

BAROQUE

Matthias van Arkel

BAROQUE, from the Portuguese 'barocco' meaning 'irregular pearl or stone' is a style of architecture, music, painting, sculpture, poetry and other arts that flourished in Europe from late 16th century until the mid-18th.

The characteristics of Baroque are grandeur, pomposity and weight. The style uses contrast, movement, exuberant detail and deep colour. Baroque art has often been defined as being bizarre and freaked out.



Mini Sarkofag #111
Silicone rubber, 90x40x40 cm



Baroque Painting Pale
Silicone rubber, 58x54 cm

4



Baroque Painting Silver
Silicone rubber, 58x54 cm

5



Baroque Painting Strong L
Silicone rubber, 108x116 cm



The Infinite Motion Of Being

by Sara Paborn

How does one write about an artist whose art explores a world beyond words, without diminishing or limiting the possibilities of the work? How does one find a language for something that is already a tongue in itself?

Perhaps this text must become like one of Matthias van Arkel's own works of art; something allowed to grow organically. Unfolding over time. Grasping intuition firmly by the hand and stay present in the moment.

For this reason, I start from a different place. It is New Year's Eve 2022, in Palma.

A pale winter sun filters its light over the polished stone pavements in the centre of the old town. It is the first time I meet Matthias van Arkel.

He has travelled here from Stockholm to plan his upcoming exhibition "Baroque" at P Gallery. Naturally, I'm curious why he chose the title Baroque: the opulent, flamboyant style that dominated European art in the late 16th century.

At first glance, his work appears to have little connection with the Baroque.

But during conversations with Matthias over the next few days, I discover entries to his artistry. I have composed questions, although it is far from certain that Matthias

himself can answer them. An artist's motives are often hidden, even from the artist himself.

As we walk down to the sea, we approach the subject of creating, cautiously, as if facing a map of uncharted topography.

Water is important to Matthias van Arkel. He has recently bought a house at a completely different sea. After residing in New York for a number of years, he has now bought a house on Torö in Stockholm's outer archipelago.

"Right now I am in a process where I want to turn inward. I have been longing for a studio by the sea for a long time. I am curious about what can happen when I change the conditions for my work. Being by the sea, exposed, close to the weather and the seasons, sets things in motion. A purification bath on several levels."

Matthias van Arkel is internationally known for his ground-breaking works, consisting of strips of silicone rubber. The technique has made it possible for him to paint without any underlay. Neither glass, canvas or wall is needed to hold the painting together.

He describes the strips of silicone rubber as his extended brushstrokes, which he physically

lifts into the paintings. The strips can be cut, shaped, rolled up or as thin as drawn lines. The colours seem to both crowd and unfold at the same time. Sometimes it is the movement that comes into focus. Nothing seems to stand still in the paintings, things are ongoing. The result is often suggestive.

The first time I saw his work, I thought of Edvard Munch, but also of Paul Cezanne and Impressionism. There is something light and flowing that stands in sharp contrast to the silicone rubber, which rather brings my thoughts to something massive and industrial. I wonder how he works with colours?

"If you were to pick out certain colour combinations that I use, they would probably be perceived as not beautiful, but in the context they add something to the expression. What feels difficult, and not immediately aesthetically pleasing, can still be needed in a painting. Just like in life and in relationships." Similar colour tones recur and somehow increase the pace of the image. It creates a lingering, almost wistful element that I associate with Scandinavia.

But then there can also be sudden, drastic, almost obscene bursts of colour. Scratch varnish that interrupts the dull grey of dawn. Shocking orange and intrusive violet.

Matthias mixes his colours by pressing the silicone mass through the rollers of a converted pasta machine in his studio. A studio which, incidentally, is located in the same building that once housed the factory of legendary interior design company Svenskt Tenn, where Josef Frank was the main designer.

I wonder how Matthias process starts, how does it begin?
"Often with a diffused feeling: first of the format and then by the technique and style. Do I want to be high in colour or low in grey scale? And then the drama. The process is largely intuitive. A balance between control

and chance." Matthias says and continues. "I don't really like to over-intellectualize. My art is a sort of Rorschach-test, both for me and the viewer. The idea of what a painting can be stimulates me to constantly seek new ways of how the work can come about and look like. I have opted out of many of the hallmarks traditionally associated with painting. Still, I call almost all my works paintings, even those that others think are sculptures."

But then, what exactly is a painting?
"The painting hangs in its own paint. I want to go straight to the essence, work both with the body of the colour and the light of the colour. In a way, you could say that I let go of the respect for painting, but at the same time I'm really obsessed with it. I have spent a lot of time studying paintings around the world. I connect with the artist if I look at paintings really closely. I want to enter the paint, be totally enclosed by it. Therefore, I myself have made paintings that are sort of engulfing."

We talk about the difficulty an artist can face when people want immediate answers to questions such as: What does it mean?

The author Ernest Hemingway once grumpily answered that very question with:

"I don't do guided tours of my books!"
Approaching a painting or a novel can take time. It is not something to do in the blink of an eye. Meaning must be allowed to emerge. We might not know what it means, but it might mean something the more we take it to heart.

But is it possible to get some guidance and help as a viewer?
"If someone asks me to describe my paintings, I usually say that they're too shiny, too big, too thick and too much," smiles Matthias.
We sit down in front of the vast sea. Surfaces that spread out seem to have something to do

with his work. It is as if he wants the paint and movement to continue, to linger, to expand. Removing his shoes, Matthias walks down to the shore to dip his feet in the sea. As he returns, I ask how his artist career began.

"My father was a painter. I grew up with all that and painted with him from an early age. At the age of 15, I had an art teacher in elementary school, who took me under her wing. She even modelled for me, in a black, transparent body stocking! At 18, I entered as the youngest student at University College of Art, Craft and Design in Stockholm where I studied Art for five years. After that, I continued for two years at the Royal Institute of Art. I quickly became quite clever about the painting itself, too clever and deft, I thought. So I tried to create difficulties for myself. I painted with my knees, fingers and my left hand. That actually started with me breaking my right wrist, but I felt those paintings were more authentic. I have experimented a lot with what a painting can be. When I found the material plasticine, it took me further in my quest to be more tactile in my painting."

During an 2003 exhibition at Dunkers Kulturhus in Helsingborg, Sweden, a man appeared who turned out to be a rubber manufacturer. He said "You should try working in silicone rubber. Come to my factory!" Matthias took the man (Sven-Ingvär Olsson, owner of Helsingborgs Gummifabrik) at his word and from there his artistry took a new path, into a new expression. "Something happens with the colours in the three-dimensional. It moves, affected by light and depth," says Matthias. "The approach gave me exactly the resistance I was looking for."

After colouring the rubber strips in the pasta machine – they are as soft as clay at this stage – he begins to construct the painting in

custom-built rectangular sheet molds, whose number can be increased and combined as the work develops. The sheets are then hardened in an oven where the heat is gradually increased over ten hours. This gives the silicone rubber extremely high resistance and the process can be repeated if Matthias wants to continue further with the work.

"The narrow silicone tongues are like small paintings in themselves, inside the big painting. There is a composition in them, too. You could say that the big painting is the home of many small paintings. In the first years when I started working with silicone rubber, I often showed the backside of the works. I had less control over them. I think that was good."

I ask why he chose to name his P Gallery exhibition Baroque.

"I have always felt an attraction to that period. I like the furniture, love Bach's music and admire the frames more than the paintings. There is a kind of bloated three-dimensionality to them that I feel closely related to. Baroque is something a bit freaked out. And my paintings are freaked out."

In the old encyclopedia on my bookshelf, Baroque is described as an art movement that aimed to completely invade the viewer's senses with drama, opulence and extravagance. Magnificent visions, intense light, ecstasy!

There is undeniably a connection with Matthias' work. His tongues of colour bring to mind skirts, seashells, seaweed, organs.

I wonder if there is any quality in his work that he thinks has passed people by? He answers only after a long pause. Over the sea, it slowly starts to darken. A pink, fluorescent light.

"Perhaps the sensuality. There are many lips, skins, folds of different sorts in my pieces, and I work with my hands, no tools. It is also a tactile experience to touch my paintings,



Baroque Painting Purple
Silicone rubber, 116x162 cm

to feel them. The silicone is quite soft, not stiff and hard as many people think. When people visit the studio, I immediately see who can imagine owning a work of mine. It is a certain group that takes it in, with all the senses. They are curious, want to touch the paintings, become eager. You have to be brave to buy one of my pieces. When you hang them in a room, they affect the whole room, you see."

We get up, brush off the sand and slowly walk back along the promenade. The sky changes quickly. A drapery of thunder blue draws in over the sky. The cyclists are flaming silhouettes against the honey-yellow cloud veils behind the cathedral.

I think of Matthias' paintings waiting to be hung in the gallery at Placa Cort.

"It will be my first exhibition in Spain. P Gallery's premises are tight and beautiful. It will be an exhibition of high density – both in the individual pieces and in the selection of works. A concentrate, you could say. It will be exciting to meet a new audience."

I wonder what he has in mind going forward. What images come to him out there in the Swedish outer archipelago?

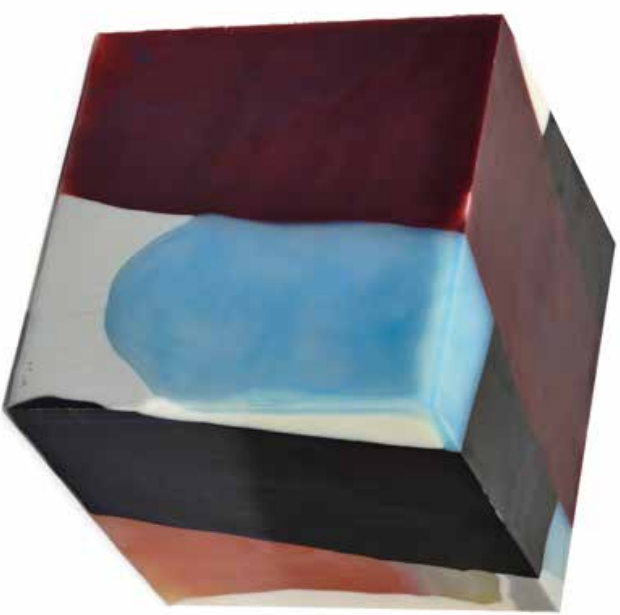
"I do not know yet. Maybe I'll start painting watercolours?" he laughs.

We walk in silence. Perhaps a different kind of work is hiding under the veil of silicone. Maybe the opulent and colourful strips are an armour of sort.



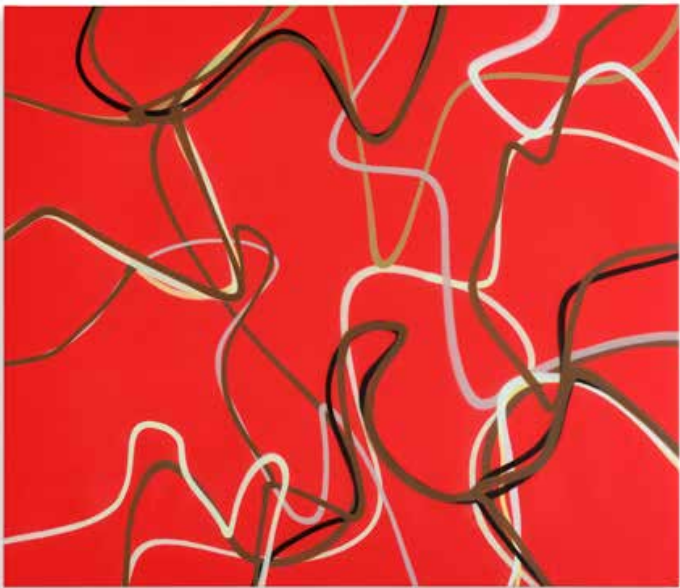


Container #53
Silicone rubber, 25x25x25 cm



Container #18
Silicone rubber, 25x25x25 cm





Spray Painting #1
Spray on canvas, 140x120 cm



Spray Painting #2
Spray on canvas, 140x120 cm



Stripe Painting
Silicone rubber, 58x54 cm

22



Stripe Painting
Silicone rubber, 54x58 cm

23



Stripe Painting
Silicone rubber, 58x54 cm



Stripe Painting
Silicone rubber, 58x54 cm



Paintings

Cover: *Baroque Painting Strong L*, detail

P. 8-9: *Flake Painting*, detail

P. 18-19: *Spray Painting #1*, detail

P. 26-27: *Stripe Painting Dark*, detail

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