



FREDRIK VÆRSLEV

FREDRIK VÆRSLEV'S CURTAIN BANGS

27.04.—20.07.2024

MEHDI CHOUAKRI WILHELM HALLEN



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Untitled (Curtain Bang #3), 2024
 Grundierung, Sprühfarbe, Fassadenfarbe, Acrylfarbe,
 Terpentin auf Baumwollleinwand und Stahlstab
 200 x 220 x 7 cm
 78 3/4 x 86 5/8 x 2 3/4 in
 (FV 2024/008)





Untitled (#21), 2024
Sprühfarbe, Waschbenzin und
Fassadenfarbe auf Leinwand, Holzspanner
76 x 257 x 3.3 cm
29 7/8 x 101 1/8 x 1 1/4 in
(FV 2024/021)



Untitled (#21), 2024
 Sprühfarbe, Waschbenzin und
 Fassadenfarbe auf Leinwand, Holzspanner
 76 x 257 x 3.3 cm
 29 7/8 x 101 1/8 x 1 1/4 in
 (FV 2024/021)





Untitled (Curtain Bang #6), 2024
Grundierung, Sprühfarbe,
Fassadenfarbe, Acrylfarbe, Terpentin
auf Baumwollleinwand und Stahlstab
220 x 135 x 7 cm
86 5/8 x 53 1/8 x 2 3/4 in
(FV 2024/010)





Untitled (Curtain Bang #5), 2024
Grundierung, Sprühfarbe, Fassadenfarbe,
Acrylfarbe, Terpentin auf Baumwollleinwand
und Stahlstab
220 x 90 x 7 cm
86 5/8 x 35 3/8 x 2 3/4 in
(FV 2024/009)





Untitled (#22), 2024
Sprühfarbe, Waschbenzin und Fassadenfarbe
auf Leinwand, Holzspanner
74 x 241 x 3.3 cm
29 1/8 x 94 7/8 x 1 1/4 in
(FV 2024/022)



Untitled (#22), 2024
 Sprühfarbe, Waschbenzin und Fassadenfarbe
 auf Leinwand, Holzspanner
 74 x 241 x 3.3 cm
 29 1/8 x 94 7/8 x 1 1/4 in
 (FV 2024/022)

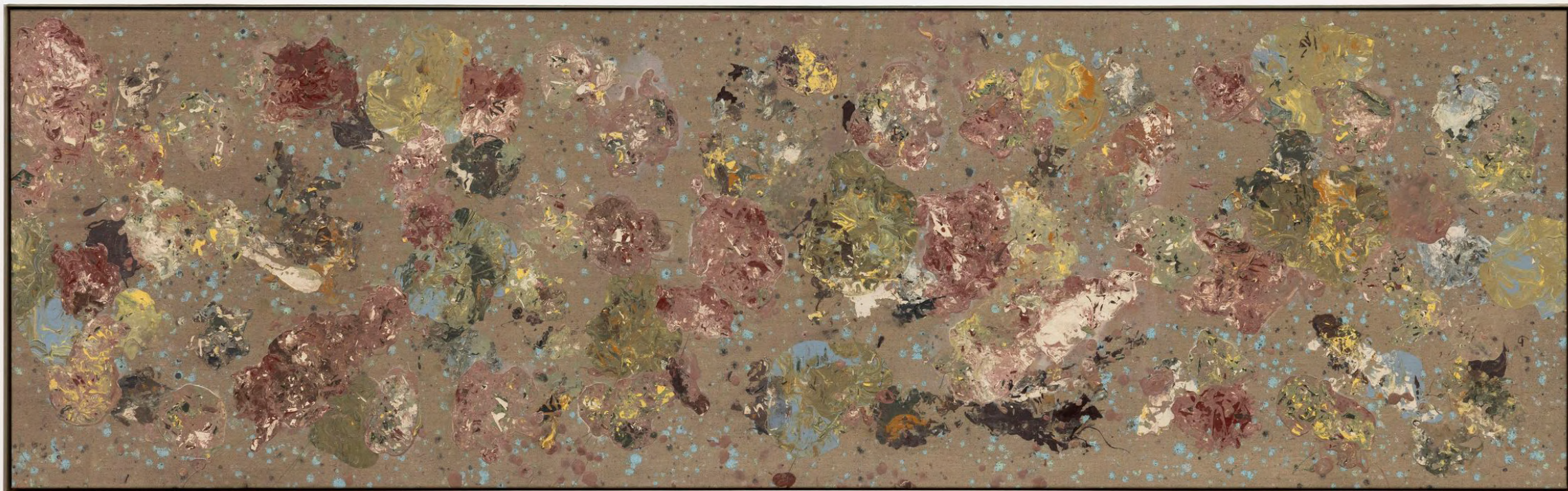






Untitled (Curtain Bang #1), 2023
 Grundierung, Sprühfarbe, Fassadenfarbe, Acrylfarbe,
 Terpentin auf Baumwollleinwand und Stahlstab
 220 x 202 x 7 cm
 86 5/8 x 79 1/2 x 2 3/4 in
 (FV 2023/004)





Untitled (#20), 2024
Sprühfarbe, Waschbenzin und Fassadenfarbe
auf Leinwand, Holzspanner
71 x 232 x 3.3 cm
28 x 91 3/8 x 1 1/4 in
(FV 2024/020)



Untitled (#20), 2024
Sprühfarbe, Waschbenzin und Fassadenfarbe
auf Leinwand, Holzspanner
71 x 232 x 3.3 cm
28 x 91 3/8 x 1 1/4 in
(FV 2024/020)





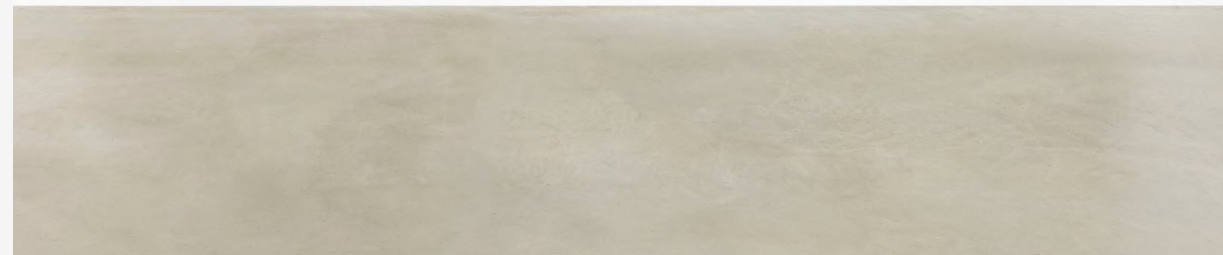
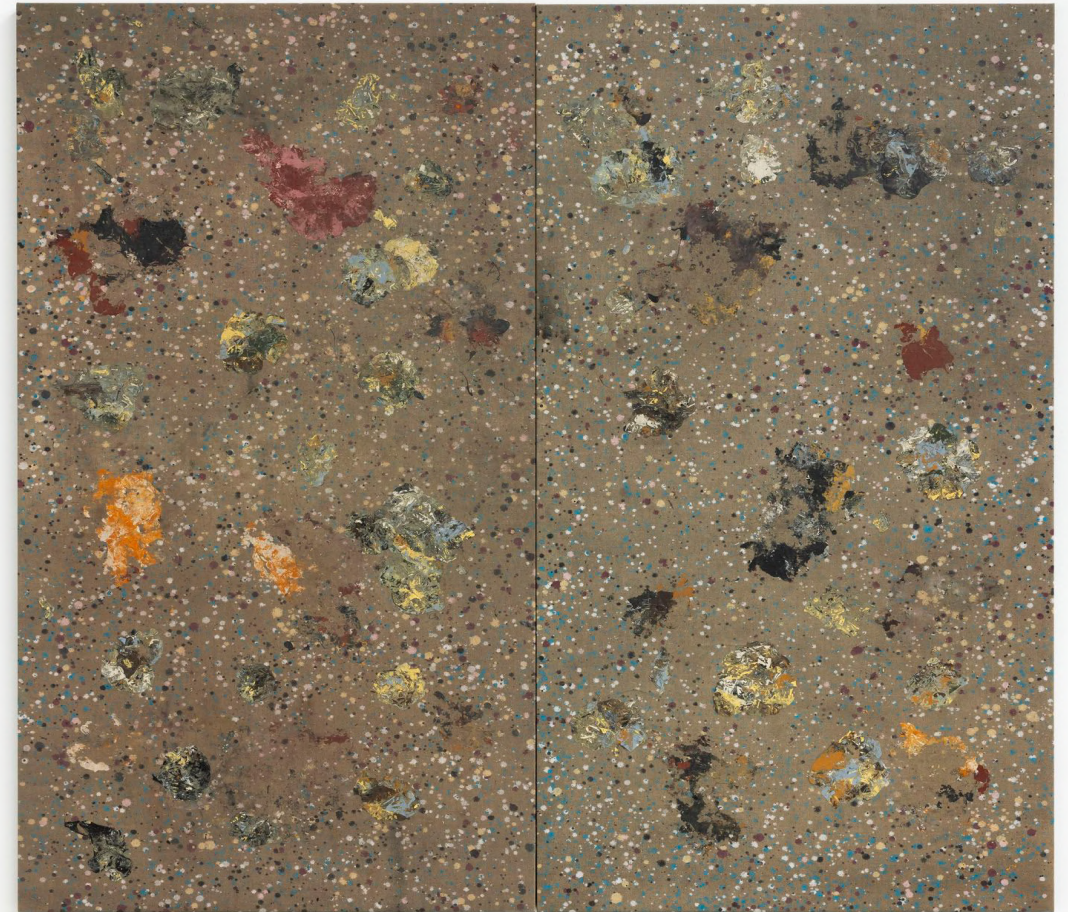


Untitled (Curtain Bang #9), 2024
Grundierung, Sprühfarbe, Fassadenfarbe,
Acrylfarbe, Terpentin auf Baumwollleinwand
und Stahlstab
220 x 146 x 7 cm
86 5/8 x 57 1/2 x 2 3/4 in
(FV 2024/013)





Untitled (#6), 2023
 Sprühfarbe, Waschbenzin und Fassadenfarbe
 auf Leinwand, Holzspanner
 230 x 227 x 3.3 cm
 90 1/2 x 89 3/8 x 1 1/4 in
 (FV 2023/006)





Untitled (Curtain Bang #13), 2024
Grundierung, Sprühfarbe, Fassadenfarbe,
Acrylfarbe, Terpentin auf Baumwollleinwand
und Stahlstab
220 x 106 x 7 cm
41 3/4 x 86 5/8 x 2 3/4 in
(FV 2024/017)







Untitled (Curtain Bang #15), 2024
 Grundierung, Sprühfarbe, Fassadenfarbe,
 Acrylfarbe, Terpentin auf Baumwollleinwand
 und Stahlstab
 220 x 120 x 7 cm
 86 5/8 x 47 1/4 x 2 3/4 in
 (FV 2024/019)





Untitled (Curtain Bang #8), 2024
 Grundierung, Sprühfarbe, Fassadenfarbe,
 Acrylfarbe, Terpentin auf Baumwollleinwand
 und Stahlstab
 220 x 103 x 7 cm
 86 5/8 x 40 1/2 x 2 3/4 in
 (FV 2024/012)



IS IT A PAINTING OR IS IT A CURTAIN?

Der norwegische Künstler Fredrik Værsløv wurde 1979 in Moss am Oslofjord geboren, wo Edvard Munch viele Jahre lang ein riesiges Landhaus besaß. Er ist ein konzeptuell arbeitender Maler, welcher die Grenzen der Malerei auslotet und sie dabei immer wieder neu verschiebt. Værsløv hat an der Malmö Art Academy und am Städel in Frankfurt studiert. Er ist gegenwärtig Professor für Bildende Kunst in Malmö.

Für seine neuen Vorhangobjekte verwendet er eine dünne Baumwolle, wie sie für die Hemdenproduktion gebraucht wird. Er grundiert sie sehr dünn mit 20-30 Farbschichten in wässriger Lösung. Es kann sich dabei um normale Farbpigmente, aber auch um Metall-Pigmente handeln. Zum Farbauftrag setzt er einen langen Stock mit einer Lammfell- Rolle ein. Dies sei für ihn wichtig, um eine gewisse Distanz zum Bild zu erreichen. Er erwähnt Claude Monet, der mit 2 Meter langen Stöcken gemalt habe. Durch die intensive und wiederholte Grundierung wird die Baumwolle sehr steif und schwer. Die Farbe dringt in den Stoff ein und durchtränkt ihn wie beim Färben. Sie haftet nicht nur auf der Oberfläche, sondern wird mit dem Trägermaterial eins. Die Farbpigmente bekommen etwas Unbestimmtes und Übergängliches. Je nachdem, wie man sich vor dem Vorhangobjekt hin und her bewegt, schimmert es fast wie Seide.

In einem ersten Prozess entstehen die Leinwände auf dem Fußboden seines Ateliers. Wie bei einem Druckverfahren nehmen sie die Spuren und die Geschichte des Fußbodens auf. Etwa die Hälfte seiner Werke wird noch einem zweiten Prozess unterzogen. Die bemalten Leinwände werden auf Plastikröhren aufgerollt und bis zu einem Jahr lang Licht, Wind und Wetter ausgesetzt. Dadurch malt die Natur das Gemälde zu Ende, welches der Künstler begonnen hat. Die Farben können ausbleichen, auswaschen oder von Pilzen besiedelt werden. Sie können die chemische Oberflächen- struktur des Bindemittels und des Pigmentes aufschließen, verändern, und sogar zerstören. Damit dringt ein Moment der Unkontrollierbarkeit, der Unvorhersehbarkeit und der Unabsichtlichkeit in die Arbeiten von Fredrik Værsløv ein. Für dieses Verfahren hat der Künstler ein berühmtes Vorbild, nämlich Edvard Munch. Dieser setzte

ebenfalls seine Gemälde der harten, norwegischen Witterung aus. Er platzierte sie den Winter über in seinem Garten in Ekely, wo sie an Obstbäume angelehnt wurden. Er nannte dieses Verfahren Rosskur. Seine Gemälde müßten dies überstehen. Erst dann wären sie wirklich gut.

Durch die Lagerung der steifen Baumwolle in einem zusammengefalteten Zustand entstehen Knicke und Kanten, die bei der Hängung teilweise sichtbar bleiben. Sie weisen auf die Übergänglichkeit der Form zwischen zwei Zuständen hin. Der eine Zustand ist der Zustand der Faltung und Lagerung im Dunklen. Der andere Zustand ist der Zustand der Entfaltung und Inszenierung im Licht. Die Vorhänge schwingen zwischen einem Zustand der Potentialität und der Aktualität hin und her. In der Hängung weisen sie dadurch auf ihre gefaltete, dunkle Existenz, ihr Larvenstadium hin, das sie jedoch gerne abstreifen und vergessen lassen möchten.

Ein geraffter Vorhang enthält braune Flecken. Diese Flecken sind aus Farbresten entstanden. Nach dem Malen schüttet Værsløv die Überreste in einen großen Eimer. Der Terpentinersatz setzt sich oben ab und die schweren Pigmente sinken nach unten. Sie bilden einen Farbsumpf. Das Lösungsmittel schüttet er später wieder vorsichtig ab und gebraucht es erneut. Irgendwann hat sich schließlich eine große Menge im Eimer angesammelt. Es handelt sich um die Reste von über 200 Farbtönen. Alle zusammen ergeben einen Mischton, der einem dunklen Braungrau ähnelt. Dieser Farbton bildet quasi die physische Summe aller in den letzten sechs Jahren verwendeten Farben. Diese „Summe seiner Malerei“ wirft der Künstler nun auf die Leinwand. Damit kontaminiert er die sorgfältig grundierten Oberflächen mit der Farbe aller Farben, die sich wie eine Infektion über die Schönheit der Malerei legt.

Aber was sind diese Arbeiten nun? Handelt es sich um Malerei, um Skulptur oder um eine Installation? Ein zentrales Moment der Kunst von Fredrik Værsløv liegt genau in dieser Kategorie der Unbestimmbarkeit. Sobald man versucht, seine Werke einer bestimmten künstlerischen Gattung zuzuordnen, entziehen

sie sich. Aber was sind diese Arbeiten dann? Natürlich sind es Gemälde. Natürlich sind es Skulpturen. Natürlich sind sie installiert. Aber jeder dieser Gattungsbegriffe beschreibt nur einen bestimmten Aspekt dieser komplexen Arbeiten. Hier zeigt sich wieder einmal, wie so oft, dass unsere Sprache der Entwicklung der Kunst hinterher läuft.

In einer Anspielung auf Richard Wollheim¹ könnte man sagen, es sind Gemälde als Vorhänge. Ein Vorhang hat immer zwei Seiten. Er hat etwas Potentielles und er hat etwas Performatives. Er fordert den Beobachter auf, ihn zu schließen oder zu öffnen. Er ist ein dynamisches Objekt, ein Quasi-Objekt, das uns erst durch seine Handlungs-Aufforderung zu den Subjekten macht, die wir sind.² Jeder Vorhang verweist auf etwas, was hinter ihm liegt oder liegen könnte. Er kann etwas enthüllen oder etwas verbergen. Das Gemälde als Vorhang, ein performatives Handlungsobjekt, ist ein Gatekeeper, der den Zugang zum Allerheiligsten kontrolliert. Er verweist auf unterschiedliche zeitliche Zustände - geöffnet oder geschlossen. Damit operiert er einerseits binär -auf-zu -, andererseits aber auch kontinuierlich. Denn er kann auch nur teilweise geöffnet oder teilweise geschlossen werden und in jeder möglichen und beliebigen Zwischenstellung belassen werden. Der Vorhang operiert in einem Horizont von potentieller Temporalität. Er legt nahe und suggeriert. Man könnte dies als sein Geheimnis betrachten.

– Hans Dieter Huber

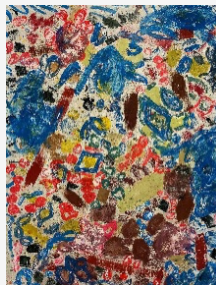
1) Richard Wollheim: *Objekte der Kunst*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1982, S.195-199.

2) Michel Serres: *Der Parasit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1987, S.346-350.



CURTAINS THAT ENFOLD – AND UNFOLD IN – A PAINTER'S LIFE

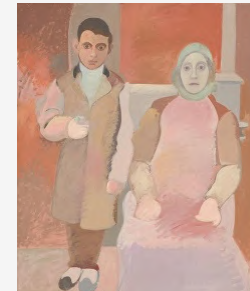
It is as if Fredrik Vørslev has well and truly come back home again with his curtain paintings. And I mean home quite literally, back to the memories of the house where he grew up in Drøbak and to the very foundations and limits of modern painting that he has spent all his adult life so far exploring and challenging. With his curtain paintings, he returns once again to the baseline of modern painting and the question of its minimum definition: a textile fabric with an application of paint. There is no requirement for any kind of figure, although some such device is usually present, even in Vørslev's work. Throughout the long history of modern painting, the individual work has been supported on a stretcher that ensures the image surface remains taut and flat. This essence – of a painted fabric supported on a stretcher – has arguably set the tone of the discourse for most of what has been written about modern painting. But behind this discourse about the evolution of the visually flat pictorial space we hear an incessant hum, the sound of the *optical unconscious*, to borrow a phrase from Rosalind Krauss. There are examples in recent art of famous artists who have painted directly on canvas they have laid out on the floor, who have folded and unfolded the fabric to create a crinkled relief, who have stuck everything imaginable to it, or applied so much paint that it flakes off, or cut – or even shot – holes in it, or applied flame to leave scorch marks. Some have built their own free-style stretchers, thereby toppling the rectangle from its position of dominance, and some have entirely disregarded the stretcher, hanging their canvases like loose, free-flowing textiles.



Arshile Gorky, *How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life*, 1944, flanked by two of Fredrik Vørslev's floral paintings.



Fredrik Vørslev's mother with two similar sweaters from H&M, 2015



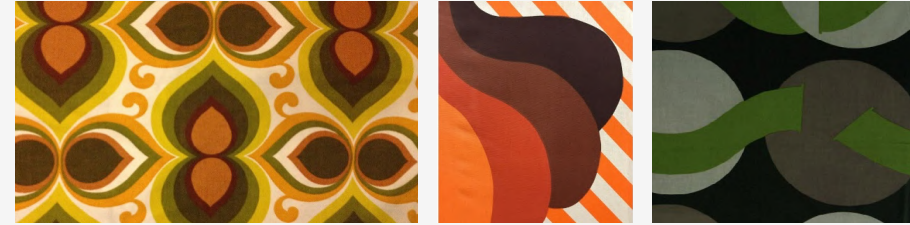
Arshile Gorky, *The Artist and His Mother*, between ca. 1926 and ca. 1942

One image of particularly importance in our attempt to trace the curtain paintings back to their origins is the photograph on the cover of the book *Pyramid Scheme*, which shows Fredrik Vørslev's mother holding a piece of cloth that might once have been an apron or a curtain. In repeatedly harking back to the house he grew up in, what interests Vørslev is the surfaces of the place, the painted exterior, the terrace, fences, parasols and awnings, and on the inside, the wallpapered walls and – not least – his mother's voluminous curtains. These surfaces, which define the interior and exterior of the house, are flat planes on either side of each wall that in combination form decorative sandwiches. It was here that Fredrik Vørslev discovered visual art. The home was decorated and adorned with his mother's vibrant home-made curtains and a changing array of furnishings and seasonal embellishments. A colourful picture gallery that reflected local tastes in Drøbak, and indeed the wider world, in the 1970s and 1980s.

They were trends that Fredrik Vørslev noticed, appropriated, and made his own. Here in Norway, taste in interior design in the 1970s and 80s was heavily influenced by English pop design¹, with its abundance of orange, brown, olive, ochre and moss green shades. In the course of the 1980s, the flowing lines and the stylised, sharply defined organic forms with sweeping lines were replaced with speckled patterns, which gave the impression of surfaces sprinkled with small individual symbols, like flowers in a meadow or a herbaceous border, as we saw in the previous chapter. Many of these were modernised floral patterns, themselves inspired by English taste, with a lineage reaching all the way back to the Victorian era and the designers who built on that legacy, artists such as Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant of the Bloomsbury Group who founded the Omega Workshop. For the young Vørslev, standing close to the curtains in his childhood home – and perhaps physically grasping them – amounted to a feast of sensual stimulation that would leave a lasting legacy. This was his first encounter with the precision of one aspect of 1970s English pop culture with close affiliations to *op art*. This same *hard-edge* grammar features in Vørslev's awnings and the organic sweep of the calligraphy that we find in some of his sail paintings.

The closeness the young Fredrik Vørslev sensed in his original encounters with the curtains of his childhood home must have been what phenomenologists call a pre-conceptual total experience, an experience of the world manifesting itself to the subject, directly and without words, distinctions or judgements. As such, these experiences possess a purity and totality that is characteristic of the unconditional wonder of which children are capable, the unconditional acceptance of the thing perceived. And since we associate these phenomena essentially with childhood and youth, Vørslev's personal revelation of origins and first assimilation with the folds of textiles can be dated to the 1980s and 90s, a period when tastes in curtains were dominated by the vibrant colours and patterns that we would now describe as postmodern. This physical-sensorial experience of existing as an embodied subject was well reflected and reinforced by the lush interiors of contemporary American soap operas such as *Falcon Crest*, *Dallas*, and *Dynasty*, which were originally broadcast on Norwegian

TV in the 1980s and then repeated in the 1990s. For Vørslev, Norwegian sitcoms such as *Mot i brystet* and *Karl & Co* provided a further source of sensual wonder and focus. The TV-studio living rooms of these series featured heavy, sumptuous curtains in a palette of mustard yellows, moss greens, and burgundy reds.



1970s textile patterns

Turning conventional value hierarchies upside down, Fredrik Vørslev seeks to undermine the refined solemnity of the fine-art discourse and to realign painting with the curtain and its potential for aesthetic and existential meaning. To this end he paints curtain fabrics on the floor, but rather than spread them tight on stretchers, thereby turning them into paintings, he chooses to display them by means of the conventional equipment for hanging curtains. This too is something he is familiar with. During his early years he became a *connoisseur* of the grammar of curtains – of their edging, lining, weight, pleats, distance from the floor, methods of hanging, etc. A typical example of what phenomenology describes as early, pre-conceptual experiential knowledge. Information that becomes firmly embedded in memory and assimilated in the body as an enduring background against which concepts and artistic methods can be tested, a material that is incorporated into reflection and the conceptual apparatus. For a young boy standing close up to a curtain, it is only natural for something like the distance of the lower edge from the floor to come into focus as a theme of interest.

Curtains: theatre, photography and film

What are the defining characteristics of a curtain, and what can an artist do to transform them into something perpetually new and surprising? Let us try here to linger by the curtain and get a hold on it.

¹) These trends are exemplified by Stanley Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange* from 1971, a defining quality of which is its use of pop design and neo-brutalist architecture, both of them new phenomena at the time. Pop design has made a comeback in the retro wallpaper in the ITV series *Malpractice*, 2023 (directed by Philip Bartatini).



René Magritte, *The Key to the Fields*, 1936

In this painting, Magritte plays on the dynamics of the shift between transparent and opaque. Theoretically, if the scene beyond the window were painted on the window itself, it ought not be possible to recognise that the image on the glass is merely a representation rather than a genuine view of a meadow with a hillock and some trees against the sky. It is only when the glass is broken that we discover how the image has deceived us with a stolen identity. Notice the subtlety and care with which the artist has rendered the open view virtually indistinguishable from the surface image on the glass shards. It is only apparent because of the white marks that indicate the sharp edges of the fractured glass, a painted sign (image) of lines of refracted light. But typical of the game Magritte plays is the way he shifts awareness from the naive perception of a landscape as seen through a transparent window or of a convincing illusion of the outside world, to the realisation that what we see is nothing more than an image on the window surface which completely covers what might in fact lie beyond.

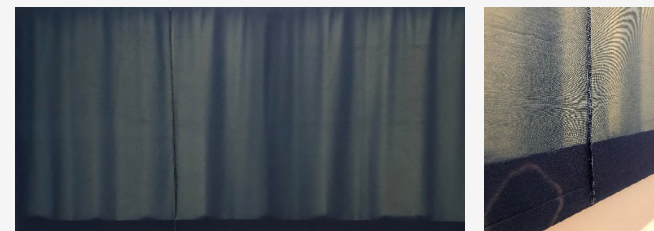
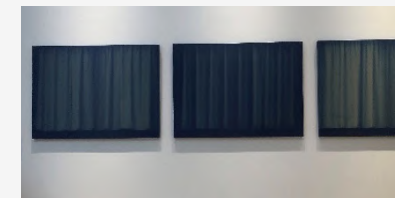
The reason why the illusion is so captivating here is that both the trick image on the glass and the “authentic” scene behind it are painted by Magritte. The power of the illusion is so great that we easily forget that everything (all we see) is happening on two levels within the frame of a painting. There are two trick pictures on the canvas. The inclusion of a pair of red curtains – which function here like a stage curtain – heightens the idea of theatrical contrivance, a play in which the curtain is pulled aside not once but twice. First to reveal the painted scene that fills the window, and the second time, when the glass is broken.



Robert Morris, still from film, 1969.

In the film, Morris walks about carrying a mirror (of landscape format), turning it to reflect different views of his outdoor surroundings: the ground covered in snow, a pale grey sky and a thicket behind the point where the camera stands. Since it is a mirror that Morris uses, it creates the illusion of a view through transparent glass, an ordinary window. There is a connection here between the glass as a reflection of a view, as if painted with the illusion of a view, and the open-closed phenomenology of the window.

The phenomenology of the curtain encompasses both its pliability and its function. On the level of function, it is practical, psychological and existential. The transparent glass of the window can provide protection from sunlight, it can also serve as a “camera” that channels sunlight onto a curtain that receives and records it. The resulting “photo curtains” are the outcome of a non-expressionistic, conceptual process.



Marie Lund, *Stills*, 2013.

Photos: Åsmund Thorkildsen, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

In other words, Lund's abstract curtain paintings are in fact *photographs*, images created by sunlight. They consist of well used curtains that have been taken down and remounted on stretchers that allow them to be displayed like paintings. The pattern is the result of an extremely long exposure to sunlight that was intensified by the glass of the window, such that the wavy folds have produced an image of irregular vertical folds. When the curtains are stretched out, the pattern that remains is an image of the folds themselves. Here, the curtain and its imprint, that which in Morris' film only remained as traces/photographs in the film frame, are physically unified in an image that is both abstract and a representation, an image of a long exposure to sunlight where the material substrate and the represented object are one and the same thing. The image of the stripes has been bleached into the picture surface.

The curtain and the body

Like Vørslev, Felix Gonzales-Torres worked with objects from everyday life. In his installations, he used bead curtains of the kind used to create a semi-transparent boundary between, for example, a back room and the public space in a bar or intimate restaurant. The bead curtain is an object that one also perceives with the body, since one does not encounter it like a normal door, as something with a hard surface and a handle. In the case of a door, all one has to do is operate the handle in order to open or close it. The bead curtain is more pliant and invites slow, gentle movement. Here as well, the hand is required, just as it is when grasping a door handle, but the movement is different. To pass through a bead curtain, one generally uses both hands to create a parting that brushes both sides of the body from top to bottom as one slips through. It is a gentle, intimate movement accompanied by a low rustling sound. You cannot slam a bead curtain shut, like you can a door. In the case of a curtain made of cloth, the sound produced by movement is even weaker.

Since bead curtains are often found in bars and small restaurants with a romantic or exotic atmosphere, in addition to private homes, they tend to touch the sensual aspect of daily life. They let us imagine what is on the other side. They let light and sound through, while marking a soft separation.



Felix Gonzales-Torres, *Bead Curtains*

I mention these sculptures – or installations, as they deserve to be called – to highlight the bodily aspect that Vørslev describes in relation to his own childhood experiences. For one of the characteristic features of Gonzales-Torres's work is the use of materials with a shift of context (from the home to the gallery) and a Southern or Oriental aesthetic, and invariably with a reference to the human body and its sensitivity. No doubt a phenomenologist would be able to describe how a young boy can discover the world through a pre-verbal and immediately sensual encounter with soft, colourful, heavily hanging decorative textiles. Hands and feet, face, hair, belly, thighs, back – and not least smell – for Vørslev as a child they added up to a fundamental manner of being in the world. There was no need for him to know anything about textiles, patterns, fashion, trends in home decor or modern painting. He didn't need to know anything about all this at the time, but the memory of what he experienced as a sentient body would in due course become the foundation for the artistic edifice he has now been building for decades.

The curtain has survived both physical relocation – for example, the exotic bead skirt curtain – and social and historical changes in styles of home furnishing. Just like the sentient human body, the curtain knows no class boundaries. Curtains and flower beds, terrace flooring and ornament shelves are marginal phenomena in the sense that we take them for granted. But a cursory survey of Virginia Woolf's novels helps us to realise just how ubiquitous they are. By and large, Woolf's narratives unfold among the cultural elite of early 20th century England. As an author, Woolf explored the stream of consciousness and the subconscious, with many of her novels describing the fluid, fragmentary nature of human

attention as their protagonists, and their female author, flit rapidly and nervously from thought to thought. The world is constantly present and manifests itself to her in rapid shifts, with aspect after aspect briefly capturing her interest, before something new intrudes. And in the settings where Woolf's stories unfold there is always a garden someone in the vicinity, either of the private kind, or Kew Gardens, or some other typically English park. These can easily be overlooked since they have little to do with the plot as such and the interpersonal dramas she so masterfully narrates. The garden is just a self-evident and natural presence, presumably because Woolf herself grew up in places where a garden was always part of the environment. And it is in the zone of transition between inside and outside that we find windows, patio doors and curtains.

In Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*, written in 1939 and published posthumously in 1941, curtains feature prominently, and invariably in connection with actions that are significant despite being mundane. Actions that do nothing to further the plot, but which are there as necessary prerequisites for or basis of the life the protagonist leads. Curtains feature as minor and marginal, yet integral accessories to the central drama. And it is precisely this kind of marginal phenomena that a sensitive artist is likely to notice and invoke as a material presence:

*It was early morning. The dew was on the grass. The church clock struck eight times. Mrs. Swithin drew the curtains in her bedroom – the faded white chintz that so agreeably from the outside tinged the window with its green lining.*²

*The light but variable breeze, foretold by the weather expert, flapped the yellow curtain, tossing light, then shadow.*³

*She flushed, as if she had spoken in an empty room and someone had stepped out from behind a curtain.*⁴

*She stopped at a window in the passage and held back the curtain. Beneath was the garden, bathed in sun.*⁵

2) Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 1941. Quoted from Oxford World's Classics paperback 1998, 2008 edition, p. 7.

3) Ibid., p. 15.

4) Ibid., p. 47.

5) Ibid., p. 64.

*"I remember ..." she nodded in time to the tune, "You remember too – how they used to cry it down the streets." They remembered – the curtains blowing, and the men crying: "All a blowing, all a growing," as they came with geraniums, sweet william, in pots, down the streets.*⁶

I dwell on these marginal, but in Woolf's work so potent details, because gardens, flower beds, terraces, sun shades and curtains are important and recurrent themes also in the work of Fredrik Værsløv. All of them occur in close proximity and relation to one another in the young boy's experience of curtains as phenomena in which various axes of action intersect. What emerges from the brief Woolf quotes is that the curtain is associated with the garden, with opening and closing, with concealing and revealing oneself. As with Værsløv, it is an intimate, sensual and bodily locus of action that provides structure as a background for the plot of a novel and of reality. And often, everywhere, flowers. – Fredrik Værsløv's painted curtains are an answer to the question of how this experience and these memories can find expression in physical form, embodiment in a representation that serves the viewer as a symbol capable of evoking all the associations and experiences that lie implicit in *life in the curtain*. – As a possible sociological footnote to these ruminations, I should mention the title of the novel – and its rendering as a film – *Alle utlendinger har lukka gardiner* (All foreigners keep their curtains closed).⁷

To understand the significance of the curtains in Fredrik Værsløv's childhood home from an art historical angle, we can return to Arshile Gorky, and to the photograph and painting of the artist and his mother. The photograph dates from around 1914, whereas the painting emerged at some point between roughly 1926 and 1942. The path from his mother's apron, which he remembered as embroidered with patterns, to the abstract painting with the eloquent title, *How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life*, is short. Short because of the direct connection in Gorky's memory. While in chronological terms the distance grew longer and longer, the link to the sense of loss⁸

6) Ibid., pp. 141-142.

7) This is the title of a novel by Maria Navarro Skaranger, published 2015, which was turned into a film by Ingvild Söderlind, released 2020.

8) Arshile Gorky's was baptised as Vosdanik Adoian. The Adoian family were Armenians and suffered during the Armenian genocide under the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1920. Gorky's mother starved to death in 1919, five years after the photograph was taken. Vosdanik Adoian emigrated to the United States in 1920, where he took the name Arshile Gorky.

and the memory of enveloping folds was always short. The path from his mother's protective apron to the abstract paintings that conquered the international art world was short.

Action Painting and existential art might not be the first things that come to mind on encountering Vørslev's art in the gallery or museum, given the plethora of art historical statements and associations that the context offers. But by linking his curtain paintings to Virginia Woolf and Arshile Gorky – and equating their origin with a preconceptual childhood experience of being filled with visual and material beauty – we are able to view his preoccupation with themes relating to the inside and outside of the walls of his childhood home in a slightly different way. It is an approach that allows us to identify in his practice traces of an existential struggle to establish a meaningful continuity in life.



Fredrik Vørslev, painted curtain fabric, *colour field paintings* with the potential to be displayed as either painting or as a painted curtain. Photo Åsmund Thorkildsen, Vørslev's studio at Vestfossen, 2023.

We have briefly touched on Magritte's contrivances and Robert Morris's use of mirrors to capture images of the landscape that vanish rather than remain on the mirror. In Morris's work, the image disappears entirely with the situation, unlike the smile of Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat, which lingers even after the body of the cat has vanished. (On the other hand, the reflection of the landscape remains as an image on the light-sensitive film.) Vørslev also plays games, for example with upside-down and right-way-up orientations. Since curtains are accorded a lower status (and are cheaper) than colour field paintings, he creates colour field works or pattern paintings, but fetches them down from their elevated

eye-level position on the gallery wall, thereby reducing them to something of lower cultural value. But this change of status has an energy and economic logic of its own. Accordingly, he wants to turn things round again, so that the curtain as a work of art in an exhibition becomes the subject of theoretical and critical reflection. He makes it possible to extract curtains from suburban homes and urban flats and to place them – permanently – on the gallery or museum wall. And somewhere in all of this there might be the lingering hint of a smile.

In his work to find a suitable form for his life in the safe and yielding zone of the curtain, Vørslev has tested his curtain paintings as silhouettes on the wall, as reliefs and possibly even as sculptures standing on the floor or suspended from the ceiling. All the associations and memories mentioned here boil down to an aura that surrounds the experience of the curtain paintings as exhibited. The exhibition presentation is reduced to motivate the viewer's capacity for optical reflection. But by translating colour field painting into curtain *gestalts*, Vørslev succeeds in challenging the conventional perception of modern painting as a vertical, optical form. Provided we are able to recognise these works as curtain paintings, we can assume that corporeal memory and recollections from early life will always be triggered, because these are reliably present whenever we feel motivated to shift our focus and ask ourselves what it might mean to find a curtain displayed in an art gallery.

Clearly, in the exhibition these curtain paintings are not employed as window coverings, although that too could be an option. (Like Arne Malmedal and others, Vørslev has also painted window pictures with muntins, transoms and frames, but in these works the panes are monochrome canvas fields.) Seen from the perspective of the fragmented world of the 20th and early 21st centuries, with all the threats of neurotic gaze, frenetic levels of activity and jittery attention spans, it has once again become relevant to pull the pieces together and build forms that are substantial and good. For over a century, this is how artists have constructed meaning.

Appendix to the curtain paintings chapter – **Curtains in cinema and TV**

For Fredrik Vørslev, television was a self-evident aspect of growing up, as it was also for the so-called picture generation in American contemporary art: John Baldessari, James Welling, Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine etc. etc. One artist who mixes the element of cinema film on TV within the private home with painting is David Reed. Reed has insinuated his post-modern, free-style abstractions into the aesthetics of the post-war American domestic interior. The fundamental experience here is bodily proximity. As has been said of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, no gesture or action is entirely without sexual associations and no sexual act is matter of sexuality alone: "For the normal subject, sexuality is a dimension of experience, such that no act is strictly speaking simply sexual and yet no act is strictly speaking free of sexuality."⁹

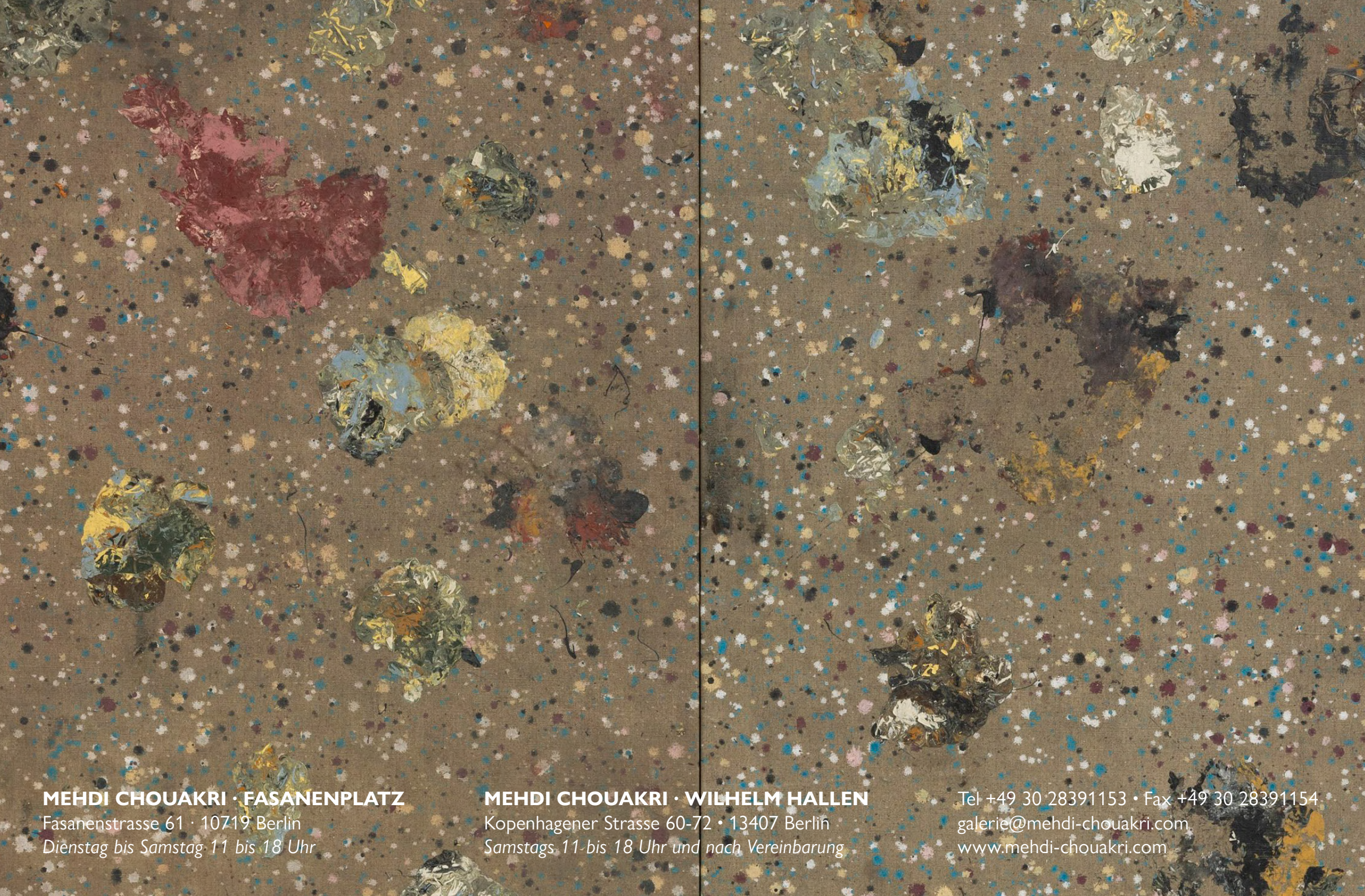
In a work such as this, David Reed uses the medium of film to explore the affinity between his idiom of the translucent brushstroke and the mundane American aesthetic as manifested in the home. Here he has recreated an old film scene and inserted his own painting into the bedroom we see in the film. It is a style – or rather an attitude – that could be characterised as domestic abstraction, a term that has almost certainly been used before (perhaps even by me!). The mood is pistachio green and the folds of the bedspread, the flowing lines of the table apron, its carved ornaments, and the headboard of the bed are abstracted in Reed's painting above the bed. In the installation, the floral pattern in the film is rendered as an abstract expressionist painting.

– Åsmund Thorkildsen

9) "Translator's Introduction", by Donald A. Landers, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945, Routledge, London, 2012. Quoted from the 2014 edition, p. xlii.

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