding things that have come about by chance, depending on their usefulness (in my conceptual world, that is to say, in my cosmos) or else legitimizing them. In doing so, this must appear even more plausible than if it had been deliberately created.'

Reversal. I feel compelled, despite all intentions, to set down a (provisional) point, to add a thought that was inspired by my beginning to read the book *On Painting* by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. (I had had this book in mind for some time, but it only drew my attention in a bookstore when I had, as I thought, finished reading Filip Haag's text on painting.) In his first lecture on March 31st 1981, Deleuze speaks of the 'catastrophe in painting.' By this, he does not mean the depiction of catastrophes such as the Flood or alpine disasters, which we know from works by Nicolas Poussin or Ferdinand Hodler (or as the 'vision' by Dürer). Deleuze has in mind the catastrophe suffered by painting itself, *the radical reversals in the process of painting*, as seen in Cézanne, Klee, or Francis Bacon.

Reversal: That is the literal meaning of "catastrophe," which in the theory of tragedy denotes the turning point in the hero's misfortune (or good fortune). In the catastrophe of painting, radical upheavals become evident—already before the act of painting, but always also in the painting process: "If you do not guide your canvas through a kind of blazing fire or storm, you will only be producing clichés".³

So, in that sense, is Filip Haag's painting "catastrophic"?

There is a question mark at the end. ~~No full stop.~~

³ Gilles Deleuze, *On Painting. Lectures March to June 1981*. Edited and annotated by David Lapoujade. of Minnesota Press, 2025.