

Leif Elggren / *B: painting myself back to Y*

01.03 – 28.03.2024

Private View 29.02 at 5–7 PM

*A Blind Seeing*

by Camilla Larsson

In an essay written in 2017, Leif Elggren described how his work with the colours yellow and black "generated new means to look upon the world". In 2022, I curated the group exhibition *Their happiest days were the dark and vast days of rain*, which was conceived around the idea of treating the artists as spectators. Elggren took part with the painting series *Black: To paint myself back to Yellow* (2021). These abstract paintings are just as open for interpretation as they are concrete – a meditation on the meeting between the brightest and darkest of colours. This text will combine themes from that exhibition with new strands in order to frame Elggren's work by discussing how the relations between human sight, blindness, and visionary work have been understood in visual art, literature, and philosophy.

For *Their happiest days were the dark and vast days of rain* I proposed that we see the artists as spectators. I argued that they observe the world, and that their artworks can be understood as comments, reactions, or proposals about other worlds. Alongside artworks by eight other artists, Elggren participated with his series of paintings, which deal with the function of sight; or rather, which use experiences of vision loss in the centre of the visual field caused by the gradual degeneration of the light sensitive cells under the macula lutea. Since 1977, Elggren has been interested in and often used the combination of the colours black and yellow, as found on road signs, adhesive tape, patterns, symbols, and in nature. It is a combination where the two colours are placed side by side to create an apparent contrast that signals danger. Danger of what has been created by humans and in nature. When Elggren's own vision failed he started to experiment with other kinds of combinations of the two colours. The painting series *Black: To paint myself back to Yellow* consists of black paint that is covered with transparent layers of yellow, gradually letting the yellow paint appear visually.

The physical sense of seeing is highly regarded in today's Western world, but in old myths wise people often appear as blind. Their sight has been taken away from them in exchange for a different kind of vision. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida reflects on blindness in his book *Memoirs of the Blind*. Derrida refers to significant instances of creation myths that are associated with blindness. A tale from the ancient Greeks makes a particularly strong impression. It describes the origins of drawing. Pliny the Elder relates how the daughter of the potter named Butades, in a gesture of desperation, captures the memory of her loved one the night before he will leave for war by tracing his shadow on the wall. In this early historical account of drawing, light, blindness (in this case a turning away), memory, and loss are all components of the origin of art.

Could the time-consuming and repetitive application of thin layers of paint – made almost automatically as in a personal ritual performed over and over again, as Elggren describes his method – be understood in this way? The nearly blind act allows the colour to react on the paper, creating images beyond what we already know. When repeating the act of the painter, by closely examining each and every one of the twenty-plus exhibited paintings, you find yourself as a spectator filled with exalted feelings. You are in a perfect now, able to see the world anew.

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If Derrida finds blindness in Greek mythology, the Turkish author Orhan Pamuk, in his novel *My Name is Red*, finds blindness in the Middle Ages. Pamuk tells a story of love, passion for artmaking, and a rivalry between Western and Eastern ways of depicting the world. The love story is set among the Ottoman miniaturists working for the Sultan Murat III, and we learn that the painters were given the status of genius after painting in a small-scale over such an extensive period of time that they lost their sight. In the state of blindness, the painters reach a master level, depicting the world as it appears according to God, not as it appears in the sight of humans. History has taught us that ideas of wisdom and genius have been a way of excluding many and praising only a few. Still, Derrida's meditation on wise people and Pamuk's interest in artistic genius can be read as ways of grasping what it means to create, as a search for ways to reach beyond what is already known. That is a challenge every artist is free to accept.

The French author and film maker Marguerite Duras, known for staring human trauma in the face, guided my work with curating *Their happiest days were the dark and vast days of rain* in the summer of 2022. The title of the exhibition was borrowed from her book *L'été 80 [Summer 80]*, a collection of ten columns written in the summer months of 1980. Before being collected and published together as a book, the columns were commissioned by the French newspaper *Libération*. The assignment was simply formulated: write about what interests you and which does not appear in the regular news flow. Duras's columns contain sharp comments about the famine in Uganda, about Afghanistan (which is about to be erased from the world map), and about the shipyard workers' strike in Gdansk, Poland. Duras also weaves in thoughts about the weather at the French seaside resort where she resides during the summer. The weather degenerates into rain, storms, and heat. She not only watches the tourists and comments on the world situation, but she also observes a group of children and their summer camp leaders who play on the beach below her house.

In the columns, small things in everyday life are intricately intertwined with larger political events, just as they are connected in life itself. And just as life is, Duras does not give in to what is painful. She rather exposes the pain; stays at the point of pain and affirms feelings as if she were waiting and desiring an approaching apocalypse. In the affirmation of the catastrophe there is a paradoxical ease, a liberation. Because when everything is over, nothing more terrible can happen, and everything can just start anew. The cyclical and the repetitive are the author's most essential *modus operandi*. Duras sees events that took place in 1938 repeated in the summer of 1980. And today, we can see 1980 in 2024. Politics, abuses of power, and violence return in a devastating way. But there are also cyclones that return, and which, irrespective of how they tear up the seabed, reset the life in the ocean. Unlike much of the damage and destruction that man causes.

In *Summer 80*, Duras observes all of her surroundings and one of the children stands out. He sees and senses the unbearable uncertainty of existence. And with the help of fables, a young camp leader tells the child about the violent sides of life. The aging author, the child and the young summer camp leader give the reader different ways of relating to life. In the book the sentence "their happiest days were the dark and vast days of rain" describes the children. The sentence binds together light and darkness, and it is also how we can understand Elggren's series of paintings. It doesn't seek simple answers, it doesn't seek answers at all, but resides with light and darkness.

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