

## "I was really struck by the Ornament..."

A conversation between Emmy Skensved and Oliver Koerner von Gustorf

Oliver Koerner von Gustorf: *Why don't you paint?*

**Emmy Skensved:** Up until two years ago I did paint. I painted very long on canvas and actually I used silk screen and I was making these really ornate paintings with a lot of repetitive forms in them. I was doing this while I was in one city and then I moved to another city and I found that I didn't have the facilities to do a screen printing anymore. I sort of needed to change my technique after I moved and so I developed a method by which I could create repetitive forms. Instead of using the silkscreen to create these repetitive motifs I began to experiment with paint. I painted on plastic or Mylar and trying to work in a more collage-like manner. I was stenciling through plastic and also painting on to plastic and cutting it out into this sort of decal forms and adhering those to the canvass. That was the time when I found out this was a good way to make the images that I had been making but without the silk screening process. It also became more a painterly process because I was actually working only with paint as opposed to having this intermediate step with the silkscreen process and the photographic motion. So this was not only a practical but more a conceptional decision because I wanted to get away from the silkscreen.

*Why did you work with the silkscreen from the beginning?*

I wanted to find a good way to create these wallpaper-like repetitive ornaments in my work.

*What makes repetitive ornaments so interesting for you?*

I have always been interested in them as far back as I can remember. By growing up in North America, particularly in the city where I grew up there wasn't so much ornament around. You really had this kind of modernist buildings and in my parents' house specifically it was very austere.

*Are your parents modernists?*

No, no. My dad is from Scandinavia so he has this kind of austere way of decorating which was mixed with my mom's college furniture so it was a really un-ornate space I grew up in. And then I went to university and moved to Florence, Italy in 2004. And there I was really struck by all the ornament. It is one of the most opulent cities you can live in.

*It had this "Room with a View" effect on you?*

Kind of. That's when I really became interested in ornamental forms from the Romans, from the renaissance, the baroque. Then it really started coming out in my work. It always had been there in the background as a sort of supporting imagery but after going to Italy it became more a forefront. And in the next couple of years it became more and more the subject of the work itself and I got rid of everything else I had been using in my paintings. I had been incorporating text and different sorts of pop imagery and that all went away – it became all about the ornament.

*Did you only use silkscreen in your former work or were there painterly gestures?*

There were.

*Did you find expressive painting especially difficult?*

No, not at all. Actually I started off really expressively.

*You sound as if this was a big sin.*

No, I was really into life drawing, from the model and also from life and that was what I thought I was going to do for the rest of my life. And then I went to Italy.

*So you started with the silkscreen prints in Italy? Not before?*

I started with them in Italy, and continued when I returned to Toronto.

*And then you started to paint on plastic and other materials and to tear the dry paint off and collage it on canvas.*

Yes, that happened maybe a year or two later, after I found out that I couldn't get the effect that I wanted with the silk screening.

*When you paint layers of paint on plastic, do those pre-paintings have a form?*

I basically have a certain size that I work in. It's the largest sheet of this particular kind of plastic that I can get.

*How big is it?*

It's maybe 1.50 m by 1 m – not so big. And I just cover the whole thing in paint, two or three layers, until it's sort of solid, until I can actually pull it off and it doesn't tear.

*So when you pull it off you have those squares of paint.*

Yes but they have rough edges.

*Like a big pancake.*

Yes, a really flat one.

*Like a crêpe.*

Yes. I just cut the paint squares into shapes and start to work with them in order to create a sort of solid surface on the background of the painting. And then I add the next layer or the next couple of layers. Finally the ornamental forms follow. Those are all cut out separately.

*So how do you fix them on the canvas? Do you use glue or paint to attach them to the canvas?*

I use Polymer. So it's all acrylic paint from the decals, that I make to the glue its all Polymer. And then it's sealed in the polymer varnish as well so it's all paint.

*So you attach the layers of paint to the unprepared canvas?*

I do an initial layer of acrylic paint to get rid of the texture of the canvas and also the decals adhere really well this way.

*Why do you reduce yourself to black and white for such a long time?*

I was using a lot of color up until a couple of two years ago, and then I realized that I couldn't really justify why I was using colors. I found it wasn't really necessary for what I was trying to communicate. It was more about the motifs themselves and then the color sort of got in the way. And as soon as I reduced things to black and white I found there was a whole new level of clarity because I had a creative set of parameters for myself. And then I found I had all the freedom to work with these parameters and all sort of interesting things started to happen with the black and white.

*What interesting things?*

My attention was drawn more to the actual forms themselves, onto how they existed in the painterly space with each other. Instead of having several layers of space in the painting there became just these two that sort of played off with each other.

*Is flatness important to you?*

Yes but then there was also more space created too because certain things started come forward and other things began to recede and then began this play between the two.

*Did you also reduce yourself to black and white to get a different feeling for the material, for the surface and the layers?*

I am not sure if it's so much about a different feeling for the material. I am just sort of honing in more on the imagery itself, getting rid of all this excess information that was there before. So it becomes about all these little details. And I think they are way more noticeable when there are fewer elements in the works like just the black and white.

*What's the theme of your painting? You are not a completely abstract painter, we are talking about motifs. What interests you in frames?*

I find them really interesting because they are sort of everywhere from graphic design and advertising to architecture and the fact that they are always in this sort of subordinate position where they support another image or some text or something else. I always tend to notice these things and I feel like maybe not everybody does and I want to draw more attention to this sort of supportive imagery as opposed to what it would have been supporting in the first place. So I like to take them out of their context and work with them and try to make them into something that maybe other people would appreciate as well.

*We are talking about supporting imagery but in your works there is not much to support. They are kind of empty, right?*

Yes, in order to draw more attention to the frame itself, I've taken out all of the central information so that the centre then just refers to the outside frame.

*Is this a formal decision? Or is it also a metaphorical decision?*

Maybe both. I guess it's more of a formal decision. It's to draw more attention to the frame itself and initially when I started working on this series, I had a complete void in the centre of the painting, so it was just completely white or completely black. So then all of the attention was drawn to the frame or on the outside. And then I realized that in the process of making them I was covering up all of these sort of fissures that would happen where the pieces of paint wouldn't quite come together properly and I found that there is maybe a sort of dishonesty in that practice. And I really wanted to just leave it at that point instead of trying to cover it up to adhere to these preconceived notions of what I thought the painting should be. So I started to let these things show. And that began to speak to me of some sort of decadence and decay and things like that. The paintings started to fall apart and I became really interested in that. And then recently I've started to see these fissures in the centre as references to geometric abstraction and constructivism and this really modernist kind of painting.

*So this was your intention from the beginning?*

No, it's just sort of something that evolved out of it and I find that reading really interesting where you have got a sort of formal geometric painting in the centre of this really ornate frame. So that dialogue is what's driving me right now.

*If you think about your education, what kind of painterly background do you come from? Are you like an educated minimalist? You said you were doing a lot of figurative painting ...*

Yes, I began doing lots of figurative work, and then I was also really interested in fiber arts, like fabric, weaving or knitting. So there is a craft background as well as a painting background. I majored in painting in school but then I also doubled in ceramics and all these other things. Being interested in the arts and crafts movement has always been there as well.

*Why was the connection between fine arts and applied arts so interesting for you?*

I was interested in feminist ideas and I felt a real affinity for fiber arts and I wanted to combine that with abstract painting. But then I continued and went more to the painterly side of things.

*Which painters have been influential for you? What was your idea of painting?*

In my fourth year of my undergraduate degree I was really interested in Brazilian art and artists like Beatriz Milhazes. Also the Dutch artist Lily van der Stokker was important for me. There was this building she did and the entire outside was covered in these ornamental flowers and I think this was such a fantastic project that she did. I really felt an affinity with her work but that was only for a period of four months.

*You seem to fly from flower to flower like a bumble bee. (Laughter)*

I guess. But this is always changing and you are always becoming influenced by new sources all the time. Lately I really became more interested in architecture and people like Gio Ponti. I am fascinated by the way he creates these modern and ornate spaces. Also when I travel I am always taking photographs of architecture – all types of architecture, especially baroque. The last time I went to Italy I went to Brescia which is a place I have been told not to go to because there is nothing interesting to see. But when I was there I found a really interesting combination of architecture from

baroque churches to futurist architectures with all these minimalist, square ornaments. I got a lot of photographs of architectural ornaments that I have since used in my paintings.

*At the same time your paintings do not only refer to ornamental elements of architecture or ornamental frames but also seem to evoke the impression of blind or broken mirrors. Is this a metaphor for self reflection or the way you reflect yourself? Are your paintings empty self portraits?*

No, I wouldn't say that.

*Now you sound REALLY bored. (Laughter)*

Not at all! I have seen them as some kind of mirror forms before. But not in the sense of reflecting myself or them being a self portrait. I guess in terms of the fractured mirror I was reading this into certain paintings when I was thinking of this sort of decadence and decay – the idea of making something so opulent that it begins to fall apart. When I make these forms the actual physical process of cutting them out you can only make something so detailed until it becomes overworked and it falls apart. And that started to happen in the actual process of the work but also in the imagery I was letting all these fissures happen. Actually there is a series of works that I entitled *Portrait* and there is another one entitled *Profile*. I entitled them this way because they somehow looked like mirrors or portrait frames. But it is not about the self portrait or a mirroring the artist or anything like that. It is just about the formal structure of the image and what that looks like.

*How important is the interaction between the painting and the space for you?*

In the recent past it has been really important to me because I just finished this project at the *Kulturpalast*, an exhibition space here in Berlin. I used this space specifically because I wanted to work with a space that had some of the same qualities of my paintings – it was really ornate, had been left to neglect and was falling apart. And the location was really perfect because it originally had two rooms. The wall between them had been taken down. So it had really similar moldings on either of both sides and beams in the centre where the wall had been. I made two large sized paintings to recreate the wall on both sides and to play with the symmetry. That was my first foray into working with the space in a very site specific almost architectural way and I would love to continue to work that way.

*Can you imagine leaving painting behind you?*

Yes. I definitely see myself moving into other directions. Of course painting is a great way to work through ideas and don't feel I am finished with exploring this field. But I have one project planned for the future that involves making some sculptures based on architectural ornament that I saw on my trip to Brescia.

*You always seem to have those awaking experiences, obviously..*

I do! Every time I go to Italy. I don't know what it is.