

Objektiv

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Scree 1 and Scree 2, installationphoto from Else Marie Hagen at Galleri K

EXPLORING THE UNPREDICTABLE

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For her works shown in the exhibition *Falling Lilac* at Galleri K, photographer Else Marie Hagen got active both behind and in front of the camera to strike a balance between abstraction and materiality. *Objektiv* met with her at the gallery in the show's final week in December.

Interview by Lisa A. Bernhoft-Sjødin

Lisa A. Bernhoft-Sjødin: What ideas are you exploring here?

Else Marie Hagen: Essentially, with this new body of work, I'm curious to see what happens in the transitional moment of taking the shot. It's a way of prolonging a moment, to which I think photography is especially suited. Somewhat blind-siding video, it's not just freezing an instant in time, but also lengthening the transitional moment between start and end.

LBS: The most prevalent photographic technique in these new works is the way in which you've captured the objects. The exposure time is lengthened while the objects are in motion. The pictorial end result is a blurred image.

EMH: The initial work title was *The Hand*, which was a constant reminder to be hands-on. I wanted to be a part of the action once the scene was set. The objects aren't the signifier in these images: it's the state they're in, the very instability captured by the lengthened exposure time.

LBS: The images *Scree (1)* and *Scree (2)* are two of my favourite works in this exhibition. Here one sees the blurred action of someone throwing what one assumes is a tower of cardboard boxes from a desk onto the floor.

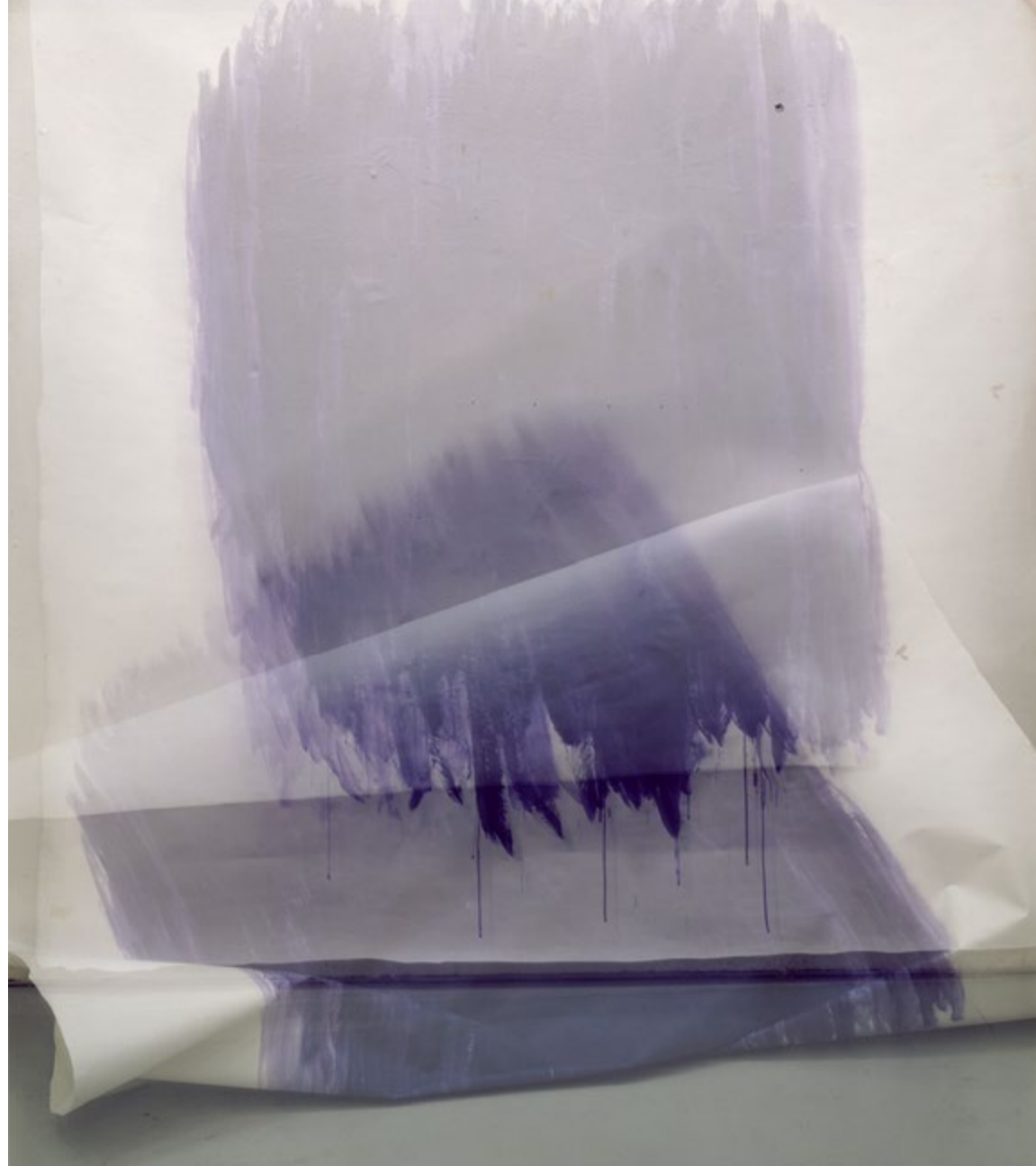
EMH: When photographing, I experience a certain distance from the motif through the camera lens; there's a kind of presence that slips away. I've tried to diminish that distance by being part of the action on both sides of the camera. I don't know whether to call the action of *Scree (1)* and *Scree (2)* destructive or constructive, but regardless, it causes a collapse into something indistinguishable.

LBS: This idea, of an image collapsing and thus becoming, let's call it, softly unreadable, is a reoccurring idea in your work - though never this pronounced.

EMH: In previous processes I've started working with a clear notion about how to present the central idea. In *Falling Lilac* I wanted to explore the unpredictable, thus inching towards the potential of an open situation. Now, this is true for any image in some degree - I'm merely trying to underline this openness, though I think its importance as mediator is underrated. Openness as a quality is part of why images perforate barriers.

LBS: How so?

EMH: At its best, pictorial language offers both analytical and emotional levels of reading, and makes room for both personal and collective aspects of understanding. It lends these areas elasticity binding them together. Perhaps clarity is not an aim, on the contrary the flexibility of pictorial language might be seen as a mode of protest. However, the way we communicate visually tends to lack proper reflection on what it is we're seeing. I do understand that in order to convey a message the content needs to be clear. However, this creates certain fixed codes, leaving us with just a few ways of reading a picture. I want my work to resist that - not to be unreadable, but to stimulate other ways of reading visual content.



Falling Lilac, Else Marie Hagen, 2015

This process was entered into with an open mind, to see if I could detach and re-evaluate the elements of an image. Take the piece *Falling Lilac* as an example. The lilac-painted paper has a surface that becomes a form as it falls. The colour is also an element, as are the hands that put the lilac into motion. Both provide a placement and scale, body and movement. These elements appear separate and tangled at the same time, trying to form one single image, but in an inexhaustible way.

LBS: Your active presence in this process is contrary to some of the reviews of the exhibition, which state that you're being elusive, and in a passive state, that we're experiencing your work as a withdrawal into abstraction.

EMH: In general, to see abstraction as passive is to conceive of abstraction as less real. This idea is hard to follow. Abstraction presents itself with an openness that eludes clarity, and demands an active mode of interpretation from its viewer. The challenge is to put into words that which has no obvious codes to go by. And here's where the danger of elusiveness lies: when the viewers or the mediators can't or have no interest in activating this openness or vagueness, the work ends up being deemed as irrelevant to the current discourse. As a viewer, one has to participate in the situation presented, and track time, space, surface and form. This is very much how we move through our daily lives. Though a lot of this extraordinary levels.

LBS: Also, you're very concrete within the images where movement seem to take centre stage. By that I mean, the occasional details of daily life on the studio wall, like screws, cracks, paint marks and plugs, create solid materiality in the works. As a punch line, the image printed on canvas titled *Portrait* alters one's perception of the room with its motionless and detailed surface. There's a space presented here too, through the vague figure deep in the image. How do materiality and abstraction work together here?



Portrait, Else Marie Hagen, 2015

EMH: In the otherwise fluid body of work, *Portrait* is different. The canvas surface is detailed and the figure within it a potential emergence that the viewer can choose to fulfil. Ambivalence works in two ways here: an empty canvas is relatively abstract on an art-historical level, but when pictured in a highly detailed fashion it becomes hyper-realistic. The figure, on the other hand, is hesitant and here you actively have to choose to include his presence as part of the motif.

The rest of the images follow suit with regards to detailed materiality, such as screw holes and wall structure. These create a basis for action and movement to unfold and become visible.

LBS: The image brings together the idea of an evasive transitional state, and forces us to find more ways of reading images. Another mode of materiality is the wall in the work *Proposal*. It seems stubborn in its realness, cutting into the room, though similar to the materials in the images and the whiteness of the walls surrounding it. The rectangular shape of the exhibition space is made curvier, challenging the viewer to take a different route through the exhibition. How, I think, it speaks to your initial idea is that it lends materiality to the other works, i.e. lends them value, by mirroring them through its concreteness.

EMH: Precisely. The wall has a content related to the other works, but in a materialised and static way. It's presentation adds the very gallery space to the discussion, turning the room around a little. Returning to what you said about value: how we see value is a question I've asked myself while working on the current exhibition. The elements that have the most obvious effect seem to be what we believe valuable, though there are also other factors that hold meaning. My hope is that these works create a detectable friction between the elements of an image. To me, these elements are vital concurrences, where modes of understanding are formed anew.



Proposal, Else Marie Hagen, 2015, photo: Øystein Thorvaldsen