

A realist in the cyber age

By Lisbeth Bonde, writer and art correspondent at the Danish weekly Weekendavisen, February 2006

This text was written for Allan Otte's solo exhibition "Everything is Good Here".

When you first encounter the paintings of Allan Otte (born 1978), they appear indefinite and weirdly vague, like a cyber realm in a computer game. But at the same time his world is extremely real and recognizable. He stands alone in contemporary art with his choice of subject, modern Danish agriculture. We know his scenes from trips around the countryside, and from camera pans over farms and fields while the anchorman talks about crop yields, slurry pollution, or increase in pork exports. At first glance he pays homage to longstanding traditions in Danish landscape painting, to J. Th. Lundbye over L.A. Ring and Theodor Philipsen to Jens Søndergaard, Kaj Ejstrup – and the surrealist Poul Anker Bech. But in contrast to these painters, who either portray the landscape as a free space for contemplation or romantic lingering, or who practice a type of surrealism by crosscutting between several different planes of reality, Otte, with his cool and formal computer generated pictures, delivers a sweeping criticism of civilization. He impartially and honestly sets out the loss of values that is the consequence of the farming sector's supplying ever-increasing quantities of food to the growing cities. But he does it without raised fingers.

The beautiful, almost cinematic pictures in cinemascope pan across the landscape or zoom in on the means of production and the streamlined farms. We see the intensively farmed fields and the rational keep of livestock, characterized by a striking absence of humans. There is no sentimentality or lamentation at this loss of values, and yet the pictures induce some melancholia in the spectator. The dream of a lovely house in the country where you are in touch with the weather and the changing seasons, milking your cows and shearing your sheep has long ago been shattered for Otte. He calmly exposes the landscape displaced by rationality and productivity, the lifeless EU-landscape, where the bird no longer halts his flight on limbs too slight. The thatched cottages of the past have been transformed into great streamlined production halls, and the kitchen garden has taken the shape of greenhouses lit around the clock. There are no human escape routes, and no dogs that bark.

With his inexorable and razor-sharp realism, Otte directs our glance into the chilly interiors of the sterile slaughtering plants, or to the wasteland of modern intensive farming. Sometimes Otte defocuses objects or landscapes by airbrushing, planting a seed of doubt as to whether this is actually reality we are seeing. With this he enters a long tradition of reflective painting that questions the representation of reality – from Vermeer and Hammershøi to Gerhard Richter and Ola Billgren. Otte used to paint still lifes and interiors, now his eyes are trained on large-scale rural scenes and thus he revitalizes landscape painting. The pictures are realistic, but simultaneously constructed. At times he takes liberties, like when he 'scrapes free' an old-fashioned farm from its surroundings, making it appear isolated on an island in a pictorial void of grey, a single phone line its only connection to civilization. Ahead of the painting process is the development phase, which begins with thorough picture research on the pc, or in different magazines about cattle or farm real estate. It is a prerequisite that the photo original be both interesting and beautiful. After this comes the computer adaptation, for

example using PhotoShop. The pictures are built up in maybe 45 to 50 layers, where Otte 'cuts' different elements in until he has reached the desired composition. After having composed the picture on the screen, it is projected onto the canvas via overhead projector, and the composition sketched in pencil. It is then masked with masking tape. The painting process can finally begin. The subject is decisively brought forth, using only vertical and horizontal strokes. Allan Otte regards abstract-expressive painting as pathetic, and has developed this dry and concise painting method as a countermeasure. It demands that he keep a cool head and a steady hand: he is miming a particular digital, visual code in the act of painting itself. Every brushstroke is a mosaic in a totality that comes together in the subject. It is reminiscent of the pixilation of the digital age. The sober and concise brush mastery in one stroke deposits the requisite acrylic paints within the naked field on the prepared canvas. Nothing is left to chance with Otte. We are far removed from expressionistic waving about of brushes and automat art, but at close range the subject disappears due to these vertical and horizontal fields that dissolve in abstraction. Otte's paintings could not have been made before the existence of cyberspace. Allan Otte regards himself as a producer of pictures rather than as a painter. Even though Otte is still an art student, he is already an artist in his own right with museum sales under his belt. A farmer's son from the north of Jutland, he knows his subjects intimately. Growing up he witnessed the increasing mechanization and depopulation of the agricultural sector, and his paintings are his way of recalling his memories. But he achieves more than that. By painting the loss of values he examines the development of society in general. Industrialization has made its mark more on the countryside than the cities, which, because of the economic boom, are being restored today to reappear in their 19th century historicist splendor. Let us look at some of the pictures in the exhibition. The widescreen picture **'Everything is Good Here'** is included along with a series of new paintings in the exhibition at Gallery Tom Christoffersen and Himmerlands Kunstmuseum in Aars. The latter was the venue for Otte's introduction to pictorial arts as a high school student, which brought the works of Per Kirkeby to his attention. If it had not been for this artist's paintings and sculptures in Aars, it is unlikely that Otte had become a painter. In the left part of the picture we see a stately redbrick farmhouse, whose architecture recalls the proud manors of the past, with their turrets and many windows. But what once signified greatness and magnificence today stands dwarfed by the working farm, which takes up 2/3 of the picture, structured in long parallel rows of streamlined, skylit design, providing the livestock with natural light, as they never leave the stables. In the background are windmills, standing as semaphores to this energy-consuming form of production. The two universes do not cohere. The farmer lives his life in one age, but produces in another. The animals and plants are production units, like bars of soap, nails or toothbrushes. They are no longer included in the farmer's empathy, and likewise the surrounding fields seem to lie dead. It is a scary and merciless picture. However, in the apocalyptic picture **'God Damn the Sun, God Damn the Light it Shines and this World it Shows'** – the title comes from a song by the eighties punk band the Swans – Otte breaks with the linear order and institutes chaos. The picture is so loaded with decay that it is almost humorous. Simultaneously a sense of cemetery and death is summoned. Ruined farming machinery lies around the garden of the dilapidated farmhouse, an overturned bathtub bears witness to an interior renovation never completed. Add to this a fallen tree and an old tractor lying on its side, and a cat that has been run over. The whole messy puzzle is portrayed in broad daylight, which reveals holes in the roof and all-round disintegration. The antithesis to efficiency and rationality, disintegration and irrationality, exposed here to an extent that verges on bizarre. In **'DLG Blues'**, which has just been purchased by Dansk Landbrugs Grovvareselskab (DLG), Allan Otte has portrayed the great square of a grain silo, tense

against the ominous sky. A gallows on the back of a blue pickup truck augurs death and sinister events in front of the cathedral-like corpus of the heavy building, which almost knocks the spectator over in its compositorial mastery. A green landscape is perceptible on the low horizon in the background – a sign of the diminishing importance of nature. In **'Melancolia'** ('Melancholia') we look through a complex of abandoned farming buildings to the greenery, but there seems to be no usable alternatives to the grey dejectedness of the buildings. The only perceptible sign of life seems to spout from the pipe that mechanically transports the grain from the barn loft to the great corpus of the silo. In **'Ophængning I'** ('Suspension I') we observe the hanging, slaughtered pig bodies before the conveyor belts take them into the flames of the oven, to burn off their bristles. Their bodies are depicted in sober and dry pixilation, whereas the flames smolder indistinctly in the background. In **'Opstilling'** ('Arrangement') and **'Eksteriørstilleben'** ('Outside Still Life') we zoom in on the typical accessories of the farmer, left behind in the yard or on the stairs. Clogs, overalls, rubber boots. But we are still in a deserted and oddly dead environment. The same is the case for the monumental **'Beholderbillede'** ('Container Picture') where a gigantic biogas system extrudes its hemisphere. The picture differs from the others in this exhibition by juxtaposing the garish yellow-green of the flat adjoining fields with the resounding darkness of the death dome. At the time of writing Allan Otte is working on a semicircular picture meant to hang in the rotunda of Gallery Tom Christoffersen. In his dystopian subjects from the country Otte shows us where the food chain of western affluence originates. It brings to mind the movie 'The Truman Show', where the protagonist (Jim Carrey) lives a happy life until the illusion collapses, when he discovers that his whole life he has unwittingly played the lead in a televised soap opera. Far out on the horizon itself he finds a hole into the world which has produced the fiction. Out there are the grim facts of life, out there is reality. With his simultaneously beautiful and scary paintings Allan Otte points our attention to the harsh reality outside the steadily growing cities and makes us witnesses to the loss of values which has permeated rural culture in the name of hyperproductivity. Even though his subjects are constructed, his focus is always the factual, and he articulates without sentimentality or pointing fingers. The new rural world is produced via the digital optics of a computer: The pictures are entirely without depth, since the subjects are painted piece by piece as a giant, flat digital mosaic. By miming this digital representation of reality Otte successfully avoids the pathetic gesture inherent in the expressive and neoexpressive painting, which has dominated the art scene since the 1950es. In this he indicates brand new opportunities for painting in the cyber age. Translated by Lotte Follin