

Interview of Magnus Frederik Clausen with London based artist Jordan Derrien for émergent magazine in May 2022 (click [here](#) for the original version)

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Magnus Frederik Clausen in conversation with Jordan Derrien

Magnus Frederik Clausen is an artist whose practice has been questioning the medium of painting for several years. His work, sometimes hidden or covered, reconsiders the place of the commodity and its related display. More recently, he started delegating the making of his paintings. In his essay "*On the network of painting and its activation*", he comes across painting's performative aspect, sharing a real-life experience with a work by Anne Fellner. Last summer, when I invited him to Vienna for the exhibition *Hetton Lawn*, he took my work off the wall and looked at it from the back. A gesture that makes sense in light of this conversation.

Jordan Derrien: Who is painting?

Magnus Frederik Clausen: I recently started to step back from the act of painting and observe others paint my pictures. Becoming the audience of my work provides me with a different kind of space to observe painting during its execution. I find myself in a position where I watch and criticise my paintings while they are taking shape - something I am not able to do when I have the brush in my hand.

JD: This sounds like an interesting approach. But before talking about it, I'd like to ask you to put a couple of words on the group show *Landscape Modern Oil Painting Canvas Painting Abstract Oil Painting Wall Hanging*, which you co-curated with Danish artist Mads Lindberg in 2017. The exhibition is confusing and quite chaotic, with furniture, objects and artworks co-existing in the same space. What was the main intention here?

MFC: For *Landscape Modern Oil Painting Canvas Painting Abstract Oil Painting Wall Hanging*, Mads Lindberg and I took over a commercial gallery's space and installed around a hundred paintings by twenty-four artists together with furniture, electronics, handling materials, and storage elements. Only a few artworks were displayed on the walls, while most of them remained wrapped and piled up. Visitors could consult an inventory of works included in the show, and, in case they wished to see a specific painting, the gallery owner took care of unpacking and displaying it for them. So the narrative of the show changed along the duration of the exhibition, touching upon how we use and see a painting in relation to its context, display mode and surroundings.

JD: What about the furniture, the different elements that were not "artworks"?

MFC: All the items that were not classified as paintings when entering the gallery space were borrowed from a storage of used domestic objects. In the show, these objects were still stored in piles, as they usually would be in their original context, with the addition that here they assumed the role of creating the path through which the visitors should walk to experience the paintings. It was a kind of "economic hack" that would eventually bring attention to these "unimportant" objects.

JD: To me, your choice of exclusively showing paintings in a group exhibition is interesting. How important is the medium in relation to this exhibition?

MFC: Even if the paintings were what was more obviously labelled as "art" before entering the gallery, the exhibition was rather a whole big installation consisting of different materials. It addressed the relationship between the paintings, the space and all the other things in between, in the line of what Kippenberger once said, "Simply to hang a painting on a wall and say that its art is dreadful. The whole network is important! Even spaghetti.... When you say art, then everything possible belongs to it. In a gallery that is also the floor, the architecture, the colour of the walls." I see *Landscape Modern Oil Painting Canvas Painting Abstract Oil Painting Wall Hanging* as a natural expansion of my work with the medium. Organising exhibitions like this comes from a strong interest in painting and a curiosity to examine painting under different lights.

JD: I can definitely see some aspects of your work as a painter reflected in this show. Especially in relation to the fact that "things usually hidden in the white-cube setting were brought to attention", as Paola Paleari wrote in the exhibition text. I would like to go further and say that things usually visible in the white-cube become hidden here. A covering/uncovering process that appears in your practice quite often, for example in your solo show *Subheads* at JIR SANDEL. Can you explain how, as a painter, this exhibition became a sculptural installation?

MFC: The covering/uncovering procedure you mention originates from my pay-the-bills job as an art handler. A common practice when shipping a large amount of artworks is to group them on pallets and then wrap them in shrink film. It's a fast and safe method that is convenient when short on time - which is often the case in the arts world. Over the years, I have wrapped hundreds of works, seeing them leaving for shows and fairs and then returning rewrapped. I started to think, why unwrap and cover them again? Even if I cannot see it, the work is there and this is all I need to know. That became the starting point for *Subheads*, where I hired a colleague to shrink-wrap my atelier's entire content (artworks, tools, books, furniture, etc.) into three large units placed on pallets. For me, it was important that the wrapping phase was done by a professional technician rather than by myself, in order to avoid it becoming a matter of sculptural or formal investigation.

JD: Both the solo show *Subheads* at JIR SANDEL and the duo show with Sonia Almeida *Standard Error(SE)* at AGA Works show your painting practice through another angle. By hiding the expected commodity in an exhibition context, they lead us to reflect on the fetishisation and value of the artwork in the art market. It also questions a sort of activation of the painting in its performative aspect - something that seems at stake in your recent series of paintings. How did the clock paintings start?

MFC: The idea behind the clock paintings came about when I had to teach my oldest son to read the clock. I drew a series of clocks - both analogue and digital - in a sketchbook, and my son had to translate each given clock to its adverse on the opposite page. So, if I wrote 12:35, he had to translate that to an analogue clock, and the other way around. I'm a big fan of children's creative output and my son's drawings are no exception. But beyond that, what struck me when we started the exercise was that I could orchestrate the making of a picture within a simple system of translation. The following day, we went to my studio and repeated the homework with paint on canvas. Since then, I have hired several assistants to do the same. It's been very inspiring to observe that, like different musicians would play the same song differently, each person has their gestures, temperament and approach to the project. The fact is: one of the reasons why I paint is that I love to look at paintings, and with this project, I'm watching more paintings than ever before.

JD: To me, the clock works and the team of assistants are pretty much in line with *Subheads* and the art handler you hired to wrap your studio. Does the anonymous method of the clock series give you the

possibility to avoid the matter of a painting investigation, the same way it did a sculpture investigation for *Subheads*? Or, is it more about pushing the work's boundaries and getting things out of your control?

MFC: I have a feeling that what is taking place in my studio after I started this project with the clock paintings is a much deeper systematic examination of painting than I have ever pursued before. The involvement of the assistants helps me sharpen my investigation into painting. If I had to occupy myself with compositional questions and how to treat the canvas, I wouldn't observe the works in the same way I do now. By stepping back from the canvas and giving the brush to somebody else, I become the observer to my own work and I can see it much more clearly. Like it is always easier finding flaws on other people than yourself... .

At the same time, you're right on the part about losing control. I think I am a control freak that loves surprises. And the clock paintings give space for constant revelations within a relatively controlled framework. It makes me think about the Danish painter Emanuel Ipsen's text on the yellow tram ticket. One day, he finds a yellow tram ticket in the gutter. He picks it up and brings it to his studio to reproduce the sensation of the ticket laying there glittering, but can't succeed in doing so. Even the most accurate attempt cannot evoke the astonishment and freshness of his first encounter with the yellow ticket. A lovely writing on a typical "painter's problem". Both Asger Jorn and later Per Kirkeby have published English translations of Ipsen's text.

JD: It sounds like the clocks project revolves around playing with different outcomes, where the experience of painting becomes more important than its appearance and visual effect. How would you describe this transition from *Subheads* to now?

MFC: It is the result of constantly and consistently looking, daunting, reading and writing about painting. Why I am so obsessed with the medium, I can't say. I guess I have a strong love for it.

JD: In 2020, as part of your Master thesis in Philosophy, you carried on an experiment where you swapped an artwork with the American/Swiss artist Anne Fellner. The idea was to bring Fellner's artwork with you everywhere you went, and explore how the different contexts and situations would affect your experience of the work and its value. From March 2020 to January 2021, you basically shared your daily life with the painting and challenged its existence. What was the main motive here? How do you qualify this project?

MFC: I guess you can call it a road trip with a painting. A road trip that started in Berlin with me figuring out how to come back to Denmark, which in the meanwhile had closed its borders due to the first Covid lockdown... The main idea behind the project was to share my life with a painting I would bring with me in all my daily doings, and to keep a diary about it. I carried Anne's painting with me to work, to lunch, going out for dinner, meeting with friends, etc.; all the while exploring the image as an active object connected with the world around it. I had approached Anne, first of all because I love her work and secondly since she struck me as a "proper painter", that is, an artist who painted landscapes, animals and still lifes - and luckily, she agreed to swap one of her works for one of my paintings. The reason why I needed another artist's work is that if I used one of my own paintings, the question of when the painting was actually finished would constantly be open. I needed a painting that was declared "art" from someone other than me. A special memory from my life with *Scrubly Gate* is when I took it on a dive. I love night snorkelling in the Copenhagen harbour, and at one point I started to fantasise about how it would be to bring the painting with me - even if I knew saltwater would not do any good to it. By using a simple construction made of bricks and strings, I installed Anne's painting free-floating at the bottom of the harbour at around 5-7m depth, and then I went for a long dive. When I came back to the location of the painting, I had to dive down against the updraft to see it: a simple but drastic change from how I usually

would approach a painting on a wall. It was a beautiful sight and a special sensation, with water and gravity providing a totally new setting for my encounter with the painting.

JD: Reading the diary, I have the feeling that your notes on Fellner's painting are more important than the painting itself, especially when you start doing live drawings of it and, at the end, when you draw the artwork by memory. There, it stops being an active object and is reduced to its experience. Did the painting cease being a commodity at one point?

MFC: I still have Anne's painting in my studio. It is wrapped up and protected now: the opposite condition to when it was an active part of my everyday doings. During the experiment, indeed, the meaning of the work became less and less connected to being "a painting by Anne Fellner", and more and more related to how it was activated during my activities and the sensations it evoked. But if I choose to exhibit it or hang it at home, the picture will transfer back into its old clothes, and be again an Anne Fellner's painting on a wall somewhere. An image with more than one story to tell.

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Jordan Derrien (b.1994) lives and works in London. Recent exhibitions include Galerie Anne Barrault, Paris (2022), V.O curations, London (2022), FRAC Normandie Caen (2021), Palais des Beaux-arts, Paris (2021), Haus Wien, Vienna (2021), ArtLacuna, London (2021), W, Pantin (2021), LAXART, Los Angeles (2019), Media Naranja, Marseille (2018), Swimming Pool, Sofia (2018).