

# STAR VERSE

It must have been liberating. Just over one hundred years ago, not only painting but music, poetry, dance — yes, all of the arts — broke away from a whole lot of notions of what they should be, in order to explore what they could be. In painting, this was eventually dubbed abstraction, both a good and bad concept. Good, since it suggests a form of reduction; bad, since it implies the remains of an original motif that has been abstracted. This could be the case. But it usually isn't.

When Dina Isæus-Berlin begins painting her panels, she does not start from a pre-existing motif. Instead, she searches for the painting's expression in the actual execution. In the course of this process, she often finds something recognisable. The body is a creature of habit, and the brain seems to search for familiarities.

Perhaps we could say that she now and then finds herself, her technique, her solutions. Then she changes her tactics, breaks away from the recognisable, away from being safe. The intention is to surprise, if it's possible to have that as an "intention". It is also a more interesting way of imagining abstraction.

That does not mean that Dina Isæus-Berlin is confronted with complete surprises every time she paints. Nor that every painting is radically different to the previous ones. That obviously wouldn't be possible, with so many given parameters. Moreover, the idea of exploring the "unknown" feels both obsolete and a bit naive. Isæus-Berlin's departure from her own knowledge is more about exploring the known, and the surprises that can appear when the artist swerves from her own skills, from her own convenience, and seems to learn something new through constant repetition.

The question of what art could be when it broke away from its old purposes immediately sparked a plethora of contradictory answers. Abstraction was said to convey spiritual content but also to express purely materialistic values. Geometric abstraction was sometimes described as situated in between the individual and the universal. Others defined the gesturality of painting as a real expression not only of the individual but also of individualism. In other words, the liberation of the arts sparked new controversies. Today, these are both obsolete and significant. Obsolete in that it is perfectly possible for one and the same artist to choose all the roads that were previously regarded as contradictory. Significant in that painting has established itself as a language, where all the new variations that once seemed infinite can be distinguished and classified. Not even a fleeting gesture is merely a

gesture. It is also the sign of a gesture. This is something Dina Isæus-Berlin is aware of. She knows that her painting is rooted in several traditions. So, when she embarks on a work, she brings both her own and painting's tradition into the process. As we stand before her new suite Star Verse, we soon notice that some techniques and styles recur. Here are the lightly shaded sections that create depth in various formations, here are the isolated, large, gestural sweeps across the middle sections of the paintings, here the variety of repetitive surface patterns, applied either in the background like a "skin" or in the gestural brushwork.

All these traits demonstrate an acute awareness and veritably meta-reflective side to Dina Isæus-Berlin's paintings. Likewise, her various choices and combinations imply a need to not allow anything to remain safe. If a certain approach works in one painting, it probably can't be used again. This is also why Isæus-Berlin's work with patterns and repeats cannot be described as decoration, i.e., the processing of something pre-chosen and time-proven. Not that there's anything wrong with decoration. But that is not what Isæus-Berlin does. She puts the elasticity of the patterns to the test.

The meta-reflection can be seen as something that is added afterwards. And sometimes it is, like when Dina Isæus-Berlin fills in the movement of the sweeping gestural with a different colour. In "Wrath of Water (Neptune)", white has been applied with such frenzy that the paint has splashed and leaves a distinct index of swift motion. But then, the artist has filled in the white with blue, making the white look more like outlines. This procedure explains the title of the painting, while the contours suggest a cartoon world: The gestural is stylised.

Moving on to "Karmic Knot (Saturn)", it is clear that the dark, repetitive rectangular pattern is behind the gestural and seems to have been applied before Dina Isæus-Berlin proceeded with the broad brush. If we look closely enough, we can see how the background pattern has provided the starting point for a new pattern layer on top of the gestural sweeps. As in "Wrath of Water (Neptune)", the artist has added a pattern within the gestural flourishes, but here it seems to imply a topography, with colours oscillating from pale whitish-grey to pink. Each time the pattern crosses a line in the underlying geometry, it switches hue.

All the while, this awareness in Dina Isæus-Berlin's paintings is counteracted by a probing, explorative act that rather disables awareness. In the initial, conceptional phase, there are no conscious choices, merely execution that must be shaped through a near-meditative presence in the act of painting. Isæus-Berlin herself describes the situation in terms of Japanese martial arts (she practises Aikido), where energy and mastering the form and strength of gestures are central. You can't determine beforehand how to counter an attack, decisions have to be made in the moment when it happens. The same is true of painting. Errors made at the outset will plague the entire movement. It is generally better to give up, to start over again.

The similarities with martial arts in controlling movement patterns and knowing what is required on each occasion has obvious bearings on Dina Isæus-Berlin's act of painting. Especially in the foundational act, where the painting is laid out across the panel. But the metaphor requires clarification. A perfectly-executed movement is not enough. That would be like mastering the rules to the degree that the rules become your master. Therefore, it is crucial that paintings are given time, not only while being created but also in the longer perspective.

Only when the "rules", or what we might call knowledge, are so ingrained in the body that no conscious control is needed, can the rules be broken in a relevant manner. Becoming a skilled painter of the kind that Isæus-Berlin is does not involve being programmed to perfection but mastering movements so exactly that they can be transcended. This is where intuition comes in. Intuition is what "notices" when a painting slips into mannerisms or into the perilous state where it looks good but has nothing new to offer. But it can only perceive this after being practised over and over again.

The American brothers Herbert and Stuart Dreyfus in the 1980s described the learning process of an expert. One of the points they stressed was that, unlike a computer, the final steps of this long process is not about mastering more data or applying more rules, but noticing, without necessarily being able to explain, when it is appropriate to break the rules.

The combination of expertise and Asian traditions brings to mind calligraphy. This is another field that Dina Isæus-Berlin relates to, most distinctly legible in the painterly expressions performed in one sweep, which I have called "gestural" above. Unlike calligraphy, however, Isæus-Berlin does not deal with readable signs whose interpretation is influenced by their execution. If Isæus-Berlin's gestural is about anything, it is the meaning of the gesture

itself, the act of painting, what painting is, you could perhaps say. Her multi-stage procedure, performed with different degrees of awareness and at varying tempi, is a form of recording of stations in a perpetually explorative process. Thus, the word "rules" could be misleading. In common parlance, rules are either something that maintain something, or dictate how something should be done. That is not how Dina Isæus-Berlin's painting works.

I see the combination of the meditative process, the voyage towards expertise, and an exceedingly conscious treatment of this material as the epitome of Dina Isæus-Berlin's true strength. Intuition and doing are, in many ways, the primordial drivers of her painterly practice, but she does not stop at the result yielded by this sensitive process itself. On the contrary, she relates quite irreverently to this painting, searching for interesting ways to transform it; adding patterns and images, messing up and editing. Within limits. The painting still has to retain its quality, which, perhaps, it only can by being distorted. I am thinking that this might be where Aikido falls come in. If you don't know the right way to fall, you just get hurt.

To fall the right way, Dina Isæus-Berlin needs to master so much more than her own technique. To find the falls that yield something, she must transcend herself. Here we have explanatory models such as those I have alluded to, that discuss painterly paths, that reflect on intuition, that draw parallels with other disciplines, along with knowledge about the traditions that the artist is rooted in, an awareness of where painting has been and how it got there. An understanding of why artists made the choices they made. All this needs to be reworked into the painterly process. Only to fall through once more.

The question of what comes first — the meditative, intuitive painterly process, or conscious reflection — is virtually impossible to answer. Before intuition can flow, it needs a surface to act on. How big should it be? How many should there be? In *Star Verse*, the question has even more facets; here, Isæus-Berlin's starting point is not a format but an idea linked to our solar system. The number of paintings corresponds to the number of planets minus Earth, plus the sun and our moon.

In Dina Isæus-Berlin's meditatively created works, we find several identifiable signs. We recognise the paintings as abstract, the gestures as calligraphic, the patterns as conceptual. When we familiarise ourselves with her oeuvre, influences appear, often linked to the artist's various inspirations. In *Star Verse*, it becomes even more clear that the paintings also involve different predetermined notions about space. These notions are not primarily scientific, there are no galactic perspectives or even attempts to depict the planets of a solar system. But there are references. These are most pronounced in "Amaterasu (Sun)" and "Cyclone Luna (Moon)", which mirror one another compositionally with the lines that run from the perimeters of the panels and intersect at the centre, making them readable as rays. Colour-wise, they also reflect our notions of the two celestial bodies, the "moon" is in a muted blue-lilac nuance, while the "sun" shines bright yellow. These keys also make it easy to trace other cultural perceptions about the planets. This can relate to colour, as in "Burning Up (Mars)", where the violent red enhances the idea of the visual environment and climate on Mars. But it can also refer to the mood, as in the dark tones of the previously-mentioned "Karmic Knot (Saturn)".

Saturn often represents gloom, melancholia and sombreness; this is also the planet of the Artist of the genius cult, who shuns society to create. But that romantic notion doesn't interest Dina Isæus-Berlin. Although she had already found her unique style and was exhibiting at established galleries even before being admitted at Konstfack, she chose to continue her studies. A typical example of how she seeks out new situations to challenge herself.

*Star Verse* exemplifies how Dina Isæus-Berlin allows different theories to influence her process even in the intuitive phase. It's not about interpreting or portraying the celestial bodies, but accepting that the mind works through associations. For us inveterate sci-fi readers, space also includes references to kitsch imagery, similar to the cobalt blue that strikes the main chord in "Beyond the Breathing Bubble (Uranus)". Here, the splashes from the sudden gesture conjure up mysterious stellar constellations in a galaxy far, far away.

With *Star Verse*, Dina Isæus-Berlin presents a congruous series of paintings where the conceptual, the intuitive and the meta-reflective are interlaced. Her paintings possess a compressed energy that lies close to meditative self-control, but they also speak pragmatically of the conditions of painting, and with some humour to boot. These characteristics have traditionally been hard to consolidate, but Isæus-Berlin knows that it is perfectly viable, as long as the painting can add something interesting. That must feel liberating.

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