**Allan Otte: Painting Under Way**  
By Mikkel Bogh

In a broad, movie-like format, the painting shows two collided buses on a snow-covered highway.

The scene is deserted, undramatic – or perhaps rather: post-dramatic. A situation, a physical event, an accident, sure, but no activity and only a rather thin-legged story. It happens: Cars collide, buses swerve when the roads are icy, sometimes the traffic stops suddenly and unexplainably and causes the infrastructure to break down. But this painting is not interested in the accident, nor in the causes of it, the consequences of it or the practical circumstances surrounding it. We merely see this matter-of-factly transformation of two vehicles caused by an accidental collision where two systems have had a violent effect on each other and created a new system, a new “connex”, as it says, almost ironically, on the side of one the buses in the work **Smadret**(Smashed). Jammed together like a cheeseburger, the buses have formed a complicated, chaotic figure, which now attracts more attention than the vainly appealing gaze of the woman on the poster or the comforting tower of the church in the cold landscape.

In the geometric centre of the picture, right where one would normally expect something like a vanishing point, the space appears compressed to the utmost degree: creased, wrinkled. An otherwise well-organised structure has broken down. Cars meant to glide smoothly through the well-trained landscape have been forced to stop and rearrange. The new (dis)order is emphasised by the contrast with the white, silent landscape with the tile church that is visible in the left side of the picture and also represented in various shades and degrees of spattering through the more or less battered windowpanes (as if to demonstrate the very difficulty of representing a landscape). In the centre of the picture, the general view, thus also the landscape, breaks down. The clarity of the broad format, the wide horizon, the landscape windows of the buses, the woman who stretches out in front of the viewer’s desiring gaze, and the tight bow of the road – all these lines promise a visibility, an accessibility, and a clarity that suddenly – in the knot of the centre – are replaced by a labyrinth of abstract surfaces floating in and out among each other. Opposite this space, the gaze of the viewer adopts another position than the one which the rest of the scene seems to encourage. Here, there are no fixed points and no obvious motivic order. On the contrary, there is the creation of something that yet has no name. It is the painting under way. Or going astray. In the words of Marcel Duchamp: Definitively unfinished.

Incorporated in the works of Allan Otte are two overriding systems or levels. And somewhere in the middle we find what is perhaps most interesting: the planes in between that belong to now one level, now the other – and which make these levels slide and collide.

At first, the paintings seem alluringly simple. We see the first level: a well-known system, suitable for visual seduction and for presenting spectacular images. But when we look closer, the scenes do not really make sense as such. Surprising fractures, displacements, and inconsistencies turn up, undermining the apparent “realism” that characterises this first, figurative system. Now another system forces its way in, partly in the shape of abstract formations with clear-cut, unbroken, yet liquid outlines, partly in the shape of horizontal and vertical strokes applied with an almost manic precision, and finally as misty and blurred sectionsconjured up with an airbrush that often resembles a photographic blurriness, but which here also brings about a general blurring and destabilisation of the scene as a whole.

Let us begin by saying that the paintings present themselves on two seemingly separate levels, corresponding to two separate positions that we, as viewers, can assume when confronted with the painted spaces. One makes us take a step backwards in order to be able to view the painting from a certain distance, as a motif, a scene, a space, an image. From this position, the painting seems to make perfect sense, rather like the relatively successful representation in a finished puzzle, where we disregard the sinuous outlines of the pieces in order to see the whole scene as a self-contained unity. It seems recognisable to us, in the same way that we typically find photographic images recognisable. At this level, there is apparently a continuity between foreground and background, and an unbroken spatial connection between the individual parts of the scene. In terms of subject-matter, they make up a consistent and meaningful structure.

The other position is more near-sighted, and in some respects it encourages a more flickering or disconnected way of looking at the painting. At this level, we come very close to the surface and discover other structures in the painted material than the ones that seemed to conjure up the picture at the first level. The painting is articulated differently here. It follows lines and outlines that only on a very general level underpin the formal demands of the subject-matter. It would be wrong to say what is often said of impressionism, among other things – that subject-matter dissolves itself into brushstrokes or in the optical-sensual dots and spots of experience that challenge the picture as image. What we encounter here is not the smallest units of perception, nor is it the flickering particles of light on the surfaces of the world. At best, the micro planes that appear on this level refer back to the mechanically generated circumstances of the digital, photographic sources that each painting is based on, and at first, they neither refer to the eye nor to the world. First of all, they constitute their own morphology and physique, which stems from the particular method that is at the root of these paintings.

With such a double position vis-à-vis the painting, it soon becomes clear that all details and micro planes actually have an in-between status. The in-between planes act as both representation and pictorial physique, as immaterial signs as well as concrete material. If we look at the painting **Skredet** (Skidded) from a suitable distance, we notice a box that is mounted on the trailer of the capsized truck. But if we study it more closely, we see the box as an abstract structure of horizontal and vertical brushstrokes drawn across the surface of the painting with clear traces of the tool used. The parallel to 17th century Dutch still life and genre painting is striking, not least in the way in which our gaze is coaxed into the details so that it loses itself in a technique, a special phenomenological effect. In Dutch painting, the viewer can become a witness to the metaphysical transformation that happens when a brushstroke goes from being a physical inscription on the surface to participating in the convincing mimesis of the picture, like a detail in a piece of fabric, in a lemon peel, a crystal glass or a clock. But Allan Otte’s paintings have not come into existence with a view to surprising or impressing the viewer by displaying a catalogue of pictorial effects. On the contrary: they appear dry and methodical. Besides, the subjects are far more than occasions for a play to the gallery or for practicing painting at all. Form and content determine each other – they are inextricably intertwined. Or rather: they make it clear that the content does have a form, and that the form does have a content. The first figurative level, the level of the subject, thus does not exist independently of the other, more abstract level. The two levels slide into each other, exchange positions and establish strange transitions without any obvious affiliations – semi-figurative and semi-abstract transitions.

Allan Otte’s scenes are undramatic, depopulated, and stagnant. As for the atmosphere, a cool and matter-of-factly tone is set. The gaze is waiting, observing, and investigating. A car is lying in a ditch, the accident has already happened. A tractor with an overturned trailer and a capsized wagonload of bales of straw is waiting quietly by the roadside, and a truck is wedged in under a bridge, but we do not see any rescue workers or other people one might expect would be present in such a situation. In other paintings, we see landscapes – not beautiful, captivating landscapes, but ordinary, flat, prototypical, Danish, civilised landscapes, used landscapes with many signs of human activity (sometimes an unrealistic amount of them), landscapes with only a few trees, broad fields, fences, wrapped-up bales of straw, black asphalt roads, crash fences, and machines and buildings in various states of disrepair. The paintings show us these landscapes, not in order to idealise them or criticise them, but because they contain an impartialness – although they might suddenly take on – and perhaps continually take on – a dreamlike nature and become grotesque, apocalyptic or melancholy pictures filled with atmosphere and confused conceptions to go with it. The landscapes, and the images of crashed vehicles and worn-out or burning agricultural machines that the landscapes set the scene for, are thus balancing on the edge between dream and documentation. On the one hand, they make use of some of the reality effects developed in the course of time by photography and realism, and they never seek to hide the presence of photographic sources. On the other hand, by using the broad format, a number of grotesque constellation of subjects, and the un-photographic co-ordinations of keenness and dimness at the same level, they emphasise their own collage-like nature and expose the subjects as imaginary, invented and sometimes almost theatrical situations.

But the most important thing is still the presence of the forces documented by the figures of the paintings – forces that in various ways reflect the physical forces at play in the paint. The forces at work – this is what ties form and content together. An example: The truck that is wedged in under a road bridge, apparently because the driver has disregarded a sign stating the maximum height for passing vehicles, portrays a physically wedged in situation. The condition of the car is one of deadlock. The essential thing about the work **Klemt** (Squeezed) is not the event itself, nor the drama surrounding a rescue, but the very interaction of forces: the bridge, the road, the car and its tarpaulin, which yields to the pressure of the bridge. At the other level of the painting, the abstract and physical level, we rediscover this interaction, this figure, which was first decoded on the general, motivic level. Here, the sharply full-drawn brushstrokes stand out clearly against each other, almost squeezed in or pinned down in outlines that frame and break up the sequence of the traces on the surface of the painting**.**Around these outline-limits, the strokes change direction or jump from one technical level to another, for instance in the transition from the concise stroke of the brush to the fog banks of the airbrush. The transitions, which usually seem very abrupt, actually only contain a very modest reference to circumstances found in the digital, photographic source. They are factual, pictorial phenomena that stem from the characteristics of the paint and the colour, the two-dimensionality of the surface, the nature of the tool, and the method of painting. However, specific circumstances like that – and there are undoubtedly more – are merely the physical point of departure for the series of transformations that are set in motion by the painter. This is what makes the painting go from being a physical phenomenon to becoming a semiotic and dynamic universe where our gaze can wander, not just between two general levels, between the figuration of the scene and the abstraction of the surface, but also among the disconnected and complicated interlacings of the spaces in between – that is, all the way down to the engine room of the painting, the place where we see the material and the ideas, the form and the content at work, constantly moving and interchanging.

Now we are in a position to introduce light and shade into the preliminary conclusion – that Allan Otte’s paintings let the viewer commute between the panoramic recognisability on the one hand and the chaos of the detail level on the other. Rather, it seems that these paintings lead the gaze (and thus also thought, imagination, conception) onto tortuous, labyrinthine roads filled with surprises and pitfalls, filled with holes, jumps, difficult passages, and deadlock situations, filled with dreary and monotonous stretches  - and the most sublime abysses and burnings. Here, we must come to terms with the paradox that we are always on the level of the subject, but never get further than to events on the physical surface of the painting.

There are no main roads into these pictures. No straight stretches. Only detours. And plenty of opportunities for going astray.