



# Günther Herbst

The Absence of Myth

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Cover image  
*Blueprint*  
pp14-15

## The Absence of Myth

*The incessant and light play of hesitation, the dull allure of language and the laughter of morning, or the excessive opacity of a hearse, does not change the transparency of universe: from the blind man to someone whom the light floods with joy the distance is nil; knowledge cannot be separated from ecstasy, nor can ecstasy be separated from the horror of non-knowledge... What I am saying has simultaneously distinct clarity and obscurity, meaning and absence of meaning, complete ecstasy and complete horror.*

(Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth*)



*Resolution*  
2014  
Acrylic on paper  
310X410mm

Our capacity to explore and discover is forever bound into turbulent histories and politics of land. The natural always intervenes with the human and its unending aspirations for expansion. So much so that, in the post-human times we inhabit, it would be accurate to identify the natural as the politics of human and, in the absence of any true belief and conviction, use it to justify and explain away the overburdening histories that turned imperialism into globalization, the Crusades into radical Islamism and the politics of fear we are all privy to in the 21st century.

When Freeman Dyson discovered the chemical compounds that made the atomic bomb, the original purpose of his research was directed towards space exploration and the potential for space colonies and communities. The idea was 'simple': a large number of small hydrogen reactions in a form of explosions will propel the space vessel, producing the high velocity necessary for the vessel's travel through Earth's atmosphere. Dyson's research was later adopted by Stanley Kubrick and used for the *2001: A Space Odyssey* film script. It was also used in Hiroshima.

What I am hoping to conjure up are the contradictions that, as knowledge goes, change from its original intentions towards something less predictable and unthought-of. This is the true nature of research, after all. The knowledge acquisition resides in our desire to affect its certainty, not confirm its stability. This process of mutation, even diversion, speaks also of a paradox of communication that allows for linguistic and representational ambiguities. My point is simple, how can an aspiring, well-meant project such as Dyson's turn into the darkest chapter of human history? I will return to this point later on.

In Günther Herbst's painting *Magnetized Space*, an active volcano gushing smoke points to a geological tableaux whose function is compromised within the environment placed. It has no role to play in the overall scale of events. We are invited to reconstruct Herbst's careful harmonizing of unrelated territories that are equally natural as they are fabricated. Strangely, they draw us to the Dysonian paradox; a chemical reaction so versatile, it can act on the most absurd of relations that are perhaps better contextualized through the phenomenon of culture rather than nature.

The strength of Herbst's work is, precisely, in drawing our attention to these relations. Taking the landscape format informed by the history paintings of William Hodges, the flotilla of painterly Modernism is placed in the context that marks not only its own end, but the end of history itself. Certainly the historical chronology that, in Herbst's visual vocabulary considers its consequences and effects, marks a critical departure from the carefully constructed narratives a tradition of landscape painting is eager to adopt.

That is because, in Herbst's paintings, there are no ulterior motives.

What resonates at a point of urgency are clearly 'misplaced' signs, whose function is disguised through visual diagrams of the floating rafts. Follow these and you are heading for a crash of visual and national identities. Chameleon-like, these structures have developed the adoptability that floats through murky waters of Modernism, changing colours and flags in order to secure its future and meaning. Herbst's painterly precision is used critically to assign 'otherness' to the instructiveness of signs. There is a flip side to its address, just like the word 'otherness' no longer assigns the state of being the other. Herbst understands this more than most. After his relocation to Europe, the history of his native South Africa took on an altogether different identity that informed his painterly practice through different visual, iconographical and contextual histories and languages. The question of cultural tradition in relationship to otherness is a pertinent one to observe. The modernist 'motifs' that float the waters of Herbst's paintings are familiar, even iconic. Malevich's gray and black compositions inform the structures of the rafts that teeter between cultural collapse and hegemony. The revolutionary ideas of the Avant Garde so brutally abstracted under the guise of newness and formal purity are now just a prototype for the theoretical musing about the revolutionary resistance. Malevich's infatuations with the forms of 'new' propelled by the binary ideology of politics and religion, nature and culture, underline the rhetoric of Modernism that, in its progressive structuring of time and future, fails to extract the unified perspective despite its claims to homogeneity.

As early as 1915 Malevich claimed "the artist can be a creator only when the forms in his picture have nothing in common with nature" (Malevich in Benjamin, 1969, p97). Herbst's paintings pick up on this contradiction by representing a less formal side to his argument. Herbst confronts us with the nature of reproduction, the original and its copy Walter Benjamin so succinctly articulated in his essay on Mechanical Reproduction. For Malevich, the natural still functions within the aesthetic qualities of sublime that are dealt with formally through the language of abstraction. Hence the black square that only formally embodies the notion of purity, attainable through material functioning of painting. For Malevich, the commonality with nature carries deeper political and cultural connotations that are, perhaps, seen as less radical in relationship to formal and material qualities of painting. He takes a polarized view that is influenced by the cultural tradition of the torn out Russia, a view of the common land and the people that is un-grandiose in its daily routine for survival. There is something honorable and

down to earth about his approach. So is the case with Herbst's motives and references that point to the contemporary culture and society we all experience and are part of.

Malevich reminds us that there is a hard line between hope and a belief that is also informed by different political and individual representations, pending on the geographies and the locality we are placed within. Towards the end of his career, Malevich's radical views on painting subsided. He experienced the change of ideological wind in the cruelest of ways and was subjected to Stalin's Socialist Realism and the newly formed political direction of Russia. Malevich recoiled from the revolutionary purity of painterly signs into a visual landscape of representation and iconography. He returned to nature.

For Herbst, to import the iconography of Malevich's radicalism into his work is important. It layers the readings of his intentions and informs the 'otherness' of his painterly language. Firstly, we can read it via the aforementioned reproduction, not only as mediations of signs and representations but as ideas and aspirations that come and go through histories of people and land. By mediating the original, Herbst is conscious of the shifts that occur in the hope of transgressing the stereotypes preformed. Hence the presence of Frank Stella's stripes in the guise of floating flags and sails. The intention is to direct our attention to the painterly language that, away from its original form, becomes a tool of communication adapted in a much broader cultural and visual contexts. It is interesting to note the reinforced features of painterly formalism and abstraction in Herbst's paintings, which function as a shifting tool and a barometer of meaning from Abstract Expressionism through to Minimalism and Post-abstraction.

Where once we were inclined to consider Stella's object paintings on a level of painterly critique enforced by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, we are now free to rummage through painterly histories, seeking an unrestrained access to the categories given to painting.

In a conversation about the new paintings, Herbst points out that the way into the paintings is made through a landscape. For him, it functions as a formal tool, defined by the tradition of the figure-ground relationship, and a source of reference he uses in the form of a collage or a photograph to structure the narrative around it. Herbst insists on the presence of landscape that triggers our relationship not only with the natural but also with the cultural and the political. The acid light in *Raft 7* that emanates in the swampy polluted atmosphere of painterly effects, articulates our responsibilities even when none are taken – the omnipresent danger of the nuclear pollution Freeman Dyson so ambitiously conceived of at the start of this essay is now forever imprinted in the legacy of the human, from the nuclear plants of Chernobyl and Fukushima to the present political strategies of South Korea.

*The Absence of Myth* is, perhaps, the most apt of titles for this exhibition.

It is adopted from the book by one of the more radical philosophers and writers, Georges Bataille, whose thinking and writing on the notions of body, culture, society and community





Raft 6  
2015  
Acrylic on paper  
223X300mm

never falls short of controversies, the kinds the last two decades of the 21st century continue to experience. Bataille recognizes the contemporary society's denial of ancient myth, "founded on a mediation between mankind and the natural world through which the cohesion (and the necessity) of the society would be affirmed. The myth of contemporary society, therefore, was an 'absence of myth', since that society had deluded itself into believing it was without myth by making a myth of its very denial. Furthermore, it believed that it no longer had a need for myth, that it had evolved beyond dependence upon a ritual to establish a mediation between mankind and the rest of creation, since man now had dominion over nature." (Bataille, 2006, p13).

One of the finest myths Modernism still imposes on us is the dominance of knowledge over experience and sensations, so constructed as to doubt everything that is not empirically sound or proven. If, as Bataille suggests, the idea of non-knowledge equals horror, the human experience is well adjusted to deal with such, as our history and presence testify. To assume the privilege of omnipresent control, the idea of knowledge is misrepresented as in order to oblige our desire for perpetual innovation and progress; the pact with horror is, than, the only real solution we are presented with. Freeman Dyson, I assume, in the end, understood the paradox, the most. If only in the language (if not in the contemporary society), are we fully furnished with the capacity to communicate this, the potential to think ourselves out of it still permeates in our consciousness and is perhaps not so far out of our site. Herbst brings it closer to us, if only to remind us that our aspirations are fragile constructs that, raft like, float the waters of our desires but need to be accounted for and safeguarded through both ecstasy and horror.

Andrea Medjesi-Jones, 2015

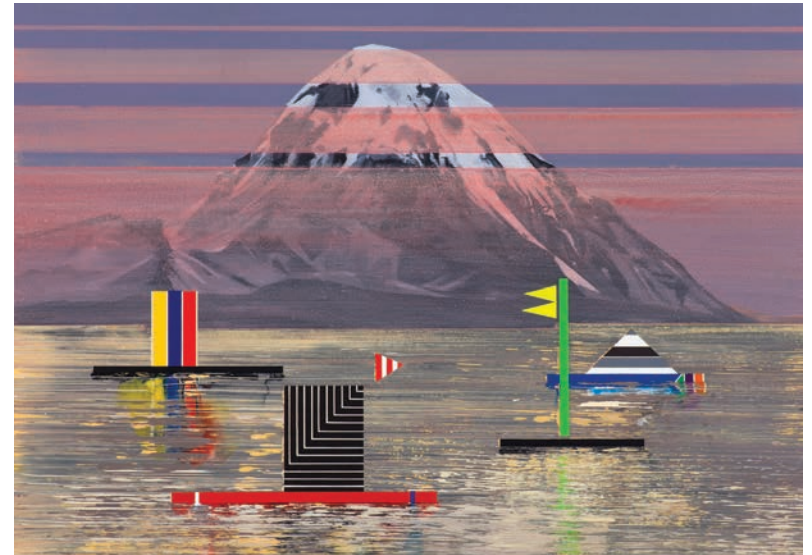
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Andrea Medjesi-Jones is a practising artist based in London, working in painting and drawing. She studied fine art at Goldsmiths College and completed her practice-based PhD in contemporary painting at the Cambridge School of Art. She has exhibited extensively in the UK, Europe and the USA and has recently completed the Abbey Fellowship in Painting at the British School in Rome. She teaches fine art at Bath School of Art and Design and at CASS School of Art, Architecture and Design at London Metropolitan University.



*Magnetized Space*  
2015  
Acrylic on canvas  
1000X1300mm



*Who's afraid of Lygia Pape*  
2015  
Acrylic on paper  
322X464mm



*The Absence of Myth*  
2015  
Acrylic on paper  
333X473mm

pp14-15  
*Blueprint*  
2015  
Acrylic on canvas  
1445X1790mm









*Raft 7*  
2015  
Acrylic on canvas  
1260X1620mm





*LBRUTE*  
2015  
Acrylic on paper  
334X454mm



*The Ice Island 2*  
2014  
Oil and acrylic  
on canvas  
860X1120mm





*Raft 4*  
2014  
Acrylic on paper  
310X410mm

*The Ice Islands*  
2014  
Acrylic on paper  
310X410mm





*Raft 5*  
2014  
Oil and acrylic  
on canvas  
1000X1350mm

Günther Herbst was born in South Africa where he obtained his first degree in Fine Arts at the University of Johannesburg in 1991. He moved to Germany in 1992 and studied under Professor Karl Horst Hödicke at the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin. In 1995 he relocated to London to continue his practice and study at Goldsmiths University of London where he obtained his Masters Degree in 2002. He won the prestigious Jerwood Contemporary Painters Award in 2008. Herbst exhibits widely, most notably in the UK, Europe and the USA. His work is represented in all major public collections in South Africa, as well as UK public collections and international private collections. Günther Herbst lives and works in London.

This catalogue accompanies Günther Herbst's solo exhibition *The Absence of Myth* at GALLERY AOP, June 2015

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