

Mikael Sandblom and the Art of Perception

Sandblom titles his three paintings in this exhibition *Phosphenes*. A phosphene is most often that phenomenon we ‘experience’ with our eyes closed just after rubbing them vigorously, namely moving geometrical kaleidoscope-like patterns of light. This sort of experience can have other causes, but most importantly they are appearances that are generated internally rather than by anything we see in the outside world. Curiously, the pictures themselves are images of things we find in the world – stormclouds, buildings and lakes. So why the allusion to such private spectral imagery?

Sandblom holds that what we see looking out on the world is largely determined by ourselves, that is, internally. We do not passively perceive things. He describes the situation thus: “What we see in the world is not what is ‘objectively’ out there; most of it is a projection of ideas that we’ve formed or learned.” This echoes the eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s maxim: “Without sensibility no object would be given to us; and without understanding no object would be thought.”¹ In other words, the very act of seeing depends on our concepts. That is why in the rare cases when a person, who has been blind from birth, newly gains her vision she cannot *see* anything; rather she experiences a buzzing confusion.² Concepts in this sense are built up from the multiplicity of associations we make between the things we experience that allows us to navigate and operate in the world. For example, we learn to understand how a car two metres away from us is larger than the same car seen at fifty metres. In general we are constantly processing the raw visual data we collect (sense), that is, ordering it under our concepts – giving structure to our experiences, making them coherent.

The artist’s job, in a crucial sense, is to present a coherent image by exploiting the associations and concepts that structure what the viewer sees. That is indeed Sandblom’s principal task as he sees it. He aims, more exactly, to *play* with the viewer’s natural prejudices vis-à-vis how she sees the world. Things are often not how they first appear to the viewer. He explains: “For me, these pieces are an exercise in self-awareness of the assumptions and presuppositions that one inevitably carries around. It may be impossible to see the world as it truly and fully is, but it’s easy to fool oneself into thinking that you can.” To many this claim will seem to be overstated. While on occasion we can be fooled, as a rule we know what we see; that is to say, it *is* possible to see the world as it truly is. For example, I look out my window and see the various objects in my garden. There is no reason to suppose I am being fooled in any way.

But Sandblom’s claim concerns the essential nature of how we perceive things, about how our brains process visual data. On this topic the American philosopher Daniel Dennett gives the

¹ Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Werner S. Pluhar (trans.), Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co., 1996, A51/B75.

² See for example Patrick House’s ‘What People Cured of Blindness See’, *The New Yorker*, 28 August 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/people-cured-blindness-see>

example of a painting of a distant bridge in Dresden by the Venetian painter Bernardo Bellotto.³ At a normal viewing distance one will ‘see’ the bridge populated by various pedestrians. But when one walks up close to the painting the figures on the bridge dissolve into a collection of blobs of paint. Dennett explains that this experience demonstrates how limited our detailed perception of things really is.⁴ For most of our field of vision we can discern very little even though we are continually under the illusion that we can see everything in it as clear as day. Our brains do not literally fill in the details, rather we let it go and just assume they are there.

So like Bellotto, Sandblom exploits the illusions we all fall prey to when seeing things in the world. But for Sandblom these illusions are the central subject of his work. He aims to make the viewer aware of them. In *Mirror/Window*, for example, he is concerned with the way in which the transparency of glass under certain light conditions changes to reflectancy. And under very specific light conditions the glass becomes both transparent and reflective. The windows of a highrise office block merge with and reflect the sky at once. Sandblom is so fond of this motif that he chooses to display his images behind thick glossy acrylic. That way the viewing of the picture is disrupted by the gallery environment reflected slightly in the acrylic.

In his *Thunderstorm* we see a contrast between detailed stormclouds and their depiction as flat contours filled with geometrical patterns and parts of a weather map. The inclusion of the weather map points to the representational role of imagery. The image of dark clouds is but one representation of the weather phenomenon. The map, with its isobars etc., is another way of representing the same phenomenon. This fact highlights the conceptual nature of our perceptions noted earlier. There is an objective world which, according to Sandblom, we cannot directly know and there are our representations of it. It is these representational forms that we are aware of, that are the contents of our perceptions. They are, if you like, the phosphenes of our perceptual experiences in the sense that they are what we are *immediately* acquainted with.

By no accident the subject matter of many of Sandblom’s photographic/digital works is sky and water. These elemental features of nature are perceptually elusive insofar as they constantly change. They suggest a world in Heraclitean flux, that is, a world of impermanence. As Sandblom puts it: “The work reflects a world where nothing is solid or permanent. It’s our act of perception that brings elements into being and dissolves them again.” Indeed, the ancient Greek Heraclitus famously likened the world to a flowing river in his remark that “[o]n those who step into the same rivers twice, different and different waters flow.”⁵ Rivers by their nature flow and yet they are essentially constituted by the water in them. Therefore, Heraclitus is claiming, there is never an enduring river – what we call the same river is in fact constantly dissolving and reforming at each and every instant. It is ourselves that think of the river as unchanging, as a permanent thing. For Heraclitus this insight extends to the world in general. Nothing is permanent, all is in constant flux.

³ *Dresden from the Right Bank of the Elbe, above the Augustusbrücke*, 1747. Bellotto was the nephew and pupil of Giovanni Canaletto.

⁴ Daniel C. Dennett, TED talk, ‘The Illusion of Consciousness’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjbWr3ODbAo>

⁵ Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, London: Routledge, 1982, p. 66.

One might describe Sandblom as a latterday Heraclitean, someone who believes that the world itself is beyond our grasp – evanescent like Heraclitus’s river. In place of its ungraspability we furnish the structure to the visual data the world provides. That said, our brains cannot cope, especially, with all the visual data that moving water or sweeping clouds potentially provide. As Dennett also observes, we are not very perceptive to visual changes in general. We suffer to a large extent from change-blindness. So we are unable track all the rapid alterations in sky and water during storms and squalls.

In conclusion, when looking at Sandblom’s pictures one ought to keep in mind that none are meant to be viewed as single totalities, “resolved into a single image” as he puts it. It is best to think of these works as essays about how we perceive things in the world. His objective is to nudge you into thinking that while you may feel certain about how things appear to you, that certainty might itself be an illusion, a trick of the brain.

Hugh Alcock, 2018