



Photo: Arvid Baltiswiler

“Colours are the bricks”

An interview with the artist Ernesto Baltiswiler

The Åland Islands are a stunning congeries of over six thousand islands, located in the Baltic Sea between Finland and Sweden. The silence, the light and the wideness of the landscape does not only inspire tourists. On Seglinge, an idyllic island in the east of Åland, the Swiss artist Ernesto Baltiswiler lives and works during the summer. His paintings impress by their richness of colours and the concentrated use of forms.

What is it that fascinates you about abstract painting?

The colours. I produce them myself, they are the bricks, the shapes rather work in a supportive way. As an abstract painter I dive into the universe of colours, every shade is essential. I do it like Rothko, who restricted himself to colours, but I do it in my own way. Although it is about the same, the colours should to touch.

The artworks here in your studio, have they been created this summer?

Some of them, I have been working on those for years, none of them got to be finished yet. You simply cannot force a painting; it is like in life or in relationships. I do not have to focus now, because I am just at the beginning. On this one for example, you can still see fish scales, I took it to the sea one

time and also painted there. I have been on Seglinge only for a couple of weeks now and I am finally well arranged.

When you started those pictures, did you already know what you wanted to express with them?

No, actually I never do. If I start and it works, I will know what it is going to be someday. Here, I am just painting over, the background is still shining through; different things result from that technique. You have to go on, some day something crystallizes and later on, the work is finished. It is important that you do not focus too much on it, you always have to be able to let it go from time to time. No idée fixe how it should be, then you just see a small part instead of all possibilities and this is also comparable to life.

“The bright light of midsummer is like the wind beneath your wings”

What abets you to start a painting?

You cannot do art with your head; the white canvas is the beginning. I never have an idea, that does not happen in my head. If I have an idea it does not work, I am just blocking myself out and the colours and lines become stiff, you directly see that. And that is also like in life: the process makes it valuable.

So you work intuitively?

Yes definitely. Can you imagine it like a kind of automatic writing, where the creativity also lies in the process?

That depends on the processing step, maybe at the beginning. I do not come into the creative part that I control until the last phase. Then the process of painting is really aware and I focus a lot, it is like meditation.

A meditation about what?

The pictures develop over a very long period of time and it is a slow approach to the picture and also a slow ripening, a little bit similar to the ripening of an apple.

Do you always work on different paintings at the same time?

I always do because the colours need time to dry. Then a whole series of pictures result, which are thought as single pieces but appear to develop during one space of time. The works of one series all have the same title but the single pictures do not have an own name. Last summer's series had the name “Eagle blood 2011” because there appears to be a lot of eagles on Åland.

What does the eagle stand for?

The eagle is a symbol for freedom. The blood symbolizes passion but it also is a colour. I really thought a lot about the topic of freedom, but my pictures are not meant to be philosophic. I only see as important that my work displays freedom.

During the summer you live on Seglinge, you sometimes paint on islands, you go fishing and collect weirdly shaped parts of wood, horns of elks or snakeskins; does this activity in nature have an effect on your art?

I would like to create an exhibition with my *objets trouvés*, they surround me like a mantle, alike the cooking that is very important for me.

So would you say that living on the island is a base for your work?

You can compare it to a chef's stock. I am not a landscapist but this kind of living, the freedom that I experience here in nature surely pours into my work. This is the message to the viewer, which should make the freedom interesting to him. And that is what the main point of my art is, it should address the viewer.

“When the picture is finished, it is like the birth of a child”

In what way does the extraordinary bright light on Åland influence your work?

The Nordic light enormously widens the spectrum of colours and Central Europe seems grey against this. Of course this is really good for a painter, that is how finer nuances develop and I get stimulated here because there is a natural reference to the colours when I am surrounded by so many different shades of them. In Switzerland I more often have to work from the inside to the outside because I have all the colours saved inside of me.

You live in Wilderswil near Interlaken; do you create different kinds of paintings there?

Of course, those works of art are not worse but I think that the Nordic pictures more convey the feeling of freedom.

Do you see a difference between your old and your new paintings?

I am not sure whether the paintings are more complex due to my life experience. It could also be possible that they are easier and more basic if I manage to let go of my experience and work free from that.

The Åland Islands advertise with the slogan “Come and listen to the silence!”. Is this silence reflected in your pictures?

The status of highest concentration, when you get part of the picture yourself is easier to reach in such a surrounding but to work as an artist alone in a studio on a lonely island often is very isolated and you have to be able to manage that.

“The picture is finished when I can see it.”

What do you think is the most beautiful of the artistic producing?

That are the creations of pictures. When the picture is finished, it is like the birth of a child and a really big affirmation when you have won the fight. On the other side you can also become desperate if the work does not continue, then you must have patience and keep working. Somehow you can find a way. This process has a huge symbolic character and with this you can also learn a lot for life.

You said that there is not even the sparkle of an idea in the beginning, just in the last phase you give way for the creativity. Is there something at that point of time what you want to express, next to the central topic freedom?

An extremely good picture, but it comes on its own, I do not want to include a message. Sometimes also the picture tells me what it is.

And if it does not?

Mostly it is finished when I can see the picture through the long process, the apple that is ripened. I decide when it is time to pick it. Sometimes it gets overripe and rotten and I can start all over again. Sometimes I change the idea but I always want to express the same: an extremely good painting. It is

comparable to cooking, where I also always want to create a very good flavour but you can only do this with a lot of love. It is the same message in arts, if I succeed to put in a lot of love it gets the people to vibrate and touches them.

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Ernesto Baltiswiler was born in 1961 in Glarus, Switzerland and studied 1982 at the School of Visual Arts, New York and from 1983 to 1988 at the Düsseldorf State Art Academy. He lives and works on Seglinge/Åland Islands and in Wilderswil. The latest exhibition where his paintings could be seen was in and outside of his studio in Wilderswil. Before that, he exhibited in Switzerland, Germany and Sweden.

<http://baltiswiler.com/>