

Mark van Yetter

The mere knowledge of a fact is pale

Kunsthall Stavanger, February 4th – April 10th, 2016

Interview with Mark van Yetter led by Heather Jones, exhibitions manager at Kunsthall Stavanger; also available here: <http://kunsthallstavanger.no/en/blog/interview-mark-van-yetter>

Heather Jones: *At first glance, your work straddles many genres – painting, illustration, sequential story-telling, and it seems like a variety of mark-making techniques are employed. Do you consider your work in specific relation to any one lineage?*

Mark van Yetter: I do not think I build off any certain lineage. I look at lots of different things and one way or another certain influences seep in. My approach is generally intuitive and hands on. I try not to over-think things.

HJ: *For the works in long, scroll format that you are presenting at Kunsthall Stavanger, you mentioned that they were too large to fully unroll in your studio. Can you describe your process for creating these works? Are they carefully planned or do you let the works evolve as they unroll?*

MvY: I had a basic idea to start with. Often those are the best. In a nutshell it was to create a long scroll depicting the landscape that I grew up with. One that I am intimately familiar with but have not lived in for a very long while. I have actually spent more than a decade away from America. But my roots are there, in the Pocono mountains, Pennsylvania an hour and a half drive to New York City. In regards to the previous question, this work I can trace to certain influences. The American social realist painters were clearly on my mind but I would be scared to say it is in their lineage, as I believe the terms of that chapter in art history expired quite some time ago. I also clearly recall a series of drawings by Robert Crumb that depict an American landscape. Each drawing in this series depicts the same landscape at different periods of time. You see the view changing from the country side to the modern city. This series is titled "A short history of America" and was presented as an animation in the documentary "Crumb" which I saw at the cinemas in New York City when I was 16 years old. It made a very profound influence on me as I remembered the animation quite clearly 20 years later. At that point I had no idea about traditional American Blues and Folk music. I did not discover this music through the film at that point, perhaps I was too young to register it or perhaps the film soundtrack catered more to ragtime piano and pre-war jazz which Crumb is fanatic about in addition to his obsession with the blues. It was a few years later when I was around 20 years old that I first heard Harry Smith's "Anthology of American folk music" and that was a turning point in my life.

This music, in a way that is very difficult to describe, was also a huge influence on the scroll I present at Stavanger Kunsthall. The early blues and folk music touch me in a profound way. They go to my bones. When I look at contemporary art I am less affected. It could be that this music is not overtly concerned with the cerebral. It is intelligent but it is also emotional and most certainly it is untainted by commercialism. I think that's what I am hoping for in my work. A certain sincerity and truth. I don't think my work successful if it requires to be explained to be understood. That's perhaps why I originally skated around the question of my relation to any one lineage in art. I am not necessarily trying to fit into contemporary art. I think art exists in so many forms and it seems strange that artists are expected to be original yet they stick firmly to certain codes. It's as if there are rules that everyone is denying exist, but fulfills them nevertheless. For example after my studies at art school I moved back in the area I grew up and painted landscapes for 2 years. You could imagine the response from the art world I left behind in New York.

As far as the process for creating this work goes it was simply hands on. I started and just moved forward. It is installed like a scroll but actually it is made on separate sheets of paper 40 by 60 cm each that connect to one another. I have a 2.5 meter wall to work on in my room so I could set up 4 pages on the wall at a time. After finishing the plate furthest to the left I would remove it from the wall and move the other three plates left and add a fourth to the right and I continued in this manner. Sketching out the work with oil paint then filling in details. I used no source material only my head, this kept it fun to work on. I also used no pens or anything else but black and white paint and a few brushes. What I regret most is that it is not one long continuous roll of paper. It could have been, as I did not discard any sheet of paper and restart. It was done intuitively and executed directly, simply planning the next element on the spot as it came to mind.

HJ: *Your use of the scroll as a format here is interesting – many of your previous works seem to be more straight-forwardly contained by the picture plane / the edges of the canvas or frame. Has working with the scroll as a format changed your process or thinking around the work in any way?*

MvY: No it has not really changed my way of thinking about my work too much. It was fun to keep going with out an edge to stop it. Reminded me of Stan Brakhage who thought of his films as one continuous never ending work. I think, if I remember correct, that he never discarded any film that he shot. But I like to have a contained space to work on. It's a very exciting thing to have to construct a composition to see what those delineations can command of the elements, the space you create in it. I'm not sure if I would make a scroll again. Maybe. I would need another simple idea to carry me through it, one that seemed worth it.

HJ: *Can you discuss your choice for subjects/objects in this work? They seem to figures depicted in familiar landscapes and social situations, but more seems to be presented here than what immediately meets the eye.*

MvY: Well it is hard to say what the subject is. I hope that is something that people can relate to in their own way. What meets the eye meets the brain and each brain must have a

wealth of associations that I could only hope to dream of.

HJ: *In an earlier interview, you were quoted as saying something that stuck with me: you said, "honoring the intrinsic human quality of imperfection grants painting credence." Can you elaborate on that statement? Would you describe your works as purposefully imperfect? Or perfect in their imperfection?*

MvY: Interesting question. I guess that it is hard to say that something is perfect. I would be frightened to death if I was to encounter perfection and am quite certain no one has been afforded such an opportunity. By this I meant that people often strive for perfection and in doing so miss the whole beauty of things. They miss the big picture. There is no rule for perfection and likewise it is not about breaking rules. I could think of countless examples but as I touched on the blues I would like to reiterate with another example. A blues singer singing a song with true feeling would not be concerned with the strain of his voice tilting out of key as he would be singing with an emotional drive. A person that studied music could easily make the mistake to try and resign the song in perfect key. Perhaps because their idea of perfection is set by a system of rules that may not actually exist. This all gets very theoretical. It is actually the point where emotions and intellect cross. Art is not purely an intellectual thing it is a human endeavor and must come from all facets of the human condition.

HJ: *Can you tell us about any current projects or upcoming exhibitions?*

MvY: Currently I am thinking of a new series of works but have yet to begin. This is still a thinking stage. The next series will be presented in New York in November at a great new gallery called Bridget Donahue.