



## As Painterly as an Electronic Cloud

George Petelin

The famous scene in *Citizen Kane* where Orson Welles whispers 'Rosebud' and lets the paperweight drop from his dying fingers exemplifies the irony of trying to understand life through one simplistic symbol. In a similar way, Peter Alwast's paintings tease us with revelations of childhood memories while critiquing his modes for their mediation.

Alwast paints a huge moon with slight blue penumbra. Below it are trite brush-worked slogans but with similar penumbra suggesting neon signage. Clouds, normally characterised by organic shapelessness, are represented in precise space-frame grids. Here is a set of Platonic solids – ideal worlds of the mind in contrast with the earthbound gestural forms of painting. Past all this float ethereal snowflakes, at once smudged and gestural, and also, where Alwast has reversed the brush and scratched firm crisscross lines, precisely geometric.

Alwast's paintings refer obliquely to the reality of nature but are in fact based on his own electronic constructs. They are paintings of his video. The world in this video is entirely a digital simulation of houses under construction, of an all-encompassing geodesic dome, of wafts of slowly settling snowflakes and of mysterious beads of quicksilver which reflect not only these surroundings but an out-of-view girl on a

swing whose 'reflections' periodically fuse into a Rorschach inkblot.

In some of the painted works however, for example in *Janek the Cloud*, these grids are translated into entirely organic strokes that belie their geometric origins and reassert the reality of painting over what it represents.

In other pictures, the electronic pseudo-environment forms the substrate for scrapes of an oil pen. A still from the video has been printed onto canvas and then obscured by parallel lines of the pen. Here the remaining indistinct traces of the artificial seem even more 'real' because we discern their photographic origins and thus attribute an indexical relation which cannot be falsified because its source is now beyond scrutiny.

Consequently, Alwast's paintings, in the tradition of Gerhard Richter, pit the ontological basis of photo media against that of painting. What he ultimately simulates, obscures, or negates is what is purely digital-photographic or painterly, not what is represented. But what distinguishes his strategies from those of Richter is that he does not stop there. In some of the works the parallel scribbles reinstate a three-dimensional space, a cubical room once again the product of Platonic geometry – the world of the mind by courtesy of painterly illusion.

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Left Top: 'Janek The Cloud', Oil on Canvas, 200x200cm, 2007

Left Bottom: 'The Moon', (Oil on Canvas, 200x200cm, 2007