



QUICKFIRE ARTIST INTERVIEW

Swedish Artist Martin Ålund

ENGAGING IN THE PAINTERLY PROCESS DURING COVID19

BY RACHEL VANCELETTE

Can you speak about your daily routine in the art studio?

Much of it has to do with beating around the bush, of procrastinating. One part of me just wants to paint, while another part of me seems to want to do everything to avoid it. I often set aside a painting so that I see it in the corner of my eye. Something unexpected happens then, and the invisible becomes visible. When I later start painting, I work intensively as if in a trance. My whole body is engaged in the painterly process. I often paint with rags and my hands. The work process itself alternates between delving into and getting lost in the painting, and then stopping short to observe. Thoughts regarding painting and art are always present in the back of my mind. But it is always crucial to avoid completing a work process beforehand in one's head. The interesting part is embarking on the unknown, and to be surprised and curious.

What inspires you?

The gaze itself. Observing the act of observing. It's about distancing oneself on a meta-level, and thereby becoming more present and encounter inspiration in the now. All art, old and new, inspires me. I spend a lot of time looking at/consuming art. It is as if engaging in a timeless eternal communication between people. Analytic discussions with colleagues inspire me. Play and improvisation inspires me. Such as playing music with my band Hybris Healers. But above all, I am inspired by my own art – it is as though it always tries to hide something from me that I have to look for. As

soon as I find it, something new reveals itself temporarily, only to hide itself again. It's like a game of hide-and-seek.

At the moment, I am working with the theme Otherworld that deals with the interface between different realities. Where does the insanity, the imagination, and the irrational begin and end? How can one move between the different realities and find experiences, as well as messages, that one alternates between? I think of Alice in Wonderland, shamanism, alchemy, Orpheus and Eurydice as well as romantic myths of the artist as magician, madman and messenger. I also often think of how the magic and the irrational can both be a means to escape, and a way to grasp the unfathomable. Otherworld is a theme I began working with two years ago, when I worked in Paris, and in these difficult times it looks as though this theme is more relevant than ever. Otherworld is like a harbinger. Art often bears a foreboding quality.

When I paint, I allow the haphazard and articulation to operate in sync. Eventually, this allows for increasingly complex worlds to emerge that I must respond to. Right now, I'm working on a series of paintings that I call The Bipolar Suite that stem from the Otherworld theme. This has to do with juxtaposing extremes through the use of diptychs and creating a charge and establishing a contact. It is like creating energy, an interaction where one touches upon both origin and downfall at the same time.



Lately, I have been especially fascinated by the artists Helen Frankenthaler, Carl Fredric Hill and Philip Guston. It is extremely exciting when other artists unexpectedly pop up like spectres in one's studio. They become conversation partners constantly looking over one's shoulder. Everything is dialogue. Everything in existence comes down to dialogues and relationships.

What have been your major influences throughout your career?

Art, both historic and contemporary. Painting, drawing, photography, video art, installations, sculpture, performance, etc. I have also been inspired by film, music and literature. Andrei Tarkovsky's films and the Miles Davis's electric period of the early 70s have accompanied me for years. Their expressions are like layer upon layer of articulation that follow an oscillating pulse like a cosmic heart of sorts. I have also been influenced by existential and psychological themes; my own self in relation to the world, life, death and love. Structural and political issues have inspired me as well: how mankind has, throughout history, had to struggle for survival and dignity against oppressive powers.

How do you know when a painting or artwork is complete?

It is as though everything goes quiet in the studio. When a painting or artwork goes quiet, I usually put it away for a while, only to bring it out again later and listen with my eyes. At times I can still hear a meek little whine, which tells me I'm not done yet. But when I don't hear the whine, that is when I find myself in harmony with the piece. It's a bit like tuning a string instrument: the vibrations reach the same wavelength. A sense of balance is established in the dynamics. The movement leads away from the artwork. And at that point, the piece is ready to leave the studio and enter the exhibition space.



Do new technologies such as AI and/or new computers affect your current studio practice, and if so how and why?

I have long worked with electronic image rendering – everything from video art on VHS to computer-manipulated image editing. Electronic/digital images create an interesting field of tension in the encounter with analog images. They can heighten an awareness of the analog image. I have also long worked with presenting art on the Internet. There is a democratic practice involved in this – an issue concerning accessibility and representation. Everyone can gain access. Everything can be free. The Internet and new technologies bear a huge potential in broadening, deepening and making culture accessible, in connecting humanity. But these tools are also problematic: analog art cannot be replaced by virtual environments, nor is that the point. Digital and virtual art constitute media with principles of their own. The digital reality is also problematic – one stands a risk of losing something important. One can be lured into viewing the world and existence as replaceable. But IRL, something unique arises. The image of a painting, for example, is not a painting – it is an image of a painting. Obvious as that might be, it seems easily forgotten.

What would you say and/or advice would you give to your younger artist self?

I constantly talk with, and am inspired by my younger self. So it would more be a question of a dialogue, a mutual exchange. I work a lot with younger artists and enjoy the dynamics that arise between curiosity, challenges, experiences, dreams and fantasies. Here are some words of advice I would try to offer myself as a young artist: keep doing what you're doing. Don't be nervous about not "succeeding". Whatever happens, the most important thing is to feel inspired in the studio.

In this time of world change, artists spend a lot of time alone in their studios. What advice would you give to others who are currently undergoing time alone and isolation?

What can this catastrophe offer us as human beings? Beyond the Dance of Death and Anthropocene, we must find a cure for our human hubris. Corona is a reaction of sorts to a systemic dystopia. I have often returned to dystopia in my art. Such as the piece 1:1 that is based on Landscape with the Fall of Icarus by



Pieter Bruegel the Elder. We live in a world that seems to be accelerating towards its own downfall. Social and ecological responsibility are intimately linked. A dialogue and interaction between naturalism and abstraction, dystopia and utopia, ecology and psychology is highly relevant.

We are going through a collective global trauma. Everyone is affected and process fear in their own ways. We must not forget what is truly important: to take care of one another and think of those who are most vulnerable. I believe that it is in times like these that we are forced to become less sentimental and think in practical terms in ways that can seem unfamiliar, while at the same time, the magical and irrational also becomes more important. This is clear when looking back at the history of mankind, and specifically catastrophic times. Even within the magical and irrational, one must also choose a path: not pursue contexts that are excluding, egocentric and isolating, but instead explore ways of coming closer to each other as human beings and endure the difficult and unfathomable that we are faced with. Here, art can show us the way. Through its multi-faceted expression, art has the ability to validate the contradictory and unfathomable in a healing manner.

Artists and other art practitioners have in many ways also long worked in self-isolation and in intentional alienation. The artistic practice has a lot to offer in times like these. Here are some words of advice I have to offer: be curious, and be curious as to why you are not curious. And here is some practical advice I would give: acquire a space, a space which is just yours, regardless of how small. Acquire at least one tool, an instrument, and create some sort of continuity in your work. And be tolerant towards yourself – listen to your own way of working, examine, and play. If this becomes too much of a challenge, try to recall how exciting it could be to fantasize as a child.

What exhibitions and upcoming projects have changed, been canceled and or come back to the plate for you since the COVID19 pandemic?

Due to the difficult circumstances surrounding Corona, anything is possible. Certain things are postponed, other things remained scheduled as planned awaiting further developments.

I have an upcoming solo exhibition of my new works at Wadström Tönnheim Gallery in Marbella, Spain this autumn. I'm very excited about it. I have an excellent collaboration with the gallerist Mattias Tönnheim, who is doing a great job. If the exhibition needs to be postponed due to the Coronacrisis, we'll simply reschedule it.

I am in the process of curating as well as participating in a very exciting International group exhibition that we have for the time being postponed until the fall. It is called Heat/Energy, and I am curating together with Torbjörn Johansson and Jonas Ellerström. Participating artists span a broad field of both young and old, both well-established artists and art students. The exhibition touches upon an exceptionally current theme – that humanity needs more than energy, water and food to survive. Art and poetry are also vital. The exhibition will take place at Kummelholmen, an extremely exciting exhibition venue, and an old power plant in the suburbs of Stockholm, that is run on a nonprofit basis. In 2021, the exhibition Heat/Energy will continue on to an amazingly beautiful exhibition venue, Körsbärgsgården on the island of Gotland, Sweden.

I also work with art projects in the public space, which is very challenging in these times. How should one relate to the collective course of events we are going through? The public space has changed – city streets currently lie empty, the public space has become dangerous in a new way and, at the same time, new communities have emerged. The market is reeling. How will this affect the preconditions, possibilities and limitations of art in the public space?

Since way before the Corona crisis, I have also been involved with a project that seems tailor-made for these times of isolation. I create music and videos together with my friend and colleague Magnus Engstedt, who lives in Norway. We send sound files and film material to each other, work each in our own separate spaces and communicate online through Facetime. Working remotely via the Internet allows for an eradication of physical distance. It will be interesting to see how artistic collaborations will work during and after these Corona times. I am the Chairman of the Swedish Artists' Association that owns a Venetian palace in Stockholm. I am also

involved in the International artist collective, Go Go Collective, that was established at Cites Des Artes in Paris in 2018. I believe that society has a lot to learn from artistic collaborations and the unique ability of artists to execute projects outside of the normal commercial systems. Not least in the wake of the Corona crisis.

COVID19 Update since original interview:

I have recently participated in new exhibitions related to the Covid-19 situation. The group shows Isolation | Communication at Färgfabriken, Stockholm, Open Window, Stockholm and Offspring, Sättra forest. I have an upcoming solo exhibition at Wadström Tönnheim Gallery in Marbella and will participate in ESTAMPA Art Fair, Madrid Nov. 2020. I am curating as well as participating in a very exciting International group exhibition Heat/Energy that is postponed until spring 2021. The exhibition will take place at Kummelholmen, an extremely exciting exhibition venue, and old power plant in the suburbs of Stockholm and after that at Körsbärgsgården, a wonderful exhibition venue at the island Gotland, Sweden.

If you can provide a quote of inspiration or thoughts on the world today?

Be curious, and be kind to your fellow human beings, and remember that this isn't the first time mankind has endured a catastrophe and survived.

Quickfire Tips:

Artist Website: <http://www.martinalund.com>
Instagram @rvancelette for more insider stories and tips

"I started to work with Martin Ålund in 2015 and it's been a fascinating experience and intriguing pleasure so far. Martin never stops to explore in his own playful, but at the same time painful, way when he pushes himself forward and beyond his comfort zone to break new ground and create. I see influences from old masters such as Caspar David Fredrich and August Strindberg in some of Martins intense neo-punk disruptive landscape paintings."

Mattias Tönnheim, director and owner Wadström Tönnheim Gallery.