



PETER ALWAST

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The Origins of Humanity an Exhibition of Paintings by Peter Alwast

The History Paintings of Peter Alwast

This exhibition of paintings by Peter Alwast aims to 'chart the origins of the human species' in just ten images. Though this could be an ambitiously grand aim, a ludicrously grand claim, or a parody of the two, it is nevertheless worth thinking about the relationship that these works have to history. An extreme Hegelian view of art history might posit that every work is the summation of all that came before it and, retrospectively, a foreshadowing of all work that comes after.

To take a genealogical approach, tracing a lineage back from the present to the past, the paternal forebears of Alwast's current group of paintings might include the coloured hazes of Mark Rothko, the primary compositions of Barnett Newman, Gerhard Richter's explorations of 'photography by other means,' the anti-heroic abstraction of Richard Tuttle and the foggy ruminations of Luc Tuymans. These artists occupy varying positions on a historical trajectory that might be sketched away from representational painting to abstraction and back again. This arc describes painting's shifting functionality – from a position of representing the world displaced by photography to the reflection of a subjective world inaccessible to technological reproducibility, and back via an absorption of the technical image into the artist's own subjective re-production.

The aforementioned forebears also work in a medium whose death had been well documented, or at least much discussed, before their time. Origins also imply endings, after all, just as evolution and progress require not only new beginnings and innovations but also redundancy and decay. The first announcement of painting's demise is usually credited to Paul Delaroche, who on first viewing a daguerreotype reportedly exclaimed: 'from today, painting is dead.' Delaroche's own history paintings can still be seen, taking their place within the chronology of art history presented by the Louvre in Paris. Within this chronology, Delaroche's paintings form part of a grand culmination of global art history, in French art of the 19th Century – histories are often both subjective and patriotic. The death declared by Delaroche is therefore of a particular type of painting and a particular mode of art making. It is true to say that the grand commemorative stage of the history painting was outmoded by the immediacy and rapid distribution offered by photomechanical reproduction.

From the advent of photography, it could be argued that the principal history that fell to be narrated by painting was its own. The continued progress of painting, in spite of its demise, reveals its death as a narrative device; a plot twist designed to enable the narrative of painting to continue by virtue of its miraculous return. It is a comic book death, in which painting returns in the guise of its own evil twin, or a soap opera death enabling the character of painting to return played by a different actor. Or perhaps, to follow Vilém Flusser's metaphor, a 'Game Over,' following which we return to the last save. For Flusser, the end augured by 'technical images' such as photography was of history itself, or at least in its linear form. The development of photography here marks a transition from line to surface; from a model of consciousness that proceeds through linear history and texts, to one that is reflected in the surfaces of photographic and screen-based images. From a linear perspective history is a drama in which one acts, from a surface perspective it is a game that is played by combining various histories.¹ Rather than the genealogical history sketched above, this is an archaeological model of history, which gathers fragments in order to make the past present in the now.

Peter Alwast's practice subjectively pursues an archaeological engagement, layering and combining fragments, forms and narratives. Employing elements of personal remembrance, historical reference, free association and automatic drawing, Alwast builds up images in a combination of 'new' digital media and 'old' traditions of painting. Elements recur across multiple works in various media, just as some memories return more frequently than others, or some references retain resonance over time. In the case of these new works, the paintings are literally incorporated into the digital images; photographed and morphed to create objects with a virtual, painterly patina. The digital images do not 'remake' the paintings, reproducing digital analogues or cloned compositions. Rather, the digital images reanimate the paintings, imbuing their surfaces with a different presence, giving their canvas alternate form. If Alwast's combination of painterly and digital forms mark another return to painting, it is one which emerges from the dialogue between these elements.

The history that they make present might range from cave paintings to frescoes to easel pictures, via the technological developments of chemical pigments and varying supports; the role of the camera obscura and linear perspective, itself a mathematical virtualisation of space that anticipates the eventual development of the digital. In the physical space of the gallery, painted pictures and computer generated images face one another, a form of co-presence in which each gives rise to the other. In the works in this exhibition, the paintings and drawings become data that literally informs the digital images. They wrap around one another, each sharing/becoming skin for the other, like a digital image made up of surface texture wrapped around algorithmic form, or a canvas wrapped around the empty geometry of a stretcher.

The works emerge from different spaces of making that might easily be described by the familiar opposition of real and virtual, but not in the sense that one simulates the other, offering virtual analogies for material realities. Perhaps paradoxically, the physical paintings are made in a sense two-dimensionally; they follow the convention of the picture plane. In the virtual space they are spatialised and animated, transformed. Instead, they mirror one another in the sense described by Elizabeth Grosz: 'The mirror surface creates a virtual field that reflects the real, duplicating its spatiality and the object's visual characteristics. [...] Each makes a certain imperceptible contribution to the other, not adding any particular feature or quality but a depth of potential, a richer resonance.'² In the Lacanian sense, the mirror plays an important role in formation of identity; its mediating gaze helps to bring the self into being. Similarly, in an age of global digital media, paintings are not only informed by reproduced images but are made to be reproduced; they are produced with reproduction in mind. Alwast's paintings are created with the knowledge that they will take on another digital form. In this sense, the digital works also make the production of the paintings possible and problematise any simple causal relationship between the two series.

This problematic causality also features in a series of digital images depicting a knotted mass of neon-like tubes. Again using 3D animation software, these are translations of the act of drawing, extrapolating lines drawn using either the material support of paper or the screen of a tablet. These drawn traces are virtually objectified and spatialised, able to be moved and manipulated in digital space. They cut through the space of the image and across one another, like light beams or motion lines given solid form, or a dematerialised duplicate of the power and data cables that make their own production and distribution possible.³ As a schematic rendering of the matrix of infrastructure through which so much of culture is transmitted, the works also visualize the ubiquity of the digital, which subsumes all media within itself. Paradoxically, however, media theorist Lev Manovich suggests that the digital transformation of analogue processes renders them subordinate to older media. He argues: 'Because software allows the designer to manually manipulate any image regardless of its source as though it was drawn in the first place, the ontological differences between different image media become irrelevant. Both conceptually and practically, they are all reduced to hand-drawn animation.'⁴ Further, Manovich suggests that digital cinema in particular has lost its indexical status and become a 'sub-genre of painting.'⁵ In bringing 'real-world' and digital techniques into dialogue, Alwast not only highlights but also problematises this relation.

We began with the grand claim of a contemporary artist attempting to survey the origins of humanity through a handful of works. Such a claim may be easily put to rest by the acknowledgement, expressed by Jean-Francois Lyotard, that 'The universe is not demonstrable: neither is humanity, the end of history, the moment, the species, the good, the just, etc.' For Lyotard, the task of abstract painting was not to 'represent the absolute,' but to 'demonstrate that the absolute exists' through 'indirect, virtually ungraspable allusions to the invisible within the visual.'⁶ This is, perhaps, the history to which Peter Alwast's real and virtual paintings belong, and the task to which he returns.

1. Vilém Flusser, *Writings*, Edited by Andreas Strohl, Translated by Erik Eisel, 2002 Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.33
2. Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, 2000 Cambridge: MIT Press, pp.79-80
3. See, for example, Andrew Blum, *Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet*, 2012 New York: Harper Collins
4. Lev Manovich, *Software takes Command*, 2013 New York: Bloomsbury p.293
5. Lev Manovich, 'What is Digital Cinema?' pp.172-192 in Peter Lunenfeld (Ed.), *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media*, 2000 Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 175.
6. Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime', pp.130-136 in Simon Morley (Ed.), *The Sublime*, 2010 Cambridge: MIT Press, p.134. A slightly different translation uses 'presentable' in place of 'demonstrable,' See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, 1992 Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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