

“Tell me ... what do you want to be?”

I thought, Someone who can survive in subzero temperatures and forage for food and build a snow cave and start a fire out of nothing.

“I don’t know. Maybe a painter,” I said, to make him happy so he’d let me go back to sleep.

“It’s funny,” he said. “That’s what I was hoping you’d say.”

Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love*, 2005

Try looking at Andreas Eriksson’s paintings way up close. Nose-to-nose with the canvas. Get as close to the surface as legally permitted. From this proximity you can appreciate Eriksson’s intricate experiments with canvas, colour, and shape. The startling variety of horizontal and vertical brushstrokes echoing the woven grid of the linen canvas. The countless, muted shades suggestive of forests and plains (fern greens, chestnut browns, muddy yellows) alongside surprising washes of pink, or patches of bright crimson, or unexpected seas of vivid blue. Up close, Eriksson’s large, abstract Kria works reveal themselves as an encyclopedia of painterly possibility, like a sampler offering every species of brushstroke available. Marks might be short and thick, or thin, liquidy and long. Or imperceptible, resulting in ‘brushless’ solids of colour. Every stroke functions like a sort of pixel which, taken in voluminous combination, resolves overall to form a new kind of 21st-century painted landscape.

With the series Kria (2018) Eriksson loosens our grip on recognisability even further, asserting definitively ‘how little subjects really matter’ for him. Andreas Eriksson insists he is not a landscape painter but a conceptualist, and I believe him. ‘They’re not about landscape. Not at all’, he says. ‘They’re about colour. And about canvas.’

In this series, Eriksson borrowed the basic composition from one of his earlier paintings which featured the open hollow of a cave near his studio in Lidköping, southwest Sweden. The complicated, original cave painting was simplified into an essential line-drawn composition with the help of a computer, becoming a flat pattern – like a line-map, for the artist to fill and fill again. The ‘map’’s central feature – i.e., the mouth of the cave – is shaped like a slightly squat-looking France. This cardinal form is surrounded by a sky (or roof) composed of large, painted ‘nations’ along ‘France’’s north-west border. At the bottom are broad fields (or depths) of striated colour. To the right (or north-northeast of ‘France’) lies a rich jumble of rocky micro-states.

Colour is never applied mechanically to this irregular Kria structure. Each canvas delivers a unique chromatic impression: starkly dramatic in Drill; nocturnal in

Cimmerian; vibrant in Honeycreeper; mossy in Dry run. Each painting seems miraculously to re-orient the identical underlying format. Kria (Do-over) moves horizontally, clustered along a central left-right axis and suggestive of an aerial patchwork of irregularly ploughed fields, fenced by pale bands of grey and yellow above and below. In contrast Kria (Cogent) is all verticals. An outcrop to the left stands bolt upright like a stone mountain, while the right side appears to be a torrent of waterfalls, pooling below. Kria’s repeated composition is wilfully disorientating. Are we looking into the cave from the outside? Or inside, peering out? The artist can not recall; it does not matter. We might be crouching in the cave’s darkness, or waiting out in the sun. We might be hovering mid-flight above multi-coloured Scandinavian fields. The top of a Kria painting may be north and the bottom south – or, up is sky, down is ground. The Kria cycle is a strange landscape, at once territory and map.

BORDERLAND

Today, in his light-filled studio surrounded by woods, Eriksson paints intuitively and intensely, standing very near the canvas surface. Vintage photographs of American abstractionist Cy Twombly show him at work in a similar posture, looking more like a diligent teacher writing neatly at a chalkboard than a painter. Like Twombly’s, Eriksson’s mark-making can behave like some odd strain of writing: a private calligraphy, or graffiti. Dense vertical brushstrokes move rhythmically left to right. Bunched together, they seem in places to grow like tall grass. Elsewhere clusters of vertical marks stretch to further heights, suggesting a dense wood, or moss slipping down a cliff face, as in Kria (Dry Run). Echoing the criss-cross grain of the canvas, contrasting horizontal brushwork also appears: stacked like the brief wall of brown ‘bricks’, centre-right in Kria (Cave). Or long and even, lying heavily along the bottom of Kria (Heister) like geological layers of sedimented stone. Elsewhere the paint is opaque and flat, like the expanse of motionless emerald green – as still as a mountain lake – in Kria (Cave). Weightless swathes of pinks and grey float within a Twombly-esque tangle of thin, undulating lines towards the top of Kria (Heister), and I am reminded of Barthes’ comment that Twombly ‘does not paint colour ... he colours in’.

Looking closely at the surface, almost re-tracing the artist's stroke-by-stroke labours at the canvas, we sense a new source of painterly 'decisions and agonies': the tension along the fraught edges, between colours. Here one feels the artist occasionally getting carried away: pushing the limits of colour against colour; ignoring borders; taking risks. Adjacent hues lean hard against each other, vying for space, elbowing a neighbour for room. Kria seems the distant progeny of Jasper Johns' United States Map (1961), in which the familiar American state lines were transformed into a flexible fill-in-the-blank geography. Johns reconfigured boundaries with smeary intrusions of oil paint, not unlike the 'aggressions' between colour 'states' in Eriksson's nation of Kria. In Kria (Fading) a crop of thin yellow diagonal brushstrokes push collectively in a single direction, like a gang, producing an irregular, jagged edge – as if biting into their prone neighbour. Sometimes a thin line separates things diplomatically, as with Kria (Drill)'s trickle of bright green keeping apart a brackish green from a boggy brown. Elsewhere the thinned oil paint sinks in like a stain – behaving like ink or felt pen, soaking into the canvas and pooling into a thick, liquid outline along the edge. At times Eriksson blends colours delicately, one shade gradually shifting into the next, like the deep hunter green subtly merging into watery green in Kria (Cave). Occasionally the dry blank canvas is left untouched – again, like Twombly – to signal in-between space and provide a breather, reminding us of the canvas' perpetual, quiet presence. Works such as Kria (Fading) seem to exist only for the pleasure of remembering the raw, naked canvas reliably there all along, unfazed by the fine, busy layers of delicately pigmented paint.

A LINE MADE BY LINEN

Kria's display of pictorial variety – in his myriad methods for applying paint; or creating edges; or reworking Kria's basic composition – hints at Eriksson's personality as a collector. He is in love with the tools of his art, and collects brushes, paint-types, pigments, linens. Specially-made brushes with short, hard bristles allow him to 'push' – as he puts it – paint into the raw fabric, rather than just swish colourful liquid around with the usual long-haired brush. Eriksson is also a collector of textiles, and the Kria series is painted on 20 types of linen, sourced mostly in Sweden. Linen is an indigenous fibre grown from flax, and each type assumes a natural colour dependent on the local soil and growing conditions (changing annually, like wine) as well as subsequent spinning, weaving, and priming. Flax, moreover, produces linseed oil: the thinner that Eriksson uses to dilute his paints. The 22 artworks forming Kria divide into 15 'days', and 7 'nights', the latter of which resulted from the interaction of his chosen paints

on unprimed canvases. The stark chromatic division also seems to parallel Scandinavia's lightless winters and nightless summers. (January sunrise is 9am, with sunset by mid-afternoon. In July, the sun rises around 3:30am, sets after 10pm.) Eriksson's knowledge of woven linen is so extensive he is equally admired for his magnificent tapestries, including a sister series also based on the Kria drawing and 20 linen types. These media are complementary: with tapestry, colour exists within the work's very fabric; with painting, colour arrives from without, forcibly pushed into the grain by the artist.

The Latin word *linea* (line) derives from *linum*, meaning 'linen', and refers to the geometric straightness of the flax – whether employed by the Romans to measure straight roads and foundations, or by weavers to work the strong thread. Colour is said to resist language, yet consider the myriad names for commercially available natural linens, shifting from white to black via a spectrum of off-shades: ivory; ecru; bone; shell; sand; vanilla; cork; putty; smoke; ash; battleship; stone; granite; jet; charcoal, and more. Colour exists within Kria's very grain, even before a single stroke of paint reaches the surface. Further, Eriksson's knowledge of pigments and binders – whether oil, acrylic, egg, tempera – result in an exquisite panoply of opaque, transparent, semi-transparent or reflective fields. In sum, Andreas Eriksson is a consummate experimenter, and his oeuvre represents a living archive of techniques and materials. For centuries, the standard caption 'oil on canvas' sufficed for most painters. Artists long ago may have identified favourite working materials, but they did not ask the 21st-century questions that Eriksson poses. Where is the flax for this particular linen canvas actually grown? How is this linseed oil derived? Eriksson's first-person attention to natural sources renders his painting not just 'about' landscape, but material extensions of his landscape.

LANDSCAPE, ESCAPE, AND E-SCAPE

Across history, painters exploring abstraction have returned to a chosen recurring vision. Cézanne obsessed over Mont Sainte-Victoire – another conceptually abstract artwork, masquerading as landscape. Rothko lived at the edge of his 'resonant void', as Rosenblum called it – a 'resonant void' akin to Eriksson's gaping mouth of a cave? Consider David Reed's lifelong investigation into a brushstroke's very essence. Or Christopher Wool's emphatic, black-and-white message-making. Critic Peter Schjeldahl credits these last two with pursuing 'conceptually alert abstract styles', and Eriksson easily joins their ranks.

However, Andreas Eriksson belongs to a subsequent

generation, working firmly within a digital age accustomed to the transition from screen to print, from pixel to paint. For all the artworks' embeddedness in the contemporary – on account of their ecological sensitivity; awareness of current debate in painting; reliance on computer-generated line-drawings; connection with 'painted pixelation' – Kria seems rooted deep in an ancient, earthy time as well. Linen is the oldest fabric known to humankind, dating back 30,000 years – long before cotton or wool. And 'cave paintings', of course, represent the earliest art-making we know of. Andreas Eriksson's timeless paintings seem to reach across the full span of art history. Traditional 18th-century landscape artists painted infinite fields receding into limitless space, sym-

bolically possessing and dominating everything within the picture's vast visual sweep. Eriksson's view bears no such greed. His vista is horizonless. Immersed in his natural surroundings, he is not aspiring to be nature's master, but just to silently observe the changing seasons near his home. Or honing in on the micro-environment of the canvas' minute weave, the powdered pigment suspended within a transparent base, and the unpredictable results of their unique combination. Eriksson's space may be shallow, even infinitesimal, but the scale and ambition of his work remains immense. The cave opening offered by the Kria composition becomes a kind of portal – a 'resonant void' – in which, for Eriksson, the limitless secrets of painting are promised.