

Up Against the Sky Fortress
Unveiling Himinbjörg from Hellissandur

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In the remote landscapes surrounding the tiny village of Hellissandur in Iceland, with its population of fewer than 400 inhabitants lies the majestic mythological Sky Fortress known as Himinbjörg. It's a place where imagination runs wild, as some envision its lofty position in the heavens in close proximity to the minuscule township. Amidst this enchanting setting, Peter Lang (b. 1965) emerges as the visual master of colour, a modern-day sorcerer whose wand is the paintbrush and colour line, and whose canvas is the world itself. The name 'Hellissandur,' translated directly, simply means 'The Sand of the Cave,' evoking a sense of mystery akin to Plato's allegorical Cave, penned in his work 'The Republic' around 380 BC, is a canvas waiting to be coloured, whether the cave has been abandoned or not.

Traversing continents and spanning vast time zones, Peter's quest for the very nature of colour has taken him to the farthest reaches of the earth. Venturing on colour hunting trips from the rugged cliffs of Patagonia with his portable studio to the snow-capped peaks of Iceland's Snafellsnes peninsula, he has pursued the elusive hues of light with unwavering dedication. Roughly a decade ago, he spent a year on the edge of this rugged, lava-covered headland, where he fell in love with the light, colour, and immense open spaces he discovered there. After numerous visits to the same location, Peter and his family decided to build a house around this spot, allowing them to reside in the land of extreme seasonal contrasts between light and darkness that he adores so much, any time of the year.

It was here, that he embarked on a profound odyssey, a pilgrimage of the spirit drawn by the siren song of light and colour, thereby echoing Jules Verne's trail-blazing science fiction adventure 'Journey to the Center of the Earth' in 1864, which started on top of glacier Snafellsjökull that looms eerily, and almost transcendently, above the tiny town of Hellissandur. A few hundred meters to the West, the village is surrounded by an ominous bastion of cliffs and black sands facing off the grim void of the North-Atlantic Sea for as far as the eye can see. Enchanted by the ethereal beauty, the Alpine Bavarians, Peter and his family, hence firmly planted their second roots in this land of myth and mystery, nestled far in the Arctic and nearly completely isolated from the rest of the world for over a millennium. Before that time, not even a mouse had set a paw on this ancient ground.

Surrounded by the age-old whispers of Bárður Snafellsas, a mythical guardian who roams the glacier-covered mountain of Snafellsjökull, Peter found inspiration amidst the rich tapestry of Icelandic folklore. Here, the veil between the seen and unseen is gossamer-thin, where trolls and gods dance in the twilight and weave themselves into the fabric of reality.

Bárdur, a descendant of a family of trolls who originated from Norway and settled in Snafellsnes, was known for wandering around in his grey cloak and hat, reminiscent of other legendary figures from Nordic mythology and J.R. Tolkien's stories, such as Odin the Allfather and Gandalf the Grey. Iceland is brimming with folklore and myths, blurring the distinction between human civilisation and nature. The belief in the existence of other creatures coexisting with the nation in another dimension is still peculiarly common in this land of ice and fire given our massive scientific Enlightenment. Drawing inspiration from figures as diverse as Gandalf - much of Tolkien's world having been drawn on Norse mythology recorded in Iceland during the 13th century - Nietzsche's emphasis on the individual's creative potential, and the art theories of Clement Greenberg's formalistic viewpoint, celebrating the inherent qualities and specificities of each artistic medium, rather than mimicking other art forms or representational techniques, Peter's paintings reflect a deep engagement with both the ancient wisdom of the past and the pioneering spirit of the present.

Like Gandalf, he is a wanderer in search of truth and beauty, navigating the vast landscapes of the mind with courage and curiosity. Like Nietzsche, he philosophizes about colour, probing the depths of human experience with a keen intellect and a fearless endeavour. And in the vein of Greenberg, he believes that the formal qualities of painting are central to the aesthetic experience of art and should be prioritised over narrative, symbolism, and any specific „tangible“ subject matter. In short, Peter Lang is a visionary artist pushing the boundaries of tradition and innovation to create works that challenge and inspire in equal measures.

During my many conversation with Peter, he often uses the bridge as a metaphor for his approach to painting. It represents the connection between what the artist observes and various processes that culminate as a visual statement on the canvas. It is a form of nonverbal communication, a silent language expressed through the pure means of colour. There is a profound understanding of the primal impact that colours exert on us. Colours exist as phenomena before any attempt can be made to articulate this immaterial substance. One could argue that colour precedes any description of the world, so if there is a landscape depicted in Peter's paintings, it is more about the emergence of the landscape through colour rather than a particular terrain per se.

His approach to painting is a masterful blend of classical techniques and innovative experimentation, in line with the notion of a modern bohemian alchemist weaving his spells on the palette. In other words, amidst his extensive travels and deep explorations, Peter's paintings stand as a testament to themselves, as far as it goes, evoking a sense of wonder and mystery that transcends any pin-point external influences. They are not mere reflections of the world but portals to other realms, where the boundaries between imagination and reality blur and where dreams take flight on the wings of colour.

What is intriguing about Peter's attitude and his painting method is how he skillfully intertwines classical painting techniques with fresh and highly resourceful applications. His research and study of colour pigments are extensive, as he approaches the fusion of chromatics on the canvas by building up, deconstructing and rearranging them. Unlike most contemporary artists who use pre-mixed colours from ready-made mass-produced tubes, Peter blends the pigments directly with the oil on the canvas. In this way, he resembles a latter-day Western shaman, experimenting with his own extensive personal library of pigments in search of the magic that unfolds in the process of painting.

Why does this matter in relation to his self-imposed artistic mission? Why revert to the time-consuming process of grinding and mixing pigments, forsaking the convenience of pre-manufactured color tubes? There are numerous answers to this question, with the concepts of ‚distinctiveness‘ and ‚authenticity‘ chief among them. If one fails to grasp the significance of this artistic choice, one also misses out on experiencing the exceptional quality it imparts to the artwork. Nothing is more valuable than the Singularity.

Despite Peter’s extensive search for inspiration, one can argue that his paintings exist as entities in their own right, alluding in an endless, strange loop to their own unique, inherent properties. There is a certain aspect of his attitude that resonates strongly with „art pope“ Clement Greenberg’s theory on painting, but the tremendous effect he had on his own cultural epoch in the wake of WW2 managed to relocate the entire contemporary art scene from Paris to New York in the late 1940s. In his essay ‚Modernist Painting,‘ Greenberg writes: „The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but to establish it more firmly within its area of expertise. Just as Kant used logic to define the limits of logic, withdrawing much from its old jurisdiction, yet leaving logic even more secure in what remained to it.“

Overall, Peter’s exploration of colour and his unconventional approach to painting demonstrate a deep passion for his craft. His work bridges the gap between tradition and innovation, resulting in captivating and thought-stimulating creations. In this latest exhibition of his, *Up Against the Sky Fortress*, Peter invites us to delve even deeper into the realms of myth and magic, where the burning rainbow bridge Bifrost meets the heavens. It is a place where imagination and understanding converge, where gods and mortals mingle in a dance of light, darkness and shadows in the middle of „The Twilight Zone.“

Every Heartbeat is Captured by the Colours

As previously stressed, Peter is captivated by the sensation of colour and the emotional impact it evokes in the viewer. When faced with Peter Lang’s paintings, one is confronted with a real sense of colour relationships, often depicted through fine lines crossing the picture plane horizontally.

What exactly are we looking at? Is there a landscape hidden beneath these dense colour fields, or are they abstract forms devoid of any connection to landscape or figuration? It could be that the sky is meeting the earth or the sea, depending on how the colour of light is captured by the atmosphere. It is the presence of colour that allows us to see the colour between the lines, the strong and intricate interactions of colour harmony and dynamics. In a sense, we are witnessing an ensemble of colour tones rather than musical ones. Peter’s technique thus resembles a conductor guiding an orchestra. With a deft hand, he applies pigments to the canvas, creating a symphony of colour that spills forth like notes on a musical staff.

The paintings elicit a laid-back visceral response, drawing the viewer into the celestial spheres of hues and all their innumerable nuances. Each Shooting line of colour creates a tapestry of colour relationships, where dense threads of colours intersect to form new constellations, offering the spectator a moment of repose and introspection away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. (...)

Peter applies the pigment to the canvas with a line, but what matters most is how the pigment spreads out from the shooting wound caused by the line, creating vapours in the space between, much like the silent part in a musical composition. In one of our many conversations, Peter mentioned that living in a forested area made him more interested in the space between the trees than the trees themselves. The open space that we refer to as the background or negative space becomes the positive in his work. Peter explores the field of colour, pushing and pulsating space with colour and their relationships. The trees act as bars in a cell, blocking the expansive openness that is free from any association. Colour becomes his manifestation of being a part of this world, not a separated or isolated viewer, but someone who lives in and communicates with this world.

Considering this, it is no wonder that Peter is intrigued by the Snafellsnes peninsula, a place devoid of any trees, where one can observe the vastness of the ocean meeting the sky in all its variations. Here, he is in direct contact with the primordial world, the entire cosmos, perhaps even the multiverse for all we know, with little interference from any civilisation and the planet prior to vegetation. It is reminiscent of the story of creation in the Snorra Edda, the chief source of Norse mythology, where the gods threw the galactic giant Ymir into the big void of Ginnungagap, thus creating the world we know, the world of flesh and blood - „Blot und Drang“ as the Germans call it.

Peter's paintings exhibit a profound kinship with the works of Caspar David Friedrich, the foremost exponent of Northern Romantic landscape painting in early 19th-century Germany, particularly evident in pieces like „Monk by the Sea“ from 1809 which embraces a pantheistic perspective of the divine subtly interwoven into the vast expanse of nature. Friedrich's oeuvre was primarily concerned with the contemplation of nature, his symbolic and anti-classical compositions intended to evoke a subjective, emotional response by juxtaposing the natural world with the remnants of the past and enigmatic figures turned away from the viewer, serving as proxies for human contemplation. By portraying individuals in a diminished perspective against huge, expansive landscapes, thereby reducing them to a scale that emphasizes their metaphysical significance, Friedrich immediately counters that message by reminding us of their almost pathetic insignificance in relation to the surrounding world and the enigmas that lie beyond.

In Peter's paintings, one can observe the fading or rather the obliteration of the human figure, the very measure of all things during the Renaissance, following the tradition from Caspar David Friedrich and his British kindred spirit and contemporary William Turner to painters like Mark Rothko, whom Clement Greenberg exalted as exemplary painters along with Jackson Pollock and their Abstract Expressionist colleagues. As with Mark Rothko, there is no longer any real distinction between solidity and emptiness in Peter's works. Colour possesses an immense presence independent of any association. Yet his affinity with Caspar David Friedrich is even greater. Like him, being profoundly earth-connected, Peter's art transcends mere representation, capturing the ineffable mystery of the natural world and our fragile, fractured, and fleeting existence within it when confronted with „the Sublime and the Beautiful“, as the Anglo-Irish philosopher, Edmund Burke, wrote back in 1757.

Given all of this, it is no wonder that Peter finds inspiration in the untamed beauty of the Snafellsnes peninsula. Here, amidst the rugged cliffs and endless horizon, he feels a connection to the primal forces of nature. In this place largely untouched by time, he discovers echoes of ancient myths and legends, where the boundaries between reality and imagination blur.

The title of this latest exhibition of his, *Up Against the Sky Fortress*, provides a glimpse into the expressive insights of the artist. Himinbjörg also happens to be the name of a Visual Art Center and private art studios located on the middle toe of the Snafellsnes peninsula, a place where the worlds of imagination and friendship can meet, interact and join forces. However, beyond the tangible settings and artistic communities lies a deeper source of inspiration for Peter. For him, the true canvas lies in the wordless landscapes and vistas of the Snafellsnes peninsula. These landscapes serve as the backdrop behind his canvases, the very foundation upon which his colour palette is developed and his artistic vision is conveyed.

In Himinbjörg, referring to the celestial abode of Heimdallur, the god who guards Bifröst, the rainbow bridge that connects Midgard (the world of humans) with Asgard (the realm of the gods), Peter finds solace and inspiration. While Heimdallur keeps watch for any signs of impending danger, especially during the events leading up to Ragnarök, the end of the world in Norse mythology, or Götterdämmerung as the Germans have named it, Peter has discovered a sanctuary for his art, a place where dreams take flight amidst the swirling mists and ethereal light of the past and present.

With each Colour line, Peter beckons us to embark on our own journey of discovery, inviting us to see the world through the kaleidoscopic lens of his imagination. His paintings transcend mere images; they are windows into our own minds and flesh, reflecting the boundless beauty and complexity of „The Human Abstract“. Through his art, Peter Lang encourages us to embrace the wonder of existence and revel in the infinite possibilities of the creative spirit. It is perhaps no coincidence that this contemporary wizard of colour found himself associated with Himinbjörg, finding a fondness for the burning bridge Bifröst and discovering his favourite spot in the center of its awe-inspiring passage. Yet, he stands not alone; we all join him there. If you have yet to realize it, the time has come to open your eyes. Even more.

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