

HENRY RASMUSSEN: SURFACE TENSION

By Jonathan Goodman

Founder and publisher of the well-known photography magazine B&W (Black and White), Henry Rasmussen has until now been underrecognized as a painter. In fact, he has been painting for many years, and although this show is his first solo exhibition in New York, the sophistication and intelligence of his art result from a long involvement with the problems of painting. The artist, while born in Denmark, has made the long journey to America—specifically to Santa Barbara, California, where he now lives. Rasmussen's paintings clearly show the influence of American abstraction, but there is something else, in the raised surfaces of his canvases especially, that strikes this writer as European if not specifically Scandinavian. Applying national characteristics to an artist proves difficult and esthetically dangerous, in part because the last two decades have opened up an internationalism that tends to exclude a specifically nationalist interpretation. While Rasmussen clearly belongs to the Americanized version of abstraction that has New York's legacy since the early 1950s, it is also true that he brings something else to the table -- in this case, a subdued melancholy, which shows that his origins have indeed influenced him. Again, It is hard to say in present times what separates American art from art of other cultures, yet there is the hope, in doing so, that we will come closer to a sophisticated judgment of Rasmussen's art.

In this show, the paintings' scratched and slightly built-up surfaces show up as an inspired palimpsest, in which the history of Rasmussen's art is given to process, to documenting the actions that resulted in a finished work. Yet it would be incomplete to call the artist an abstract expressionist, someone interested in paint alone, for there is something tangibly metaphysical to the way he works. Beyond Rasmussen's deft use of color and, in a number of cases, graffiti and words, there is an attempt to free the dumb, muted existence of painting, which is free to illustrate but cannot in fact elaborate an idea. Bringing words or phrases into the visual world of painting is bold and intellectually stimulating; one can read the words as if they were placed for literary meaningfulness, or one can accept the language as a particularly sharp use of linguistics in a purely visual form. Meaning in abstract expressionist art tends to derive its force from a principled but narrow activity in which the painting becomes the site of the artist's interior; in contrast, by opening up that site to words -- to information outside of the painting -- we can see why the painter would enjoy bringing not only connotation but also denotation into his art. Words are specific in ways the image is not.

In Rasmussen's case, the use of language does create meaning above and beyond the evidence of his materials. For example, in *X-14 (Execute)*, the painter has included the words "extort," "execute," "expel," and "exploit," all of them describing negative social activities. To offset their evidently destructive nature, Rasmussen has painted over them a large, thin black "X" that extends to the four corners of the composition. It is hard not to think of human rights when confronted with the painting, which manages to be beautifully expressive despite its brief litany of words connoting damaging acts. In *Big Deal*, Rasmussen presents us with the words "big deal," written out in capital letters in black, white, and red. Inevitably, his audience is forced to speculate on the literary meaning of the phrase—is Rasmussen highlighting the American dream of making a lot of money through the cashing in of a big deal, or is he shrugging off art or society by ironically including the notion of the big deal? Either interpretation seems plausible, but unless we speak to the artist himself, we will never know his intentions. As a result, we ascribe a conscious awareness where there may be little or intentionality on the part of Rasmussen. In any case, the tension between his motivation and our interpretation of it surely helps to inspire his audience, whose speculation must remain intelligent—even in light of an apparently double valence in language.

Not all of Rasmussen's canvases are so socially or metaphysically oriented. In *Midnight*, a beautiful meditation on the experience of darkness, we can see Rasmussen at his mysterious best, documenting night as if it possessed a dark light of its own. The lightly raised surface of the paintings has been randomly scored, with some highlights brought out by the use of a dark gray-white surface. These points of interest focus the audience on the experience of darkness as physically substantial, and in some ways the painting suggests the phenomena produced by the Light and Space artists of California, where Rasmussen lives. Yet he is not so much interested in tricks of the light as he is in communicating the density of an atmosphere in which light does not exist. The painting shows Rasmussen to be an expert recorder of ambiance, with the result that the painting stays in the audience's mind for a long time after the painting has been seen. Rasmussen's hand is both cool and impassioned, optimistic and pessimistic, enabling him to order a language that tends to proceed intuitively. The surface tension between dualities is key to the understanding of his art.

It is unwise, however, to ascribe too much intention to Rasmussen's work. He is as much an action painter as he is a literary one, and his more abstract paintings show the viewer a way out of intellectual conundrums. It is also true that even in the seemingly abstract works, there are references to the world external to us. For example, *Birch Morning* consists of black verticals that have been rendered against a brown-taupe ground, with bits and pieces of orange light—the arrival of morning—coming through the hazy background. While atmospheric and bordering on an idealized sense of nature, the notion of a copse of birch trees is unmistakably a large part of the painting. *Midday*, with its orange-red background and areas of yellow, over which brown lines have been scribbled, shows us that Rasmussen is committed to rendering the effects of the real world, no matter how idealized they become during the process of painting. Rasmussen is a connoisseur of art's recent history, but in his case his knowledge makes him that much more independent of the movements people assume he may be gravitating toward. This is striking, being both new and highly intelligent. It makes his work overwhelmingly contemporary.

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