

Why Settle for Champagne?

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In Halvor Rønning's visual notes, two compositional strategies are smoothly conjoined on the same plane. The first consists of cutting out advertisements from glossy magazines and weeklies and pasting them into his own works: an old-school, hands-on form of appropriation based on the collage method. In Rønning's collages, fragments torn from a mediated representation of reality exist *on the pictorial surface* as material and physical presence, thus establishing a new ontological "reality." The cutting operation is primarily about interpreting, transforming and distributing existing

visual fragments in a new way and within a delimited pictorial universe. The second strategy belongs to the paradigm of abstract painting: a method for *creating* pictures, said to be drawn directly from the artist's inner self and expressed on a pictorial surface. The brushstroke, the hand's movements and the trace of painterly action are delineated on paper and represent, in Rønning's pictures, another form of presence, as direct and unmediated presentness.

FIRST TRANSPOSITION: FACSIMILE AS APPROPRIATION

Via collage, Rønning transfers selected pictures and texts from printed media onto his own visual universe. Torn from their original context, these fragments establish a new narrative within the logic of the cut-and-paste book. The pictures can be read as a catalogue of distinct typologies in advertising and mass-media: garments, shoes, watches, perfume and jewelry are some of the most prevalent goods that appear. Some objects signal a "high-end" lifestyle (golf

equipment, designer furniture and perfectly furnished interiors); other images reference the (often absent) *body*, oscillating between a positive focus on health and beauty and unhealthy body-enhancement (dietary supplements, injections and performance-enhancing substances).

The few people to appear in the pictures are either themselves a "product," or they are present as bearers of a certain product. Most



of the time, however, people are absent and the product appears undisturbed: uninhabited rooms, meals with no guests and jewelry without bodies. Pictures from gossip columns and celebrity news form another category in the repertoire, and in this context, they seem to demonstrate a basic attitude embedded in advertising but expressed via the weeklies' coverage of celebrities and almost-famous people.

Capitalism's commodification of everyday life is patently present. But if there is a critical aspect in Rønning's project, it is still devoid of moralization. Instead we sense a sympathy and identification with this pictorial culture; it seems primarily to be met with desire and treated as a genuine form of escapism or productive dreaming. As the "receivers" of these visual messages, the intention is that we should project our own lives into the stories that are being told. This mental exer-

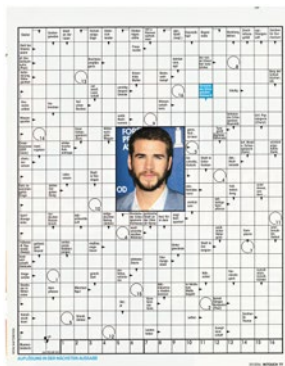
cise is simultaneously a bodily projection. We imagine how this one piece of clothing will look on our own body; or—through the magical mental flight of day-dreaming—we find ourselves inside a certain interior. With a little imagination, we sit beside a swimming pool

conveyed to us through seductive images from a tourist brochure. The ad tells us that this imagined scenario can in fact become experienced reality. The buying and selling of dreams is, of course, the very essence of capitalism's raw material. And the products pictured are therefore enveloped in a characteristic mystique, signalling a fleeting state of well-being.

High-heeled shoes and luxurious diamond rings exist to adorn the body, to accentuate certain body parts, or, in the case of high-heels, to adjust the body's physiology (a type of "beauty crutch"). As products of no utilitarian value, their ontological status is close to that of art, being categorized by formal and aes-

thetic criteria, and by vaguely defined economic parameters of value. In the advertisements, the jewelry appears sculptural, like individual, autonomous works of art: depicted as bearing no relation to the body, they float in a pho-

tographic space without gravity. Small constellations of gold- and diamond-encrusted Bucheron rings are pictured without a hand that could give them scale. They appear together as a monumental installation where one circular shape gently leans against the next.



The photos make it impossible to remain unimpressed by the level of precision in the rings' design and material composition. (Boucheron's own product description resembles the language art galleries use in presentational texts and descriptions of artworks: "The Quatre ring combines several gold engraving techniques and is inspired by the architecture of Paris. The result is a sparkling play of brilliance and texture.")

Women's shoes are often displayed in a similar way: by themselves, without feet, and in a neutral setting. A pair of shoes consists of two very similar objects, the one a mirror image of the other. Advertisements exploit this form of self-duplication. The composition appears random, with one shoe lightly "tossed" onto the other, so as to allow the photo to capture the shoe design from more than one angle in a single image. Rønning, in his painterly drawings, sketches the same shoes with rapid lines, as if visually reading the forms again on the paper. (This is not unlike Andy Warhol's many shoe pictures, both from his time as a commercial illustrator and in some of his later work where high-heeled shoes often appear in small groups and even larger assemblages.) In earlier works, Rønning reproduced similar shoes as 3D-printed objects, stripped

of all traces of functionality and exhibited in a gallery in a similar and apparently random way: a nonchalant composition of shoe-objects functioning as a comment on one of the conventions of the art exhibition, that is, the deliberate placement of objects in a neutral space. Among the appropriated advertisement material, a shoe reappears in an ad for Chivas Regal.

This time there is only one shoe, only half of a pair. "Why settle for Champagne?" we read in a text accompanying a picture of a high-heeled glass shoe being filled with a tawny scotch whisky. It is as if the advertisers have tried to unite two of Martin Heidegger's archetypical thing-categories (the jug and the shoe) in the same object. But more likely, the ad is probably an insider's nod to the curious habit of drinking champagne from a stiletto.

At the more destructive end of the scale, among the luxury objects and celebrity life, Rønning has included photos that point to the negative, often outrageous results of pursuing daydreams planted by advertising and popular culture. The insulin syringes



in Rønning's photo montages float just as weightlessly as do the diamond rings in the advertisements. A jar of protein powder floats in an abstract space made with wavy brushstrokes. Like the protein powder, insulin is sometimes used by bodybuilders as a muscle-building hormone—with potentially fatal consequences if administered incorrectly.

Rønning's transpositions—of a single image, advertisement or feature article from a magazine to a white sheet of A4 paper—are quite primitively done. He does not strive for virtuoso handiwork in his collage technique. Directness seems instead to be the point. Rather than create new pictures from the cut-outs, he moves one complete medial statement from one visual reality to another. His method is based on a type of appropriation that, rather than collage, could perhaps be called *facsimile*. Entire ads or ready-made magazine pages are cut and pasted without any further treatment. In this case, the *facsimile* builds on the methodology of repetition, which can be seen as a development of the practice of appropriation artists from the 1980's "Pictures Generation." But *facsimile* is an equally imprecise and inadequate term. Rønning does not actually copy

anything. Instead of duplicating the material via the critical distance of remediation, he makes a simple *transposition*—from one medial context to another that is more personal.

Like artists from the 1980s, Rønning recycles visual material that is already *in circulation*. Paradoxically, this re-use creates a hiatus in the medial cycle that opens a space for critical reflection on the flood of pictures around us. The medial and cultural/critical impulse underpinning remediation is undoubtedly present. But whereas artists of the Pictures Generation linked their fascination with the seductive and manipulative media culture to an obvious critical distance towards the very same material, Rønning's position is more undecided. His starting position seems to be a reading of the pictured material from the perspective of a willing consumer. The book of sketches is a flickering cavalcade of pictures that we are as much fascinated by as we are *absorbed*. It is perhaps primarily the combined *effect* on us as viewers that comes to the fore: advertisements and fashion magazines as inexhaustible sources for daydreaming and mental escapism.

SECOND TRANSPOSITION: THE APPROPRIATED PAINTING

Painting, for Rønning, represents a similar form of day-dreaming and escapism; he treats it with the same degree of ambivalence as he does the mass-media images. On one level, the painterly act is comparable to the narcissism of bodybuilders. It is a matter of what one chooses to spend one's time on. Using the *workday*—the period in a 24-hour day laden with expectations about being “productive” in society's sense of being “useful”—to smear paint on a canvas is tinged with a certain decadent meaninglessness that can be difficult to justify to oneself.

When combined with mass-media images, painting evokes a comparable desire, longing and day-dreamingness. The attraction of being able to indulge in painting—in all sincerity and honesty—is constantly constrained by an awareness of the painterly action's basic absurdity. Like many artists of his generation, Rønning came to painting via an almost insurmountable critical distance from the medium. In his earliest paintings, he used a series of conceptual and processual strategies almost as



pretexts for allowing himself to create abstract pictures. In some works, the unpretentious preparatory labor—priming the canvas, for instance, and which involved no intellectual intent—became the finished composition. Other works were created by spilling paint and then wiping the spills repeatedly with a rag.

In later works, such as the sketch-like notes, the painterly gestures appear more genuine. Rønning demonstrates a painterly spirit. It shines through, despite the often-tongue-in-cheek attitude in execution.

The moment an expressive line is allowed a certain autonomy, it immediately takes the form of a jesting cartoon character; or, a line drawing might mimic the surrounding pictures appropriated from the media. One example is the composition in which a few sensitively-placed lines suddenly take on a shape that clearly resembles the heavily-made-up eyes of Donatella

Versace in the adjacent picture.

In general, Rønning's style is characterized by a light touch: the relatively few markings barely allow the painterly quality to appear on the pictorial

surface. Only to a minimal extent does he use paint and brushes in a conventional sense. The painted effect is created with tools such as felt-tip pens and alcohol-based ink (so-called “tagging” ink, applied with refillable pens). The effect resembles the transparent brushstrokes achieved with digital drawing programs in which one “paints” on the computer screen with one’s finger.

In Rønning’s art, heroic painting’s pastose and expressive brushstroke translate into a more careful and hesitant *line*, executed in decorative colors similar to those in the advertisements; it is like make-up on a model, or the azure blue characteristic of the sky and ocean in this photo-pictorial universe. By supplying the abstract—and masculine—painting’s formal vocabulary with a markedly feminine quality, the painterly elements support an ambiguously gendered identity already existing in the appropriated images; the selection is clearly *gendered*, borrowed from men’s as well as women’s magazines, but the elements are combined such that the one category glides seamlessly into the other.

A striking effect of Rønning’s juxtaposition of collages and painterly lines is how the entirety inevitably

becomes part of the formalistic self-reflexivity of painting. When images from advertisements and mass media are combined with painting, they appear as painterly means—as form, color and surface. The choice of colors underscores this, as the painted elements are compatible with the palette of the mass-media images. Rønning uses the printed media’s own colors, produced in combinations of CMYK values and further combined with brown, grey and pink. (CMYK = cyan, magenta, yellow and black, with “K” standing for “key”; these comprise the four-color system used in commercial printing and reproduction).

In post-conceptual art, where *creating* and *stealing* are often like two sides of the same coin, painting exists perhaps first and foremost as a strategy an artist can choose to use. Rønning borrows—or dresses up in—the vocabulary of abstract painting, treating it almost like a language he can use just as much as any other pictorial goods he may find. The abstract painting thus appears as much staged and constructed as do the advertising images. Both parts represent an unattainable, mediated version of a world to which the artist himself is denied genuine access.

In contrast to earlier postmodern painting, Rønning does not quote any specific motif or historical style. It is rather the *category of painting itself* that he appropriates. The juxtaposition of painting and mass-media images is precisely calibrated to make them appear strikingly equal. The different elements ask for attention to exactly the same extent. As such, it is not a matter of melting together two pictorial categories but of placing them side-by-side, of evening out each and every hierarchical step between the two. But *juxtaposition* is not the same as *synthesis*. Rønning does not try to merge two otherwise separate art forms, as was the case for Synthetic Cubism's early collages or Robert Rauschenberg's Combines. His project does not necessarily involve getting the different elements to enter into a new unity—a new picture—but rather to let them speak *simultaneously* and at the same volume.

If one can see painting as a form of appropriation in Rønning's works, one can, paradoxically, also see the mass-media images as painting. Perhaps these works are not solely examples of painting being subjected to calculated theft or mindless formalistic repetition (so-called "zombie formalism"), but rather

as expressing contemporary painting's ability for constant, critical self-reflection. Seen this way, Rønning's works can be symptomatic of how contemporary painting absorbs context-sensitive, media-critical strategies from post-conceptual art, and turns them loose on painting itself. It is thus perhaps possible to paint with sincerity and be devoted to the painterly idiom while at the same time accepting that one can no longer avoid being constantly reminded of every painting's function as an object, a commodity, a design product and a lifestyle marker.

The distance that must exist between the two picture-creating strategies is erased in these sketch-like works. Abstract painting and media/pictorial culture appear as equal entities. Both painting's utopian world and the idealized fictional world communicated through mass-media culture are treated with a fundamental ambivalence. Rønning appears to exist on the inside of the two pictorial cultures without actually participating in either; and above all, his work expresses the combination of proximity and distance that marks the melancholy of loving someone from afar.

