

# THE EMANCIPATION OF GESTURAL FREEDOM

The promise of the first generation of abstract expressionist painters heralded nothing less than the emancipation of painting via free gestures spontaneously translated onto the canvas – no initial sketches, no academic quotations, just pure painting on a canvas without top or bottom, without even the limitations of beginning and end. Resting on the ground and approached from all sides, these abstract expressionist works were designed to give the sheer, unmitigated feeling of being a psychograph in color, faithfully portraying the personality of their creator. And this held the dual promise of both internal and external emancipation. Internally, the act of painting itself - the bounds of which seemed to have expanded continually over the centuries to encompass increasingly refined capabilities - was emancipated; Werner Haftmann's 1954 promulgation of "abstraction as a world language" and its goal of making the invisible visible opened a whole new world of possibilities to art. Externally, an astounding parallelism between artistic and societal emancipation was made manifest in the wake of the Second World War; what was originally an emancipation of the elite following the First World War was tested democratically in all its depth in the 1950s. And the development of abstraction as world language was equally democratic, reaching its high point at the end of the 1950s. The missionary-like euphoria of the first generation of gestural abstract painters receded in the following decades, culminating in a heroic posit of the "end of painting" upon the end of the style.

Since the turn of the millennium, however, the return of gestural abstraction can be seen clearly, with Christian Awe as one of its foremost proponents. Haftmann certainly would have regarded Awe's work in the most positive light, as it shows the vitality and potential of abstraction as world language fifty years after its supposed death. Awe's painting achieves something that seems impossible at first glance, combining the key theme of abstract expressionism, spontaneous gestural painting, with cool compositional analysis.

The two are unified within Awe's work, taking place one atop the other. His paintings emerge from a multitude of overlapping layers that unite various elements from sprayed graffiti to classic brushstrokes. The buildup of the layers is set in direct contrast to their prompt removal, hewn out in a form paraphrasing the painted gestures. The immediacy of Awe's gestures is thus juxtaposed with his formal calculation, which emerges from the distance through the layers; spontaneity and artistic deliberation act in one and the same arena, with the formal design encompassing a tension of carefully selected opposites that only reveals itself upon closer examination. The vivid colorfulness of the works, so redolent of Street Art, leads the viewer to hastily presuppose a mad drive of creative energy overstepping the works – a false conclusion dispelled upon closer examination of their archaeological layers. Awe is as cognizant of the longstanding tradition serving as the foundation of his artwork as he is aware of the need for a painterly concept that is both resilient enough to allow for his own artistic language and has enough room for development to allow him to come to consistently new results. The scrutinizing works Awe has created in the past few years show that he keeps both in view – and is hence in the position to celebrate a sensuous, jubilant and multilayered painterly style.

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