

# Here It Is Colour That Does the Writing

By Mikkel Bogh, arthistorian

The installation of painting, *I'll Be Your Mirror* joins the series of artistic experiments that Ruth Campau has conducted in recent years with a view to giving colour, and the physical, almost meditative, working process through which it has been applied, a prominent place in space and in the experience of space. Thus the installation also joins an almost centennial line within modern painting reaching back as far as at least Matisse and Monet, but, perhaps more surprisingly, to the otherwise not particularly colourist oriented Hammershøi. American artists like Frank Stella, Morris Louis and Donald Judd, not to speak of the French Yves Klein, must also be counted among the decisive precursors in this experimental field within which the simultaneously expansive, dynamic, and symbolic power of colour has been explored from various angles. But tradition aside, Ruth Campau's painting has never had the limiting and framing quality of the tableau. In her case, 'painting', is rather to be understood in the dual sense of an object, a physical thing in space, and an activity, an event. Both dimensions are highlighted in her work, since they are both preconditions for colour attaining the special position in space that she wants it to have. It is not for nothing that she has most recently collaborated with architects. By underscoring the object-like feature of colour and surface rather than, for instance, the illusionist, narrative, or figurative aspects (for all of which painting holds a tremendous potential), she turns painting into a concrete spatial entity that takes up a position of its own between the wall and the other things that fill up space, such as furniture. And by underscoring the aspects of process and event pertaining to the work (both through the almost pouring texture of the paint and through the serial positioning of the painted boards on metal shelves), the work opens up towards its surroundings, that is to say, towards the architectonic circumstances under which it presents itself to the viewer. From each one of the small Perspex boards on the shelves in *I'll Be Your Mirror*, as well as from the installation as a whole, a message emanates that is no ordinary message, since it cannot be decoded or readily switched into another language; it is the communication of colour, light, material, those minute modulations of stroke and tone of colour; and it is the play of difference and similarities between the boards that together give the work a present voice and bring it into play with its surroundings. It is not the artist speaking through her work, and the 'I' in the title and large inscription of the installation does not refer to an artist's signature that underwrites a basic and cohesive intention. What speaks or writes is the colour, an 'I' without subject, though perhaps not deprived of body, wholly indeterminate and impossible to fix at any particular point in space.

If Ruth Campau's painting were, at all cost, to promote colour in its full intensity, extension and spatial presence, why not simply splash paint onto the floor and walls without Perspex boards, paper, shelves and other means? Would colour not in that way achieve the ultimate presence and optimal penetration? One could not straight off deny that such a splash would generate interesting art. On the other hand, it is far from certain that this spontaneous and so to speak unmediated method would yield the best results and the most interesting impact. Several of Ruth Campau's previous installations of painting and series of works nonetheless operate on the verge of the unmediated. In 2001 at the Charlottenborg

exhibition venue in Copenhagen, she thus created an 'event' consisting of painting on paper with colour applied in the characteristic parallel, vertical, and monotonous strokes in graduated tones that lay rolled out on the floor in yards of lanes, hung on the walls and way lying in rolls on a table, like in a shop of fabrics, where the artist herself would stand ready with a pair of scissors to cut pieces according to length for interested buyers. The 'frame' of the work was here so vague, so porous, so close to being at one with the physical surroundings as one could imagine. In a way, this marked the transition from painting as a defined medium to painting as an event whose form and meaning to a large extent arise as a function of – and through an interplay with – physical and pragmatic circumstances. When she, in many other of her series, apply the colour strokes on the inside of smaller or larger Perspex boards that furthermore create a mirroring of space and viewer, a similar effect is achieved. The colour of the painting is no longer tied to a specific and fixed medium, but hovers in a certain sense in a space between the board and the wall to be glimpsed through the veil of the colour strokes.

But can all this, strictly speaking, be called an unmediated presentation of colour? At least one would have to admit that the method is not spontaneous, and the impact is not unmediated in the sense of being immediate and direct. That colour, to Ruth Campau, does not appear as tied to a conventional medium is rather to be seen as an expression of a will to let colour open up towards various situations and conditions through, and by virtue of which, it may produce its special effect. It is not a question of letting colour take over and dominate space, nor is it a question of letting it become one with space and disappear into it like pure light or pure atmosphere. The exercise is more subtle. One could say that the sense of presence and the ever so slight modulations in light and space that colour, through these works, is capable of producing, are owing to an element of absence or at least of discretion. Instead of pushing colour out towards the viewer in an expressive gesture, it is here toned, in and out, with an effect that reminds one of waves in a curtain or of distant flickering northern lights. One moment one sees it, the next it is gone. Now quite near, then far away. The regular drop of the strokes down across the surface is mixed with mirror images of lines, details, figures and movement all around. And the natural delimitation and authority of the painted surface is challenged by the obvious dependence on a varying base like the wall, shelf and so on.

The sensuous presence of the colour is, in other words, never given in a solid, corporeal and absolute sense. It rather appears like a possibility, as an encouragement to its surroundings. *'I'll Be Your Mirror'* – the words do not express a will to power, but rather the 'desire' of a work to be available, in the same way as the books of the shelves in a library are available to those who want to read for themselves. The boards on the shelves put the colour on display, on offer, but do not force it on anyone.

At the same time discreet and withdrawn as well as authoritatively insisting on its own ability to create value and a qualitative difference, the colour in Ruth Campau's works thus lives somewhere between silence and communication. Here it is colour that does the writing, but what is communicated is neither edifying, nor true, nor false, for it is not a statement about anything but itself, about anything but the genesis of the work and its at once emphatic and withdrawn presence. Although the works have a strong public aspect to them, partly as mirror images and partly as images framed by an architectonic space, they cannot on those grounds be viewed as unequivocally social phenomena. The sense that they create is much too transient, subtle and condensed to be brought into circulation as cultural signification or to be made the

object of negotiation and exchange. What they can however do in a space where people move about is – with their own discreet precision in the creation of tiny shifts in material and light – open new fields of attention, of receptivity and wonder in the viewer who sees herself gaze in their mirror image. Through slight modulations and big leaps of colour, through dramatic shifts and microscopic differences of nuance, and through the gradual appearance and disappearance of the colours, Ruth Campau's painting articulates itself as an open universe, open in the sense that it is neither stable no self-reliant, but rather receptive to changes and to as yet unheard of events. The consequences of this are immense.

Translated by Michael Münchow