

Lesley Bunch

Interviews Marius von Brasch

LB: You have a background in literature, with an MA in German Literature from the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University Frankfurt. You also worked for many years as a psychotherapist, and have studied music. At what point, and why, did you decide to become a full time artist, and to what extent does your prior experience inform your practice?

MvB: What seemed to me indecisiveness and inconsistency for a long time—until I decided to become a full-time artist at the end of my forties—turned out, in hindsight, as a strangely winded path that allowed me to approach key points of my interest from diverse angles and develop slowly and quite independently as a painter.

As a child, music was all I wanted to learn. Looking at the intricate labyrinths of classical scores and learning to play them, understanding the structure of dynamics and what is essentially dance in every piece (a body-mind moving, trusting the energy that moves it), thrilled me and influenced ways of understanding writing and painting at a later stage. As a teenager, I realised I was not made for a career as a musician. Through my sister-in-law, an artist, I discovered literature. I started writing stories and poems that would evolve, without planning a plot, during the process, similar to cohesive musical improvisations. This process intrigued me with its tension between intellect, feeling and intuition. What ‘agency’ besides my conscious invention could be involved? The question has guided my art practice for many years, and the tension, which feels somehow imperative, has remained a trigger for making art.

I was lucky to get accepted for an apprenticeship in publishing at one of the best contemporary publishers then, and I aimed to train to become an editor. My subsequent German Literature and Philosophy studies were part of this, and I worked for several years free-lance. However, in the meantime, I continued writing and started painting in the early 1980s, again encouraged by my sister-in-law, who, against all odds and the fact that I was a latecomer, believed I had something worth developing. Her works, mainly in ink on paper, were influenced by the Informel movement and elements of Zen.

Fascinated by following non-scripted processes (and supported by observational drawing) that would almost always result in a somewhat meaningful image for me, I approached a critical understanding from a psychoanalytic point of view, highly influenced by French Postmodernist writers like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. However, this was questioned by internal shake-ups and powerful dreams and visions I had throughout my life, which have been at least as influential as critical reflection. The latter, in a complementing way, often helped me properly integrate them. They are

difficult to pinpoint and somewhat wrongly framed by the term 'spiritual' as I don't experience any divisions between matter/body or political life and this otherness that might feel like 'spirit'.

It helped or challenged me to explore and trust a painting process that starts from 'nothing,' from some inferior poetic scrawls, opening a conversation with or negotiating what emerges and seems to have its own life. Thus, the process might have a visceral input, yet I'm uncomfortable with lopsided appraisals of 'guts', probably because of what they let loose during the Nazi regime. My education in Germany had a robust anti-fascist strand, which stayed with me.

Looking at my evolving painting practice, it's obvious that I fell in love with Cy Twombly's work (and remained faithful!).

Like my early stories, the emerging paintings dealt with transformation (which is the emergence of a piece of art as such in my practice), with zones of fear and oppression and the freedom from them, depression and the presence of light or the potential of the new in darkness, and one's relationship to the Other: subjects that have remained at the core of what I have been doing throughout my life and that, in terms of painting, can take on all kinds of moods and colours.

The thesis I wrote for the MA in Frankfurt navigated around these themes from some theoretical angles.

There is a thread – I wasn't aware of it until thinking about your question above - leading from my own experiences with depression and fear, back to witnessing and living with my mother's fragile mental health. It left deep impressions on me, my brothers, and my father, a Jungian psychoanalyst. I loved my mother, a colourful, paradoxical and inspiring woman, and it is probably true that as a very young child, I wished to make her see the beauty in darkness and the unknown, the freedom as the other of fear, which she couldn't see.

However, the ambivalence between interior darkness as either lack or abundance and the shifts from one to the other (an intriguing axis in French Postmodernism) also goes beyond my background. Depression, fear, lack of hope, and political powerlessness are part and symptoms of cultural and political everyday life and are realities with societal consequences.

It is a vast subject, and I feel that as an artist, I can develop constellations and questions rather than answers (which I don't have), can work with and allow this somewhat invisible ambivalence to become visible and shine.

That I became a psychotherapist might be a consequence, but it was also the result of having to confront painful creative blocks and a need to deepen my coming out, mainly to myself, as a gay man in my mid-twenties. A longer process finally led me into training as a Gestalt- and Body-Therapist, which suited my approach to making art well and allowed me an embodied approach to working with

the psyche in the real world. From the start, I applied this to painting in workshop modules and taught others ways of intuitively accessing their painting potential.

I wrote (in fact, rewrote three times) a novel at this time, an experimentally structured text about coming out. The frustration about publishers' rejections made me think about the medium, the somewhat abstract distance a text, hidden in a stack of paper sheets, holds. Painting became my medium of choice because of its immediacy, the confrontational, seductive power of colours, the endless possibilities of invention and invitations to hide and seek in visuals, and the materiality of the process involved.

After working therapeutically with clients for fourteen years, I became a full-time artist because I felt I had genuinely tried to help others and could now risk making my pressing dream a reality. At 48 years old, I was accepted for an MA at Winchester School of Art and continued my studies a year later into a practice-based PhD with the late and deeply appreciated Beth Harland as my tutor and supervisor. Combining painting and philosophical thinking, or practising painting as a mode of sensuous and critical research, felt (and still feels) exhilarating.

The previous shifts from one professional identity to another, not knowing where I belonged and living a strange overlap of fluid identities, started to make sense. A new sense of what transformation could mean opened up: there is no definite identity to be achieved but an openness for confusing, contradicting impulses to becoming other in time – which is the subject of (almost) all of my paintings.

LB: It was wonderful to visit you in your studio last summer on the Isle of Wight and to finally see so many of your paintings first-hand. Among many things, we talked about unconscious filters that shape our perception, imagination and memory. How do you explore these filters through the process of painting?

MvB: Thank you. It was so special to have you here and observe how you engaged with the paintings—you discovered and followed minute details and pathways like in your own work! The answer to this question continues from the previous one.

It might not be visible initially, but my main motive for painting and going public with my work is political. As an artist, I have the freedom and task to work with complexities that shape life and perception and show the difficulties involved in loving or hating indiscriminately, in the spiel of either-or, of polarities in action. I need to use a finely tuned navigation system for what is invisibly at work, on a subcutaneous level of my environment, literally in nature around me (I live on an island) and societally.

I have had, from childhood on, a sensitivity for the 'presence' of people, also of animals, and nature, which translates in my experience into individual and shifting energies, colours, moods, and feelings.

It helps me discern from surface appearances and makes me aware of how unreliable first impressions, lopsided judgments, and descriptions of people, their circumstances, and perceptions are. The plasticity of my perception (which, I guess, is pretty universal), shifting from one judgement to another by getting fed another piece of missing information, invites me to potentially look at the world through a kaleidoscope of allegations, projections, and fantasy – unreliable but still the generally accepted foundation of communication. Gilles Deleuze distrusted any exchange named ‘communication’ because it leans toward abbreviated misinformation, which serves commodification and administration of individuals and their potential.

Is painting communication? I aim to share truthfully how I see, observe, and detect the ‘world.’ When I talk about painting unconscious filters, I make myself a study object and acknowledge the confusion that is part of such truthfulness. I let the work be tinted by filters of coloured, vibrating, pre-verbal feeling, which interrupt representation, then aim to integrate this interruption into the formal structure of the painting. It becomes its rhythmic backbone. Working with such balancing acts of unmediated and meditated elements reflects quite accurately my experience of everyday life, which I want to share: unpredictable, very difficult-to-represent ways of interaction, being part of inside/outside networks, in flux, continuously exposed to the dynamics of time and events.

This justifies also making it impossible for the viewer (who has a title of the work, though), to monopolise what’s going on in the painting. Instead, I aim to turn the dilemma of confusion into an affirmation of the freedom to follow threads in a complex image, to feel and reflect.

I received comments on the erotic or sexual energy of my paintings, and I was happy to hear this. Passions and energy light up unconscious filters and, hopefully, my paintings as they encompass *relating* in the broadest sense: through bodies, a desire for life, or even a flash of boundless love. Balancing the power of colours, feeling/affect, and imagination with the formal structure and context could be another type of communication, one that honours the presence of poetic remainders each individual holds.

LB: Your paintings appear to hang in a constant state of flux and transformation between polarities; polarities of light and dark, warm and cold, and of elemental forces. Figures and fragmented narratives constellate these polarities.

Why do you, at the same time, insert frames into your paintings, where a different space is demarcated, sometimes with a hint of figure, happening, or abstract form? Do you see these spaces as relating to our perception of time, are they a ‘crystallisation’ of the present, or do you see them as something else?

MvB: As already mentioned, the overlapping of narratives and emerging and vanishing forms and figures function like markers of an augmented moment in time, one that connects to the broad theme of transformation and change and its segments. Each painting counts for or *is* such a moment with some deeper, timeless layers, or at least those that feel timeless or internal duration to me.

Thinking about this, I remember my early obsession with Virginia Woolf's texts, especially *The Waves* and *The Lighthouse*, where the simultaneity of time layers works wonders; the same is true for some Modernist music.

When you perceive elemental forces in my works, you refer to another aspect of timelessness in time: the symbolic forces of fire, water, air, and earth. For a long while, these forces were seen as actively building and shaping the world and are still used to describe specific human character traits or emotions of an archetypal quality - and when I say archetypal, it interests me what this universal quality signifies at this moment, not back in time. Imagining the elements in this sense evokes intensity and colours in me: mercurial movements, hazy and shimmering stillness, bright ruptures of light, wrathful currents, the rhythm of breathing, the heat of red and a soundless, restful solidity. The elements also build polarities, but the dynamics of fire and water attract me the most as a painter. Making both coexist and interact instead of letting them extinguish each other is a fantastic challenge in terms of colour and grades of intensity.

As you say, there are demarcated spaces in the plane of the painting, frames within the frame that the painting embodies itself. I became aware of the significance of 'framing' while working intensely with the illuminations for *Splendor Solis*, a series of early Renaissance visuals accompanying a treatise on alchemy. It might be necessary to introduce them here a little before returning to the question of the frame in the frame in painting.

Alchemy, as I understand and appreciate it, examines what a 'process' as such could be about, the effects qualities of one substance can have on another, the working of opposite dynamics, and the transformation and extraction of something that is valued as minor, overseen, and abject into something of (its finally acknowledged, transformed) value.

What has been declared as inferior is probed for its inherent potential, exposed to operations (metals were, in the language of early alchemists, 'tortured' with acidic solutions and heat to approximate them to gold) and lifted into a form that, symbolically, would provide a remedy for healing, eternal life and rejuvenation. Although looking at the parallel between alchemical vessels in which such a remedy is present and the grail holding Christ's blood, this idea made alchemists vulnerable to persecution, which explains the rarity of circulating manuscripts and the 'hermetic,' sometimes even encrypted nature of their works. Alchemists could count on the protection of high-powered rulers interested in the newly rising fusion of mystical and practical philosophy of European, Jewish, and Arabic backgrounds. Otherwise, they often enough ended up tortured and killed.

Looking at the significance of intermediate stages of change (the blackness of lead would turn white, then possibly take on the scintillating hues of peacock feathers, finally turn into a desired vivid red), the association with death and rebirth, even multiple stages of dying away of what had been prevalent for something new, of repetitions and their differentiations are evident - if one accepts that these operations were undertaken simultaneously on the level of matter and spirit or psyche. Engaging with

alchemical imagery from the 16th century today involves revisiting 'nature' through filters of enchantment. Planetary 'gods,' nature and the human body corresponded so that the metals, derived from subterranean veins of ore and undergoing procedures of transformation to 'gold,' corresponded to human temperaments and plants, all equally ruled by universal forces.

Perceiving the 'world' as the interconnection of life and consciousness reminds of the environment's vulnerability with a somewhat surprising affective power.

Back to the frames: the intermediate stages of alchemical procedures appear in *Splendor Solis*, imaginatively put into landscapes and figures expressing what the metal/psyche is undergoing in explicitly framed form. The frames are filled with elements of nature, flowers, leaves, and animals, which again refer to certain corresponding qualities. Although such frames are custom in early illuminations, we also find frames within those frames that hold separate information, referring to historical or biblical events or differentiating what happens around them in other ways. These frames contain what is an elusive process, and although the viewers are invited and can't avoid seeing, they are reminded that there is something different, something they need to keep their distance from. Their form, rectangular, bordered spaces relate to something I read and never forgot by Mircea Eliade in his book on the Sacred and the Profane. He remarks that the 'sacred' hinges on a designated space declared sacred by intention and manifested as a boundary space for otherness to appear. It is thus an invitation for the *arrival* of something to complement what is happening outside of it, which in the context of alchemy would be the agent of transformation and, I feel, relates also to painting and its unpredictable intuitive element.

A canvas can feel like a sacred space because I am inviting and dealing with what I don't know yet and am open to receiving, inventing and working with. Derrida shows how frames provide containment, while what is contained inside is simultaneously organised by what remains outside the margins. Pushing the energy a painting holds virtually beyond and out of the frame, negating the frames' control, and inserting random mini frames holding indefinite, even illegible content belong to this dynamic.

Some of the points discussed here point to religious or 'spiritual' events, and I must be clear about this. On the one hand, I keep decidedly away from religious frameworks because of the inherent destructive and anachronistic hostility towards body, matter, women/the feminine and diversity; on the other hand, I see the relevance of symbols and myths which incorporate poignantly essential questions about the human condition and its desire for transcendence. I am conscious of this desire, which touches on how I approach subjects like time, layers and invisibility, dreams, otherness, etc. However, I aim to reinterpret and analyse the dynamics of certain symbols - without aiming for answers - in a painterly way.

I could learn a lot about symbols and worlds within worlds from an unassuming, committed and free-spirited teacher, Jenni Shell, with whom my partner and I studied Kabbalah, an experiential

exploration of the Tree of Life, for eleven years; and one of the most critical insights was how little I know for sure.

LB: You sometimes use digital projections of *Splendor Solaris* to commence work on a canvas. These take the form of fragmented copies, which anchor themselves, and are then transformed in your original painting. Why merge the two, fragmented digital copy and original, in one work?

MvB: When, while working towards my MA, I first discovered *Splendor Solis* and decided to work with it, I made A3 photocopies of the illuminations, cut random segments out with a pair of scissors, and glued collages with these fragments that would reflect themes the *Splendor* talks about. It was important to me not to emulate the ancient images or create pastiches but to invent new and contemporary ones based on transformation. From there, it was only a small step to dissect digital files, lift out random fragments and assemble them into a new file, which I would project onto a canvas. The projection would provide a first point of departure for painting, tracing lines or forms and then, step by step, inventing a new painting from the marks and emerging form on the canvas, alluding to the ancient subjects in my contemporary language. The diptych *Preceding / Forgotten Spaces* (2010 – 11), fortunately held in the collection, is such a work.

The subject of the frames in *Splendor Solis* was at the centre of these works. Looking closer at how the *Splendor* is structured, I found that the chronology of the old illuminations, a reliable order of alchemical processes, must be unstable based on my own experiences of developments, including those of a painting.

Any developments include setbacks, unexpected leaps, and interfering layers of past, present, and future; the orderly series leading to a reliable result, rebirth and the vague ‘stone of philosophers’ (the vermilion red piece of metal symbolising the reborn sun or soul or a quintessence) seem idealised. Could the emphasis on the frames be so distinct because of the inherent instability of the process? These thoughts encouraged me to tumble, fragment and reassemble fragments of the illuminations, breaking up the frames that promised a secure containment.

The primary agent in alchemy is Mercury, both the elusive liquid metal and the messenger God who can, as the only Olympian, access heterogenous worlds, heaven, human sphere and underworld without hindrance. The mercurial, fugitive quality reminded me of working with digital media, the sudden appearances and vanishings of images, the hidden layers of a digital realm (Manovich speaks even about the digital unconscious).

At this time, I shifted from acrylic painting to oil, mainly because of its slowness and connection to history and because I simply love the smell of resins and oils. Making an oil painting based on fragmented, digitally projected elements of ancient alchemical imagery felt like an exciting way of thinking about and making an ‘original’ that is compromised in its uniqueness by the digital input and

its mode of dissemination. The axis between the hermetic, hidden, history of rare illuminations and the disseminating medium of the digital became part of my practice-based PhD research.

LB: Is your use of colour in any way inspired by alchemy?

MvB: Yes, without a doubt, I instantly fell in love with the pure, radiant colours of the *Splendor* illuminations. Put differently, I could relate to them instantly because they felt akin to the colours I am drawn to most of the time. They signify critical stages in alchemical processes—black, white, yellow, red—and show affective meanings. In the initial phase of the process, black (lead ruled by the god of restriction, Saturn) is associated with the darkening of the Sun, or the Egyptian god Osiris' journey through the underworld for 12 hours: a journey demanding trust, loss of identity, sight and control. Black becomes loaded with associations, feelings and atmosphere. White appears to signify a 'clean slate' waiting for activation, achieved when red will become visible as the rising sun or dawn (another important alchemical work refers directly to this, *Aurora Consurgens*). This desired outcome relates to making vermilion, the fusion of sulphur and mercury producing a spontaneous gaseous red and then suddenly precipitating as a lump of radiant red pigment. Because of its unmediated, spontaneous action, vermilion became venerated and an analogy for the gift of rejuvenation or achieving the rebirth of the sun (in Osiris' case, coming back from the underworld). In representations of Osiris, green signifies the return of plant life, new shoots and growth, which is easy to get. The colouring of landscapes and intricate details in the illuminations influenced my painting (especially the depiction of robes with their symbolic references as for the Hermaphrodite and the so-called 'Ethiopian' who rises from muddy earth and encounters his winged counterpart, a female with a star above her head).

In different ways, Poussin's later canvases feature landscapes populated by mythological figures, which function, like in the *Splendor*, as conceptual ideas. I see a parallel to *Splendor* and often look at both for ideas for my paintings concerning how to develop or modify land- or 'inscape' elements.

LB: When I first saw your painting *Rebis* (2020) I was drawn in, and felt unable to speak for some time. This painting is dense with detail, abstract and figurative, folding into and back out of adjacent detail. Fragments reveal themselves slowly, and I imagine, more at later viewing. This painting is full of surprises. Are you, yourself, sometimes surprised by connections when you step back from a painting?

MvB: Thank you for this fantastic feedback! Yes, I'm often surprised. It may be the pay-off for not planning too much and having only a broad idea of what I want to work on.

In the case of *Rebis*, I knew I wanted to make another painting about the Hermaphrodite, a significant personage in alchemy, a stage where male and female fall together and build one. The alchemical term *rebis* derives from Latin and means 'two things'. But what falls together, apart from depictions

of a female and a male body, or matter that is understood to 'be' masculine (fire/reddish) or feminine (salt, sea/blueish)?

I admire alchemy for its unprejudiced, unapologetic, unsentimental cracking of tabus: gender roles are quickly subverted, men and women almost equally powerful, and death and rebirth, fragmented bodies undergoing endings and loss of authority and power, are natural parts of evolution. Engaging specifically with the Hermaphrodite meant inventing a painting that would relate to my ambivalence about what it means to be a man.

Both my parents were sensitive people but worried, when I was a young child, that I behaved like a girl and that it was unsafe. It confused me. I felt good about being in my male body, yet was aware of being quite different to boys around me who were praised for being 'real' boys. Turning out finally, after lots of deviations and question marks, as a gay man would secretly confirm those worries around me, and working on being a carrier of projected shame became a part of my later journey. For my paintings, I often think about what colours say about gender and how I choose colours as the man I am.

Are Rococo paintings camp per se or just embarrassingly beautiful (Boucher's rhythms are outstanding, the shiny bodies and gestures disappoint me)? When I use pink, light blues and refer to flowers, like the painters of the illuminations, do I enter the realm of camp? Watching old Liberace footage, the colour bursts, audio schmaltz and clashing fabrics evoke sadness: does flamboyance of colours and ornaments signify and single out queerness so that it loses its power to subvert subtly and can be brushed off as eccentric entertainment? Should I hold myself back, show less feeling than I have, paint muted or angular? Many women artists around me work angular and restrained, as if they turned away from those classic chypre fragrances (and supportive instructions, 'pour femmes') I love to wear when I feel good in my skin (wrapped into an olfactory dark-golden three-parted suit). What is at the heart of this point is that men of my generation have been burdened with shame when they absorb or express what is reserved for women. However, this shame wouldn't exist if women or more general, as it also concerns men, the feminine in society weren't, on a deep level, ranked as inferior.

Many of my works reflect this thought in subtle ways because I mostly prefer – and that is a problem for all painting dealing with gender and sexuality - not to represent bodies but what is going on in the fold from inside to outside.

The Hermaphrodite is a literal fusion of genders, opposites or polarities. For *Rebis*, I chose a modified vermillion as ground, then glazed it partially with sap green as a complementary filter. The biggest surprise was the cliff-like forms on the upper left, which resulted from a formal decision introducing white that suddenly opened up a different spatial feel. Also, the figure leaning towards it, defined mainly by colour marks and flowers, wasn't planned. I suddenly thought it could be me, why not? The small literal Hermaphrodite is gleaned from Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens*, another seminal

illustrated treatise on alchemy from 1617. It can be a visually minor element as it rules the whole canvas.

LB: One of your paintings, *Pansy, Self Portrait as a Child* (2023), contains two figures in the foreground, which allude to the alchemical idea of the dying king. How was this idea of particular interest to you in the context of a self-portrait?

MvB: The dying king is a very peculiar figure in alchemy as he refers in a quite brutal way to generational renewal (patricide). Like Osiris, he is dismembered and reassembled by the Feminine into a new form. According to Egyptian myth, Isis, Osiris' wife and sister, can retrieve all body parts apart from the phallus, which will be the 'new' in his following incarnation. This myth fascinated me when I started to work with alchemical imagery because, for new work, I dismember and fragment source images digitally as much as I reassemble them painterly in a very different form with a specific and different power. However, repeated renewals and assemblages also extend to one's attitudes, sometimes outdated regimes of how best to survive in the world.

A 'Pansy,' a man whose masculinity and coping mechanisms are in doubt, needs to learn to mistrust being signified and go through repeated metamorphoses of becoming truthful if this could mean being able to love. The painting displays some of such stages and thoughts on a pink that refers, on the one hand, to alchemical vermillion and its exuberant renewal of life and, on the other hand, to the pink triangles gay prisoners in German concentration camps had to wear, which marked them effectively as the lowest on the ranking ladder. The blue king needed a place in this painting. He seemed to be emerging from what Jung called a Night Sea Journey and needed a rest.

LB: Your drawings are somewhat different to your painting. Your 7 drawings of the series *For a window to be open would be a consolation* (2018) incorporate isolated figures, marks and empty space similar to that left in Asian classical painting. Although they are not studies for paintings, to what extent do these works on paper generate ideas for your paintings, or vice versa?

MvB: Yes, they look different, yet work on the same subjects, only with lines and white emptiness instead of richly covering oil colour on a canvas. This mode allows intense colour lines to stand out and vibrate and hasn't changed much over the years. When I started to work with digital fragments of *Splendor Solis*, I projected them, heavily zoomed on smooth watercolour paper full sheet size and traced some of the pixel strands. Taking away the projection would reveal the start of a new work, still influenced in subtle ways by *Splendor*. Over the years, I let go of the projection element. It's more about invention, again, like in painting.

The series *For a window* from six years ago shares much with *On Butterflies*, a series of 12 drawings I'm working on this year, parallel to a series of paintings, *Untitled*, all on the subject of metamorphosis, which, of course, does link back to process and alchemy. Paintings and works on paper complement each other. The viewer who expects to find outlines of butterfly wings or mimicry

spots will, with some squinting and empathy, even detect a few. Otherwise, these works are about breaking through restrictions and using free space.

Comparing both series, I see that I've become less tentative on paper over the years. Introducing wax pastels and ink, which before felt like compromising purity, does emphasise what the work is about. However, at the centre of my works on paper remain coloured pencils, which I simply love for their simplicity, both water-soluble ones and those with a higher wax content. Sometimes, I try to emulate watercolour washes with pencils, leading into or away from real ones. The gentle and, at times, intrusive contact with the smooth, thick paper makes me forget time. Unlike painting, holding a pencil and focusing on lines invites traces of feeling or lines of orientation on the neutral white paper with different abrupt pressures (somewhere on the axis of tenderness and violence), resulting in maps or landscapes of an indefinite nature. However, the sudden perspective shifts in my paintings also remain part of my formal decision-making. They amplify an idea into different vectors of thought.

The rhythm of emptiness and fullness in Asian classical painting and thinking, of acting and receiving, of breathing with a feeling for the animating energies and the curious point of stillness between inhaling and exhaling, and caring closely for details: a way of making art (and living) that, yes, suits me well. However, I think expanding on this here would go too far.

Thank you for putting so much time, interest and scrutiny into your questions!

Interview completed on 3 September 2024