

Martin Brausewetter: Gentleman, Artist, Scholar

by Renée Gadsden

Without considering pre-historic cave painting, egg tempera is, after encaustic, the oldest painting technique known. Favored by the ancient Greeks and Egyptians, it is most familiar to contemporary society through its use in Medieval and early Renaissance art and in Christian religious painting of the Byzantine era. Martin Brausewetter paints with egg tempera. Like an Old Master, he separates the white from the yolk carefully, and uses the yolk to mix with pigments and other ingredients to create his painting medium. Egg tempera dries quickly, and is insoluble after it dries. This means that it can be painted over without disturbing the original layer of paint.

Layer after layer of paint is one of the most important markers of Brausewetter's style. When contemplating his canvases, one can get lost in the richness of color and the depth and lushness of the layers of paint applied. Painting with egg tempera is time consuming and requires great technical skill. Despite its initial brief drying time, it is not a medium that can be used to create a painting quickly. Martin Brausewetter contends that his paintings are first finally completely dry and hardened after 1-2 years. When looking at his works, the movement and agitation of the surface can be considered perhaps specious, catching the eye at first. Longer contemplation however reveals a distinct profundity: his love for the material tempera, the discipline and structure required to mix the paint, prepare the surface, and apply the paint in layers.

Early Abstract Expressionism is an important influence for Brausewetter. Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky are artists that have inspired his work. A fact known to few: as one of the WPA (Works Progress Administration) artists, Pollock also used tempera for mural studies and murals. (The WPA was a federal arts program (1935-1943) in the United States during the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.) Brausewetter says that he feels a great affinity to Pollock's work because of the tension between the consciously placed gesture and coincidence which make up the paintings. In the European context of that era, Emil Schumacher is an artist that Brausewetter highly regards. After the Second World War, Schumacher played a decisive role in the renewal of art in Germany by establishing the abstract style of art informel. Art informel was characterized by a gestural style of painting unrestricted by notions of form. When looking at Martin Brausewetter's canvases, neither Abstract Expressionism nor art informel come to mind. His work is imbued with the spirit of those movements, but does not contain direct quotations from them.

Brausewetter's paintings, layer upon layer of tempera paint, applied in both spontaneous and pre-meditated fashion, are formed and shaped by his most important instrument: the razor blade. Brausewetter creates his forms, shapes and landscapes on the canvas in a painstaking process using a flimsy razor blade. The struggle between the many layers of thick and densely applied paint, and the tiny

tool used to confront them, gives the paintings a vitality that can be felt as well as seen. Although his works, egg tempera on canvas, are classified as paintings, they have much in common with sculpture. The forms are set free with a razor blade, not a paintbrush. Our visual experience is the result of the struggle David against Goliath, the thin edge of the razor blade against the formidable layers of paint. It is telling that two of Brausewetter's favorite artists are Louise Bourgeois and Tony Cragg, both sculptors.

The Dadaist and Surrealist Max Ernst developed a technique in the 1920s, frottage, in which he took a pencil or other drawing tool and made a rubbing over a textured surface. He went on to develop the technique for oil painting, calling it grattage (scraping). In grattage the canvas is prepared with a layer or more of paint which is then scraped over or scraped off the canvas with a trowel or other tool. Ernst developed grattage together with Joan Miró, who also employed the technique.

Max Ernst, the painter as protagonist, and his fellow Dadaist André Breton, whose literary production is extremely familiar to Martin Brausewetter, are kindred spirits to him. According to Brausewetter, his paintings have strong surrealist content – if one allows oneself to perceive it. The importance of the unconscious as a source of inspiration is central to the nature of surrealism, and a key to understanding Brausewetter's oeuvre.

Another writer of importance to Brausewetter's development as an artist is the French playwright Jean Anouilh, one of the pioneers of the Theater of the Absurd, which began in France in the late 1940s. Brausewetter says that the unconscious and coincidental happenings in Anouilh's writings, framed by conscious structures, strongly influenced his own diction in painting. Interestingly, although Anouilh was a wordsmith and not a painter, he grouped his plays according to a color which corresponded to the dominant mood of the pieces; for example, there are pink plays and black plays. For a person who loves to read and for whom the written word is extremely important, it is worthy of note that Brausewetter's works are mostly untitled. By leaving the works untitled, the artist shows his insistence that the creations should be experienced directly, without a filter. His paintings are for the eye and the emotions in the primary instance, and for the mind only in the second instance. Without a title as a guide, the viewer goes more quickly into Martin Brausewetter's visual universe, into his school of seeing.

The artist describes his art as "eine Synthese von Werkzeugen und Erkenntnissen" ("a synthesis of tools and realizations", author's translation.) The freedom and space that earlier artists created is built upon by Brausewetter consciously. The freedom to drip, the freedom to scratch, the freedom to create discernible figures, the freedom to use pure abstraction: all the possibilities that the history of art offer, Martin Brausewetter takes for his own and uses to serve his artistic vision. The result is an exciting experience for the viewer, but the consequence is also a certain isolation for the artist. Martin Brausewetter's paintings do not resemble anyone else's. He does not belong to any movement, hasn't written any manifesto, does not belong to any group. He does not even use a material that is popular: the overwhelming majority of contemporary painting is done either in oil or acrylic. An artist who uses egg tempera is a lonely prophet. Until now it has not been possible to put a label on his style of painting, and without a categorization, the contemporary art scene tends not to take sufficient notice.

It is a paradox; in theory, art should be original, different, but in the practice, too

much originality is not necessarily appreciated or rewarded at the time it is made. Often there must be a distance of years, decades or longer, for the value of an artist's work to become generally apparent. That certainly is no problem for Brausewetter, because his paintings are made for eternity. There are examples of egg tempera paintings from the 15th century that have retained their color brilliance, without being restored, until today. Martin Brausewetter is represented in various private collections. His works have been eagerly collected for more than 20 years, and the collectors report that the paintings, also when exposed to sun or hung under non-ideal conditions, retain the color depth and saturation of the day they arrived in the collection. This is a testimony to the seriousness of the artist towards his art, and most of all, to the tremendous knowledge which is contained in each canvas.

This artist's most important contribution to the history of art could very well be the "Martin Brausewetter blue." There is a certain shade of blue – deep and dark, almost tending to black – that appears on most of his canvases, and is perhaps his most noticeable trademark. Martin Brausewetter blue is a very rich color, mysterious and hard to describe. It is distinctly different to black, which the artist also frequently uses. His blue is very lush, and haunting, and has a powdery, even velvety, quality inherent to tempera. Martin Brausewetter blue is a color that sucks you in and fascinates you, because it is so unlike any other blue you commonly see. It is not a standard shade of oil or acrylic paint from the art supply store; it is a secret concoction from the studio of someone familiar with Old Master techniques.

As much as Brausewetter is versed in and loves Western culture, it cannot be forgotten that he is curious about and fascinated by the rest of the world. *Tao: The Watercourse Way* by Alan Watts is a book that means very much to him, as is Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*. This book had a great impact on him in the 1980s and informed his first trip to the non-industrialized world, to India, in 1984. Since then, he has travelled the globe, and found his spiritual home in Brazil. The nature, the people, the culture, all the beauty and the tragedy of Brazil have been important in the development of his art. His love of Brazil is reflected in his paintings, his photo works and his objects, the "soliden Boliden": wooden furniture or furniture-like pieces which he constructs of cast away wood and then paints white. The *Boliden* often have long legs, which Brausewetter says can be a reference to the stilts of the buildings in the *favelas*, the Brazilian shanty towns. One can see *Boliden* forms that Brausewetter incorporates into some canvases and most of all, in the photo collages.

Martin Brausewetter, owner of a lonely heart, through his concentrated and single-minded explorations into his craft, creates a body of work that in the best European tradition only gets finer with age.