

Prospect

Alfons Bytautas

One of the delights of the movement towards abstraction was in the sheer vortex of its annihilation of meaning. As the world fragmented in modernity, so new modernisms revelled in collapse and fragmentation. Out of this dissolution of meaning the certainties of bourgeois painting and representation disappeared and abstraction began its obsession with pure surface. Like Victor Pasmore, abstraction came late to Alfons Bytautas, and like Pasmore, became an obsessive urge to disorient and recompose our fragmentary world into new eloquences.

The notebooks of Bytautas are full of experiment and play. They characterise both a will to represent non-intentionality and the unconscious as an artistic practice, but also to serve as a method of living, of being-in-the-world. Both the drawings and the collages, in different ways reflect new modes of patterning: grids, chequer boards, cabinets, structures of games. The hand of the artist constructs new worlds, almost prefiguring or daring us to make them into something beyond the notebook. They are biomorphic and geometric; they contain figures, entities and beings that Bytautas disrupts and fragments into new collisions, contestations, constellations. At once they revel in surface and then we begin to discern depth. The works stand against the production of illusory space but then almost become blueprints of imaginary architectures and worlds. This is a vortex in which the sentience and the unconscious of the artist recomposes its own mental fragmentation into monstrous novel unities produced by play and experimentation and indeed into landscapes of haunting and apparition initiating new forms of order.

I don't really think of my work as being either abstract or figurative – there are still landscape references to be found. Sometimes there are portraits too. Geometrical shapes are mostly perceived as being “abstract” in art and there is certainly an underlying geometrical system in a lot of my work – a simple grid. Making a grid structure is, after all, a simple and elegant way of imposing order.

This is a modernism of the layer, the sediment and the strata in which the found paper objects of the collage are entangled with, what Tim Ingold has called, the ‘parliament of lines’ of drawing and mark-making. Lines make worlds.

Moving the line itself creates a plane, a flat surface, that can be used to effectively represent form in three dimensions. Through the use of perspective, lines can be used to create the illusion of space. Texture is suggested by the quality of the line (this might be fluffy or sharp) or by simply making a rubbing of the textured surface itself. By varying the pressure when drawing, light and dark marks can be made to simulate the play of light on an object.

This multitude of lines and marks makes movement out of its pre-compositional world, uses the phrases and objects that Bytautas has inherited, and transmutes them into a new cosmos. This drawing has origins but it also has destinations: they are lines of movement, learning, play, joy and surprise.

In *The Glass Bead Game* by Hermann Hesse the game itself begins with unfathomable rules, enigmatic board moves and a scale of such immensity that the game itself stands for the world, all of its arts and all of its music and sounds. There is something architectural about these grids and boards in the work of Bytautas. They have intent and passion but also emerge from something beyond consciousness, indeed beyond life and the world. We could make cities and machines out of these drawings and collages. At once they are reminiscent of the biomorphic late obsessions of Schwitters, at other points they recall Klee. Viscous, somatic colours vie with the techniques of geometry and the rectangle. Mythic entities appear as figures within the collage, eyes and faces stare out at us from their depths, beyond and behind the lines. At other times the collages and drawings are like walls shrouding a meaning inaccessible to us.

This journey towards and through abstraction is what Catherine de Zegher has called an abstraction which draws from and draws form. The work of Bytautas is something to be experienced, endured, traversed, precisely because it draws from the world but re-orders its system of ruination, a world-ordering born out of trauma and dislocation. John Berger says something like this when he traverses Ferdinand Cheval's stone palaces at Hauterives:

Whether you climb up its towers, walk through its crypts or look up at a façade from the ground, you are aware of having entered something. You find yourself in a system which includes the space you occupy. The system may change its own image, suggesting different metaphors at different times. I have already compared it with a forest. In parts it is like a stomach. In other parts it is like a brain – the physical organ in the skull, not the abstract mind (Berger 1992).

With the work of Bytautas we enter something and we emerge again, but we are changed by that traverse and so our fragmented world is recomposed again by an artist's labour.

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Prospect is the first exhibition in Gallery North's Autumn season of exhibitions curated around the theme of Constructions.