

BETWEEN REVOLUTIONARY EMERGENCE AND ESTABLISHED TRADITION: THE ABSTRACT WORKS OF CHRISTIAN AWE

Christian Awe's sprayed, spattered and layered abstractions – abstract expressive works uniting graffiti and action painting – are characterized by their sense of sanguine playfulness and unrestrained vigor, bursting with youth and the dynamics of modern progress. Based on the works Jackson Pollock created after 1945 in their pictorial rhythm and all-over style, they combine conceptual and experimental procedures, artistic deliberation and chance into vigorous compositions.

Awe makes explicit art-historical references while also reaching beyond art history with inventive ease; in place of the theosophical-esoteric substance of the works of Wassily Kandinsky, the father of all things informal, Awe utilizes the freedom inherent within the artistic process in terms of its explosive discharge of emotional expression. This, in turn, presents an uncompromising continuation of the psychological automatism of Jackson Pollock's works.

Both the fine nuances and rich contrasts of Awe's abstract sprayed works have their roots in Street Art, which Awe began passionately exploring already as an 11-year-old youth with an adventurous group of sprayer friends in Berlin-Lichtenberg. The primarily large-format works he has created in the past few years, which present a clear continuation of the spraying tradition, radiate with "the greatest possible luminescence" (Awe). They are characterized by an artificiality that, in its blazing fervor of color and silky sheen of sprayed surfaces, conjures up associations with the cold world of plastic, the scrutiny of clamoring luminescent advertisements, the splendid luster of high-gloss photographs and the glint of metal. Awe lives in Berlin, and the unrelenting drive of this pulsing metropolis, its hectic bustle and vibrant vitality – its fastmoving, loud, aggressive and dynamic life force – have left their mark on him and his art.

Awe has moved increasingly closer to the facile ease at play in the oeuvre of Sam Francis. For both artists, their artistry is not so much about expressive or even mystical expression as it is first and foremost about a vibrant psychedelic pictorial world. Both explicitly engage with fissures and regard form and cause as nearly equitable. Ultimately, both concern themselves with the unity between the formal colors of beauty and movement – a vitality that also exudes a conscious sense of closure and transient impermanence.

Titles such as "Meer aus Farben" ("Ocean of Colours") and "Cap d'Antibes" also give telling reference to the work Awe does with nature and landscapes. His 2010 work "Graffiti Summer Feeling" and its characteristic, flittingly atmospheric spraying style conjures up the association of a cornfield beneath the blue skies in allusion to van Gogh's 1890 work "Wheatfield with Crows." It is precisely this kind of quiet art historical reference that anchors Awe's works and lends them their singular style. In his works "Sommernachtsflimmern" and "Gift from Berlin," floating colored shapes set in clear colorful contrast to the background portray

a loping detachedness from all things corporeal – something that also takes on a central expressive role in the late works of Henri Matisse and Wassily Kandinsky. Indeed, just like Kandinsky's organic, vivid shapes of the 1940s and Matisse's gouaches découpées between 1947 and 1951, Awe's lyrical works – such as “fairy tale,” “eternity,” “together” and most recently works like “spring fever” and “Starshine” – also create the impression of detached, abstract life forms from the sea and sky. These are works suggestive of an ecstatic joie de vivre, their sense of utter joy sired by an intoxicating emotionality, weightlessness, unbound freedom and serendipity that is also manifested in their titles. Furthermore, they also provide reference to the legendary blind leap Awe made that led to his decision to study art. Awe's sharply detailed and balanced compositional work cedes to organized chaos. His compositions are not only freed from every earthly thing weighing them down but also roam within a pictorial space suggestive of the depths of the cosmos itself. Awe's works are steeped through and through with ebullient musical rhythms. This is not surprising, as the artist takes in a wide range of music, from classical to electronic, as he works. He also uses his entire body as he engages in the creative process. Most of Awe's large-format works, with their artificial color and light effects, mirror the spirit of the hip hop generation, a spirit embracing values like freedom, non-conformance and revolt. Awe's creative process is marked by its hands-on, experimental character. He sprays layer upon layer of color – formerly on PVC and today on canvas. He employs spray paint and acrylics, ink and watercolors, markers and oil pastels. He sprays, pours and scrapes his colors into paintings that bring together the painted and the sketched. The control of the intellect plays as great a role within his artistic process as do intuition and chance. Awe's works can feature up to 15 layers of color, layers he exposes in places – like Jackson Pollock's cut-outs – by ripping off skeins of color or even digging out entire chunks of color, hence using the subtractive to augment the additive compositional process and exposing the hidden layers resting beneath to give the works a measure of relief-like structure and an aura of the mysterious. Even as each layer of color implies a greater material elevation, the materiality of the substance of the color is strongly decreased. Awe's colors do not manifest themselves in the relief-like and encrusted streaks and traces seen in Pollock's works but instead, because of their painted artificiality, condense into hermetically conclusive pictorial surfaces, surfaces that feature an overcooled character despite their often torrid coloring. In spraying his works on the canvas, Awe carries out a nearly symbolic act, one in which he nearly seems to repress the very origins of his art – Street Art – for the art world and the art market. In his works, however, he elaborates on the beauty of color and the dynamics of forms, augmenting them into a floating suspension of artistic energy at times furious and at times gentle – within this process demolishing personal and artificial constraints to reveal his irrepressible will, bent on assertiveness and radical self-expression, as the actual driving force behind his works.

If one regards abstractive expressionism as the triumphal procession of gestural painting, eruptively discharged from the artist's subconscious directly onto the pictorial surface via his hand, it becomes clear that although Awe uses the spray can in place of the brush, this has only granted him all the more spontaneity, intuition and improvisation. With the spray can, Awe has secured his own prototypical expressive style, one articulated by the constantly changing, unsettled nature of the background colors with their changing, smoldering, refulgent way of being, their irregular, scriptlike vortex and their organic cut-outs.

The poetic pictorial spaces envisioned by Awe possess an inscrutability of depth. He merges

opposites within them, antitheses such as established tradition and revolutionary emergence, vehemently present color and mystery, glossy spray-painted artificiality and emotionality. With his pictorial expression, positioned between the informal and graffiti, he has attained a goal that is of vital importance to him – namely, overcoming the boundaries between the street and the exhibition space.

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