

November 1998

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**Jan Eschmann**

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# Pass the pepper...

Jan Esmann interviewed by arthistorian Alex Stonebrew, Ph.D. et Ph.D., author of the internationally influential monograph *Unfogging Rothko*, artcritic Peter M. Howling, Ph.D., and arthistorian and vicar Sir Luther Aretina, Ph.D., producer of the eminent BBC TV-series: *All in one Palettecup*.

## Jan Esmann, recent paintings

### Alice Lookingglass Gallery

October 10 – November 10, 1998

Esmann: Pass the pepper, please. Thank you... Oh! Is this thing on? [rumble]

Peter M. Howling: Mr. Esmann, thank you for joining us here tonight. You are probably aware, that you are attracting quite a lot of attention as one of Denmark's talented young surrealists.

Esmann: That's odd.

Peter: Err...

Esmann: I never thought of myself as a surrealist. Not even remotely. Surrealism is as dead as Dalis waxed moustache.

Alex H. Stonebrew: But you must be aware of the similarities between some of your paintings and those of Delveaux, Magritte or Chirico.

Esmann: Yes. They also have similarities with Goyas *Caprichos*, Carravagios drunks and Piero Della Francescas abandoned cities. Also my nose looks quite like yours, but that does not make us related.

Sir Luther Aretina: But when you look at your pictures, they do look surrealistic by all measures.

Esmann: Actually surrealism was more an attitude towards life and consciousness than it was a style. Rejection of style, or rather immanence, in preference of psyche is indeed one of the arthistorical hallmarks of surrealism; it's an -ism of attitudes that centres around the artists psyche and promotes the liberation of the repressed subconscious of the suppressed average working class citizen. Just because your pictures don't represent everyday scenes or you deal with subjects that follow the rules of nature, you don't become a surrealist. By that criteria a minister like yourself must be the perfect surrealist - that is second to an art-critic. I am not a surrealist by any of the surrealists own measures. Breton set those out clearly in his surrealist manifesto. I find them to be

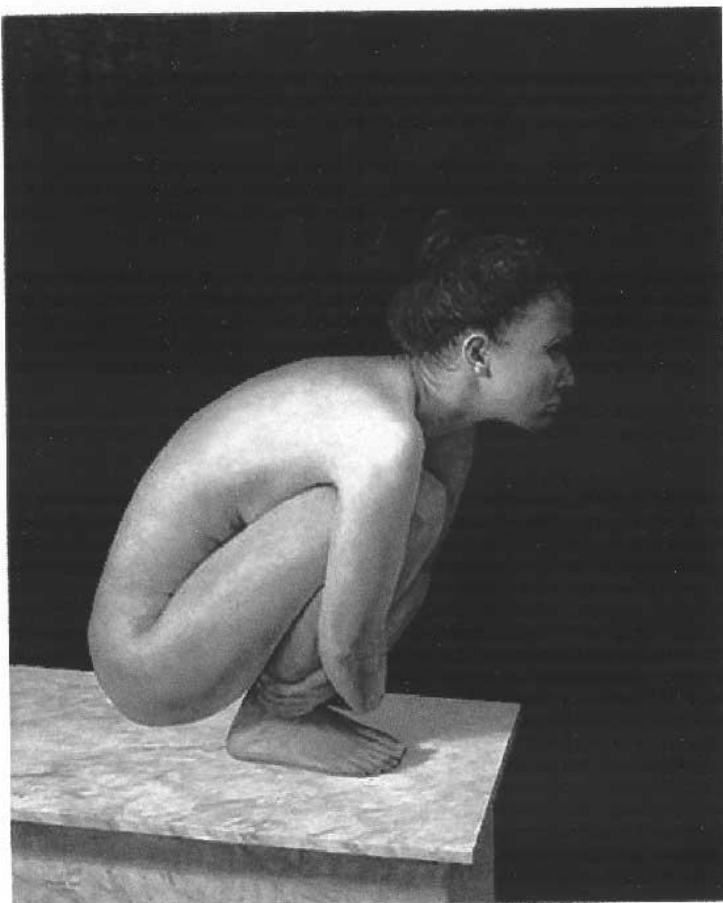
a) in bad taste, b) of the stuff dreams are made, c) ridiculously messianic. Lets make a list: Surrealism is out, meta-realism is in. Social realism smells like dirty underwear. Should we continue?

Peter: Thank you, no. I don't think it's necessary. The term "neo-baroque" has also been applied to your work. What do you think of that?

Esmann: What? My work? I enjoy working.

Sir Luther: That people classify your style as neobaroque.

Esmann: Well... Neo-anything isn't exactly flattering; it has a foul odour of plagiarism and repetition. The concept "neo-baroque" is OK, but it's very ambivalent, undefineable and hard to grasp. I prefer to paint pictures rather than classify them. My image-game is to transcend my paintings even during the act of creation. Its rather amusing, really. Even liberating. One



should always try to transcend what one is doing even while doing it.

Alex: But you can't do something and transcend it at the same time. That's a contradiction of terms.

Esmann: Wrong! And to prove it, let's do it with this interview. Transcending the activity while engaging in it one-pointedly is a very important issue if you want to make art. It's also a sound spiritual attitude. I can't separate art and spirituality, you know. How about meditating instead wasting time with this interview? Turn off the mike, please...

Peter: That's not a microphone, Mr. Esmann, it's a pepper pot! Esmann, even as we can accept your rejection of being a surrealist. You must admit, that you to a large extent repeat what was done in the baroque.

Esmann: I am not aware of actually repeating, copying or borrowing. I think my pictures also have resemblances with what was done in the rococo and in classicism, or the renaissance for that matter, or even that ugly mistake called impressionism. Did you know Renoir had a reverse ageing process and became less senile, when old and more and more clear-minded? ... He remarked, when of age and confined to a wheelchair, that his personal form of madness had been spending his entire life smearing paint on canvas. I can relate to that. I think Carravaggio could have related to it as well. Probably not Eckersberg or Abildgaard, but certainly Goya. Maybe Tiepolo too if frescoes count.

Sir Luther: Yes, yes. Let's stick to the point.

Esmann: I thought we were talking about the neobaroque and since Peter thinks it's nothing but a repetition of the baroque, why not make a list of some baroque and neobaroque phantasmagorias.

Peter: Ingres was not baroque..

Esmann: No, neither was Delacroix. But Delacroix was undoubtedly one of the first neobaroque, despite his romanticism, and in order to say that, I had to conjure his primary aversion: monsieur Ingres as well as a few of my own. Goya wasn't baroque either, but certainly he was neobaroque in the same sense I can be called that. It's a pretty loose term fit for nothing but newspaper columns and university lectures. If you make the criteria large enough anything will fit and if you then disguise it in sufficient academic rhetoric you will be able to promote your purely subjective tastes as art-historical profundities.

Alex: What are you then? You seem bitter.  
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Esmann: No, I'm embarrassed. Mantegna and Bellini are absolutely adorable.

Peter: They weren't baroque.

Esmann: No? Well, what about that odd little fellow, who always painted people with silly head-dresses. Even his wife! What's his name? Mc Eyck?



Peter: Van Eyck was not baroque either.

Esmann: How about Leonardo, then. He invented a lot of things, why not the baroque? He wasn't all that bad with a pencil. He invented chiaroscuro, sfumato and all those baroque tricks. His most long-lived invention, however, was the silly-beard phantasmagoria.

Peter: That's not how it works. You have lost the historical context.

Esmann: Have I? Who made up those contexts in the first place? You have lost the context of contexts! I think it's more important to classify art with criteria that are inherent in the artistic process and intention, rather than by superficial likenesses in style. If you classify me as a neobaroque surrealist, you ought to classify Leonardo as a prebaroque neobaroque – a self-contradictory term which illustrates the absurdity of such classifications – and you should most certainly classify Botticelli as a surrealist and El Greco as a German expressionist. That seems slightly out of context. Maybe meta-noetic contexts would prove more valuable.

Alex: Your homepage contains some so called FAQ's about your spiritual life. There you discuss the concept of metanoesis a bit. But your answer to a request to explain your spiritual life is a plain "no". Why this reluctance to reveal your inner life, when the inner life is obviously the subject matter of your pictures.

Esmann: Yes, I mean no...

(Pause)

Peter: Yes?

Esmann: You are absolutely right: the spiritual is the sole subject-matter of my painting. However, the difference between discoursing or colourising about my inner life is so large, I was surprised about your question. I thought that distinction should be obvious to an art-critic.

Peter: Well, it's a matter of discussion if such a distinction has any justification, and I...

Alex: Mr. Esmann. Could you explain why discourse is so incompatible with painting, when you yourself incorporate Sanskrit and Hebrew letters and incomprehensible text in your pictures. Also it is a commonplace today, that anything operates as either an icon, index or symbol, which makes the fact that anything can be interpreted as a semiotic phenomena rather straight forward.

Esmann: That's exactly the point: by incorporating fragmented or incomprehensible text, the nontextuality and metasemiotic nature of colourism becomes accentuated. Only by utilising metadiscursive means can you express anything sane about metanoesis.

Peter: Don't you believe in reading pictures?

Esmann: No. I think you should see pictures. It's a completely different cognitive operation. You wouldn't talk about smelling a symphony, would you? Don't tell me gazing at a book from different angles is a splendid way to comprehend its thematic subtleties!

Alex: You read the meaning invested in the elements generated by the paint on the canvas. In your case, since you are a figurative painter, you must be very conscious of the semiotic layer.

Esmann: Oh yes, yes. Very much indeed, I always try to make it not work as such - or deconstruct it you prefer an outdated catch-phrase - through the immaculate technical pseudomimetic construction of metanarrative figurations. Semiosis is nothing but the minds bait to trap itself in itself - a bit like a mouse storing cheese on a mousetrap for a later feast.

Sir Luther: Metanoesis is the Christian term for repentance, is it not? Are you a Christian and if so, how does the Christian spirituality show itself in your paintings and your inner life?

Esmann: As I said: I am not a surrealist, so I don't frequent surrealist clubhouses like churches etc. because I don't partake in surrealist discourses on the resurrection of the flesh, the transfiguration of wine, and so forth. I think the church has so utterly misunderstood the whole concept of





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metanoesis, that I resent even being compared with a Christian as long "Christian" means adhering to church-faith. However I do consider myself a Christian mystic of the theocentric sort represented by Symeon, Eckhart and Abhinavagupta.

Sir Luther: Apinawa-who?

Esmann: Sorry! But in my experience Symeon's and Eckhart's mystical theology is very similar to the enlightenment project of the Kashmir Shaivism of Abhinavagupta and Utpaladeva. But why these classifications on the basis of superficialities? It's like our discussion of who's baroque and who's an expressionist and so forth. Arthistorians are such a religious lot, really, adhering to this aesthetic cult and denigrating that. I must insist the inner processes, realisations and states are far more interesting and important than cults and trends.

Sir Luther: I don't quite see your point, but never mind. However I'd like to know what you mean by metanoesis? How does it apply to your art?

Esmann: OK, lets take a stroll in the labyrinth of terra linguae. Meta means beyond and nous means mind. Metanoesis, obviously, means to go beyond the mind, to transcend it. Transcendence, or lost transcendence, is what my art is all about. However, I disagree with the notion, that the transcendental can be integrated in a work of art.

Alex: You talk of the transcendental as if it is something tangible: The Transcendental with a capital T, and not just something invested in, or projected onto, the immanence of the work. What do you mean, when you talk of the transcendental in art?

Esmann: Err... Well... ahem... words fail me. But as I just explained to Mr. Luther... err... It is beyond the mind and thus beyond, umm, discourse. You know... You could say... well...

Alex: Maybe you haven't thought of it, but speech is different from writing in that it is a vocal and bodily act, so it transcends the textual problems of cognition. A good metaphor and rich imagery has such a degree of sensuality that it evokes, or mediates, a bodily cognition and thus transcends the limits of textuality. It's simply not located in terra linguae, as you call it.

Esmann: Ah! yes...um, I see...my utterings now... err... are certainly more, mm, clearly transcendental than a... err... well edited text?

Alex: We presuppose a clear mind.

Esmann: I want to transcend the mind, don't you see? That's the whole issue! Or what do you think?

Alex: The issue of this interview is what you think.

Esmann: That's unfortunate, because I don't think I can avoid it. Thinking is discursive and therefore it hides you from yourself. Cogito ergo occultum! But this is astray: I think you missed the point: the issue isn't the act of producing, but rather receiving communications. I think it is just as bodily to read a message with your eyes as to hear it with your ears. The most bodily would be to be blind and read braille. However, I still believe we with eyes to see are more privileged than the blind, despite whatever philosophy has cooked up this century. But of course, I am a painter, not a philosopher. I am dependent on my eyes so I adore them and their medium: pictures. Philosophers depend on their ears, so they adore them and their medium: speech. Let's not argue about which of the senses is the most refined.

Alex: There's more to it than that, really. You have a masters degree in literary criticism and history of modern culture, I have always wondered why you seem to make a virtue of positioning yourself below that level.

Esmann: I just don't want to hide myself from myself. Do you know, Alex, that psychology has long since acknowledged that physical reactions are generated far more often by reading pulp-fiction and watching TV than by listening to recitals of poetry? Applying your criteria of linguistic bodilyness to the area of mysticism would defi-

ne Barbera Cartland as a great saint and spiritual teacher.

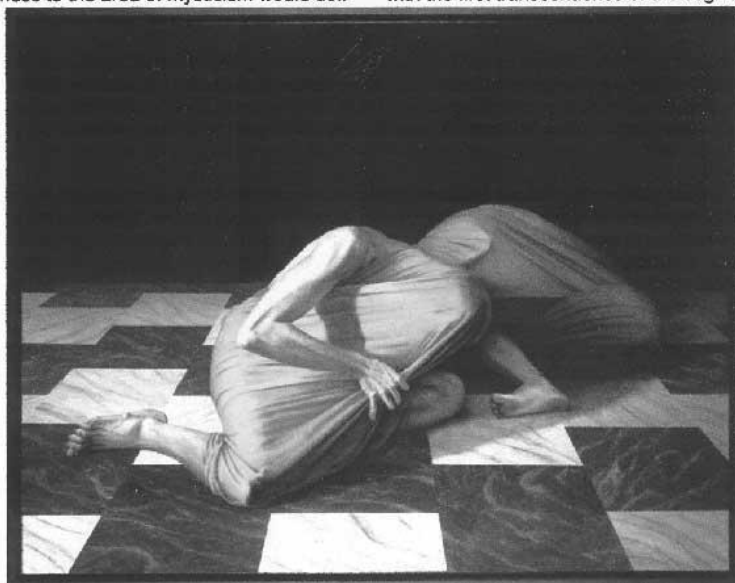
Luther: I rather enjoy Mrs. Cartlands novels, really. So few have grasped their literary merits...

Esmann: So on a purely phenomenal level good metaphor and rich imagery are probably not more, but less sensual and bodily. It seems more right to say, that the excellence of the poetic language is, that it transcends the body and even twists and jerks in the straightjacket of language. But unfortunately it does not get out of that straightjacket: the twisting just makes it even tighter. The fate of every good metaphor is to become a cliché.

Alex: But in the immediate speech-act, there is a transcendence.

Peter: Could we relate this to painting, please? We are not here to discuss the act of speaking, but the act of painting, are we not?

Esmann: Sure. But to answer Alex: There's no transcendence in the speech-act in the mystical sense of metanoesis - which is the sense in which I use this phrase "transcendence". The media of semiosis is irrelevant: language just can't transcend conceptual understanding - even if you're a genius at using metaphors. It's true the bodily is less caught up in the semiotic straightjacket, and a communication anchored in the body is thus more free, but you forget it is not meta-noetic, its pre-noetic. You have turned mysticism up side down by post-supposing cognition instead of pre-supposing it. You want to end with cognition, but mysticism only just begins with the first transcendence of the cogniti-



ve faculties of Descartes cogito.

Peter: Enough, please! Not many artists today are interested in the transcendental. Except those that repeat romanticism, expressionism, and, like you, the baroque. It seems an outdated interest.

Esmann: It sure is. But you haven't realised, that I'm not interested in the transcendental either, only in radical transcendence. As I promised earlier, I tried to transcend the subject of this interview: art, but you got the better of that and I must acknowledge your unconquerable will to not transcend art and enter your language game. Basically I want to transcend all language, cognition and the cognitive faculties altogether, even the cogniser - *Monsieurs Descartes cogito ergo sum* is a supreme statement of ignorance from a mystical point of view. As I mentioned, there is no transcendental Other invested in the immanence of the work which leaves the work utterly meaningless - apart from the meaning artoritics project onto the painting in order to write an article or review and thus make themselves, not the painting, seem clever.

Peter: I resent that last remark!

Esmann: How come? It was only a soft caress compared with what certain critics administer to most artists. As I was saying: all this does not deny the fact of meta-noetic being-as-being. You can't grasp this meta-noetic by positioning yourself below the noetic straightjacket just as you can't grasp a work of art by thinking or discoursing - or for that matter reviewing. Body is certainly on level with a fine metaphor, a good review or a nice brain, but all are certainly below the metanoetic. I'm after "IT", and this "IT" is even beyond metanoesis. "IT" is reached when you have completed the process of theosis and you have established yourself in the state of existential, and not just transcendental, *unio mystica*. I actually wrote a clumsy essay on that. It got printed recently.

Alex: Your essay on experiencing God?

Esmann: Well, I didn't choose that title. My point is, you must transcend language to understand even the initial insights of mysticism - or rather: when you get those insights, you have transcended language and begun to develop a completely different cognitive faculty that enables you to auto-cognise yourself as meta-noetic unconditioned and unrestricted being-as-being. Its my experience, that poetry isn't above language, but that a good painting can be. That's why I try to convey the traumatic phases of the mystical process in paintings instead of writing.

Alex: If this transcendental is not describable, it's just some weird X. Incomprehensible and unapproachable. Why, then, talk about it at all?

Esmann: Yes, it's a weird X of which you cannot speak nor write! Thank you! Let's call it that instead of "IT" or mysticism or The Transcendental. And please note: I don't talk about it, you do. But I do partake in your language-game. Why not? If you're not caught up in literacy it's more fun to be literate than illiterate and I like to play. Words are great playthings, really, but to a mystic they are nothing more. If you study mysticism on its own premises and not the premises of phenomenology or Wittgensteinianism, you'll see no mystic has ever found any other way to transmit this weird X than telepathy.

Sir Luther: A telepathic weird X? Mr. Esmann, please be a bit more serious.

Esmann: In my experience telepathic transmission of weird X does work quite well. What is the Grace of the Holy Ghost but a telepathic weird X, really? In Kashmir Shaivism it's called shaktipat. As for my art, I first of all experience this weird X daily and subsequently pass the time between meditations with painting about not experiencing it or losing it. To think that a picture has conveyed something to you is very akin to what I am talking about when I say telepathy, for somehow you have acquired some internal insight or experience from this mute thing hanging on the wall.

Peter: Is that what your paintings are about? Telepathically losing some inexplicable and transcendental weird X? But if it's inexplicable and transcendental, how can you lose it, then? Even paint about losing it? That's silly!

Esmann: I thought you wanted to talk about art?

Peter: Yes, your art. And you seem pre-occupied with some arrogant inexplicable notion of some otherness, that's not in the pictures, and the pictures are about losing it, yet you insist art is about it and there is no Other. That does not make sense to me.

Esmann: No, that is apparent. However, it generates pictures on my canvases. So without that, or it, there would be no art in my case.

Sir Luther: I say: Do you consider yourself a religious painter by any means?

Esmann: What do you mean by religious? Undoubtedly something regarding weird X, but if you have absolutely no experience of weird X, or God if you prefer a cliché, which I doubt you have, then if you

discuss weird X it is no wiser than arguing about the haircolour of inhabitants on mars. Ministers just vocalise private variations on collective dreams and that's a surrealist act par excellence.

Sir Luther: So God and religion have nothing to do with your work?

Esmann: Yes: I avoid them, just like that picture-plague: surrealism. I also dislike concepts like "Self" or "yourself" since it would imply "to consider yourself a" which implies some Other you identify with. Maybe this identification business is the whole problem. You think I am Jan Esmann, I don't. If you consider your self, you can't be that self, you consider your self to be, because it would be more correct to say you are the point from where you observe the observed. I try not to observe myself, but to transcend myself. Just as I don't observe pictures, but try to transcend them. You know, I never go to museums, exhibitions or galleries unless I am wearing a pair of dark blue or dark red spectacles.

Peter: What?

Esmann: As long as there is a Self, however high, there's an observer of the self who identifies the self as self. So selfhood can ever be the truth about you. That truth can only be no-self. The same with painting. The Art in art is none-existent; that doesn't mean its not there. Very few works of art have it, though, that's why I consider the general work of art an investors construct and not Art. So naturally you must wear coloured spec's when visiting museums and galleries. Just like reviews are only investors guides and art-critics are merely stock-brokers. That's why my practice of reading reviews from the bottom up, last word first, is the only sound approach if you want to preserve your sensitivity to artistic quality.

Peter: This is getting a bit far now, isn't it?

Esmann: Preferably while listening to Beethoven's ninth at double speed.

Peter: Mr. Esmann, please!

Esmann: The problem is that of radical no-self-recognition. Ultimate radical self-recognition must be transcending self-transcendence: there's nothing left. Art should recognise art as an illusion about artworks, and Self recognise Self as an illusion about being-as-being. In that recognition one will discover that there was no Other to discover and that language is utterly incompetent to deal with mystical realisations. Because of that incompetence I try to infold figuration and mimesis, just as self infolds in radical self-enquiry. And instead of a paradigm of phonemes or sememes I try to develop a field of co-

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lourisms disguised as mimetic figurations. Its not the individual colours that are interesting, but the presence of non-existent colourisms that crop up in juxtapositions. This is why semiotics and linguistics are inferior to painting and you can never grasp the point of my painting by reading my pictures. In language the sounds, for example [key] and [mon], may or may not have meaning in themselves; but if you juxtapose them in the word monkey you can either describe an animal or an art-critic or Jackson Pollock at work, but note that [mon] and [key] disappear and vanish into a new word. In painting the cadmium-sulfoselenide juxtaposed to the chromi-umoxide does not disappear, both stand in their own right, even though something special happens between them that has no autonomous existence and is not the sum of the two. The ability to work with the not-there-yet-present in painting and play it against other present non-existents is what can never be grasped by neither a monkey nor a picture-reader. Perhaps Pollock caught onto it, I don't know. He certainly behaved like a monkey, but you know how he died, of course.

Alex: What about Rothko?

Esmann: Rothko certainly did in '59. I think he forgot it again though. He only transcended painting in the year 1959 and again the year before he died, '69 I think. All other years his paintings are simply pictures, despite that he denied they were just that. He must have seen it himself, and that's probably why he finally gave up painting and invented the ultimate body-art happening instead: he pretended to be a crucified Jew on the Golgatha of his studio-floor and fatally slit his veins.

Alex: That's tragic, but let's get back to our subject. You want to transcend painting?

Esmann: Absolutely. Painting as is a drag. Thank you for phrasing that so clearly. I'm not good at words, so I just babble pseudo-academic mumbo or ridiculous jumbo along the way to hide my helplessness. I never quite realised that. Yes, my pictures are about self-transcendence. They invoke one narrative and negate it at the same time in order to transcend their own semiosis. That's why you can't quite grasp the pictures as allegorical or symbolic or in any way narrative. They simply are not as such because they negate their own immanent semiosis. The ultimate transcendence must leave the immanence empty. I'm after emptying the immanence in order to point at radical, or mystical if you prefer, transcendence. That's why the pictures are not about anything except perhaps about something that is nothing. Nothing that poses as something to be more exact. Like ideas - or speech. It's rather uncanny, isn't it?

Peter: Well. Could we please stick to the subject of our interview: painting, in particular Esmann's painting - whoever Esmann is, if it's not you - and leave philosophy behind for a while?

Jan Esmann: Mr. Esmann, I have always had this question on my mind, I really must ask it now.

Peter: Are you talking to yourself?



Esmann: Of course! Art is by nature a disrupted or auto-castrated dialogue with yourself transposed into the medium of artistic creation. I thought that would have been obvious by now. Do you mind?

Jan: Mr. Esmann. My question is: If you want to transcend painting, then why do you adhere to mimesis? It seems a contradiction to paint figuratively, when you want to transcend it. Why don't you just paint abstract?

Esmann: Yes, that question does spoil me sleep. But abstraction today is the decaying corpse of modernism, or at best its gravestone. Look at Per Kirkeby: to prove it, he has built so many mausoleums you can't even count them any more. To be solely an abstract painter today is nothing but an aesthetic act of self-gratification or interior decoration. They guys of the New York School ... at least Rothko and Reinhardt ... They managed to make abstract painting transcend abstract painting, but since the '70's, abstract expressionism has only been plagiarism barely fit to decorate the walls of furniture shops and banks. The primary mission of abstraction today is obviously to relocate the contents of one persons bank-account to some other persons and help the reviewers make a buck on the process. It's all pottlatch anyway. As for art, one thing is obvious: Today we have to make figurative painting transcend figuration. No one has ever done that before. The modernists only denied figuration and mimesis. They never transcended it. The surrealists only transmuted it.

Jan: Tell me, then, why do you make such a big deal out of craftsmanship and skill if you want to transcend it. Isn't masterly painting-technique really a way of confir-

ming mimesis and figuration. It seems a waste of time.

Esmann: First I must say, I don't make a big deal out of good craftsmanship, I simply happen to be a good craftsman, and that's no big deal, because the whole deal is transcending it. Yes, it can certainly be a waste of time, so to avoid that I paint more sloppily than the limits of my craftsmanship force me to, simply because painting as craft in itself doesn't interest me any more. And frankly - this is off the record, please, because it's rather embarrassing - it bores me tremendously.

Jan: It bores you? You seem rather satisfied with painting, the way you hide it in slick modesty and arrogant pseudophilosophical commonplaces.

Esmann: Yes, its boring, isn't it? I told you we had to transcend the interview to get to the real point. Competence is an aspect of ignorance. Ignorance is repulsive to me and since I am ignorant in the mystical sense I find myself repulsive and have made it my life's project to transcend myself and merge with the weird X.

Sir Luther: Merge with God? Good Lord!

Esmann: Is trying to get rid of yourself unmodest?

Peter: There are other young figurative painters today who are far more excellent craftsmen than you. I recall one portrait of the queen where you can see every little wrinkle in her face and every hair, even the little delicate ones round the lips. Surely that's good craftsmanship.

Esmann: There's a general notion, that the more details and the sharper the brush, the better the craftsman you are. Of course, that's naive. Details and sharp brushes only prove your meticulous temperament and degree of patience - that is: your honourable character not your artistic competence. I find sharp brushes annoying - I used them a lot when I was younger, though. It gave me a kick to fill the pictures with all these minute details. Technique is more a matter of counter playing opaque with transparent, vibrant spatiality with flat substantiality, pastose with glaze, solid with aireal, etc. All those commonplaces of the craft of painting everybody knew in the baroque but everybody seem to have forgotten today. In the baroque they knew that too many details simply kill all that painterly competence. In that sense I am certainly neo-baroque. Anyone can fill a canvas with meticulously drawn details. However: make a darkness appear luminous, make a monochrome surface vibrate with colour, make one light area solid and luminous and an other luminously ethereal. Then



let's discuss technical competence in figurative painting.

Jan: Ahem! I am sorry to interrupt. But you haven't clarified the schism between painting figuratively and transcending figuration.

Esmann: Oh! You can't express transcending figuration and mimesis if you don't present figuration and mimesis. Otherwise you just negate it. I thought I had just explained that. Did I miss some point? What do you think Peter?

Peter: Err...

Esmann: Maybe we should make an other list? One of criteria of good craftsmanship: Details are out, tangibility is in. Shadows that vanish in the dark are the marks of dilettante chiaroscuro, flat lights are signs of naive ...

Peter: Stop! It's irrelevant!

Alex: So your painting is really about not painting, is that correct?

Esmann: Yes, of course. Otherwise I would have written a book on craftsmanship instead of fiddle around with hogs hair on wooden handles and get my fingers dirty. I hate that.

Alex: That's not what I meant, neither craftsmanship nor the anatomy of brushes. I meant painting as art.

Esmann: Oh, but what do you mean: "art"?

Sir Luther: Indeed! That's the whole point, isn't it? "What do you mean 'art'": 'tis all about that, is it not, your transcendence? I say, is not all art an attempt to answer, or circumscribe, that very question: what is art? And in that process transcend previous limits of understanding? Is enquiry into the nature of art not the sine qua non of art?

Esmann: I think Rosenblum once wrote a book, that inadvertently illustrated the cloudiness of the ontology of art... By taking the point of view of northern romanticism ... mmm, by equating Rothko and Friedrich he implied, without realising it himself, that abstract modernism was really a romantic fallacy, didn't he?

Alex: Well, in my book., Unfogging Rothko, I devoted several chapters to the question of what is hidden behind the clouds in Rothko's pictures. Is there a clear sky or, or an other strata of clouds, or simply the endless void of deep space? I don't know and I don't think Rothko knew. Its so mysterious, isn't it marvellous?

Peter: Yes! Such mystery is indeed the mark of great art, only a genius can gestalt such clearly.

Sir Luther: Come now, dear. That reminds me of your response to my essay criticising that particularly cloudy chapter about the spiritual superiority of the intellectual genius. You never really...

Alex: But I did! I did! Only you missed the point that just as Rothko's semi-tragic neo-romantic representation of cloudy nights instead of full moons is an allegorical act ironising the very status of painting, then also the tragic stance...

Sir Luther: No, no, no! You deliberately avoided the principal issue: that one can not allegorise in an abstract picture. And that point is why we need to come to grips with the fact that neo-figurative art really is the only true abstraction, because it abstracts itself out of allegory. I think Esmann's works are examples of that. Rothko never transcended anything except his own cure for his severe depression.

Alex: Rothko was a visionary. Don't say that.

Peter: Please, gentlemen. Please! Esmann, you also partook in that discussion if I remember correctly. What do think was Rothko's aporia?

Sir Luther: Too many pills for too many ills...

Alex: Come on...

Esmann: Rothko completely misunderstood Zen. Along with Reinhardt and their friend the monk Thomas Merton. My essay about that even got translated and published in Denmark. They thought they could transcend ignorance by suppressing ignorant knowledge, but that only results in blankness – or a well of blackness as you imply, Alex. It's like spending your life staring into a hole you can't get into because you are separated by a strong grid. That's tragic. The tragic was something Rothko never transcended, and that's why he never, not even remotely, grasped Buddhist mysticism, whether Zen or other. Mysticism isn't tragic. Mind you: it's not heroic either. It simply isn't. And when this isn't-ness has caught you, you enter the dark night of the soul.

Alex: Mysticism isn't? What has that to do with painting? And I thought you said you were a mystic, yet you say mysticism isn't. And your paintings? are they not either?

Esmann: That's right. You have the whole point there. There is no painting, no painter and no spectator – as such, that is.

Peter: How's that?

Sir Luther: Yes. Its a bit difficult to see...

Esmann: Because ontology is a blind alley. We are not interested in separating work from spectator or artist or this from that. When you paint, you spectate and the work becomes, there is no work of art during that process, only the process, no artist, only doing. Actually, there is no work after the process either. The work of art is an investors construct, just as the arthistorian is, as well as the artist. As for our previous discussion about styles and –isms and historical contexts, the formulated social context is an ideological construct necessary to uphold the methods of the social constructivists. And, for that matter, this whole interview is a construct, a phantasmagoria, not meant to be read, but seen, just as pictures are not meant to be seen anymore, but read.

Sir Luther: Yet we are here engaged in discourse. You can not deny that you handle your pictures, so there must be works, and we look at them, so there must be spectators.

Esmann: What do you mean by "you", "we" and "I"? To me, there are no such things. They are simply illusions about ourselves that we are stuck in. My paintings are solely about that, solely about illusions. That's rather uncanny isn't it: that your notion of yourself is really an illusion? That's why my pictures play with the uncanny. That's why I must employ mimesis and at the same time transcend figuration. Also why I must incorporate narrativity, yet let the incorporated narrations short-circuit each other – and/or themselves in a meaningful anti-semiosis. Only that way can we hope to develop a mimetic and figurative painting, that transcends figuration and mimesis.

Peter: That's taking it a bit too far, isn't it?

Esmann: No. On the contrary, its taking it absolutely nowhere. Except taking it to that is.

Alex: In this case too far and nowhere is the same thing, isn't it?

Esmann: If you know your craft as an artist, I guess so, yes. Otherwise it's just a ridiculous play with words not even fit for newspapers.

Pass the pepper, please...