



Ute Diehl The geological perspective – Per Kirkeby's 'glowing landscapes' underground

Neuroscience has not yet managed to answer the question of what happens in our minds when we look at a picture, and it also remains a mystery why not everyone likes the same colours. If we knew the answer, no artist would ever paint anything that their audience disliked.

Yellow is considered to be a colour that promotes well-being, and it is also appreciated for its high visibility in warning signs. In our painting, Per Kirkeby creates an exhilarating effect by allowing the yellow to flow into orange and reddish purple. This painting is impossible to ignore. Sulphur rises from the earth's interior forming a golden backdrop for shifting grey-green areas. The viewer imagines rock, water and vegetation winding their way through.

Kirkeby spent decades painting landscapes, but never depicted specific places or areas. "I don't care about the landscape at all," he said. Instead of beautiful vistas, he primarily saw layered matter. He had the eye of a geologist, which is why there is no horizon in his paintings.

From 1958 onwards, he took part in several expeditions to Greenland. At first, the young student was just looking for adventure, but he became completely captivated by the history of the formation and structure of the Earth's crust. In 1964, he completed his studies with a doctorate in Arctic geology. As an artist, he drew on his experiences during expeditions to create geological drawings, which he transformed into art, and explored the terrain with the eye of a painter. "Geology is the study of the forces behind forms, both constructive and destructive," he said, referring to both rock science and his art.

We know that there are tectonic shifts in the Earth's plates. The fact such infinitely slow changes cannot be observed always irritated Kirkeby and he attempted to visualise telluric currents in his landscape art. Geologists think in different time dimensions, and when they paint, it can take them longer to finish a picture. Kirkeby worked on several paintings simultaneously for months, repainting them over and over again until, as he put it, "a sedimentation of wafer-thin layers" formed. He was interested in things that took a long time and could last a long time. He found working on his large-format paintings tedious, but loved the feeling "of almost being able to walk into them, like walking into a garden. You take a little bit of soil from here and carry it over there and plant something. It's a wonderful feeling, which is why I painted such large works."

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Kirkeby was part of the circle of neo-expressionists surrounding art dealer Michael Werner, but he was never really a neo-expressionist, as his work lacks spontaneous and dramatic gestures. His wonderfully colourful paintings, which became larger and brighter over the years, thrive not only on primary colours but also on the many shades in between, which are constantly in flux, like the colours of nature.

Kirkeby was not only a painter and sculptor, but also an essayist and poet, and although he believed that too many thoughts interfere with the painting process, his inquiring mind always remained alert. He was fascinated by Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'Remarks on Colour,' which he illustrated with four colour etchings in 1998. In the book the Viennese philosopher embarks on the "colourful path from blue to yellow" and asks: "Does green-blue contain yellow? Is there a green that leans neither towards blue nor yellow?" Kirkeby would surely have known the answer, but admitted: "I hate green, but I can't escape it when everything outside turns green." That meant the paintings were also green, so Kirkeby placed them in the corner, waiting to see "how long the picture would hold on to its green".

4^R Per Kirkeby

1938 – Copenhagen – 2018

"Fünf". 1989

Oil on canvas. 200 × 200 cm (78 3/4 × 78 3/4 in.).

Signed, dated and titled with brush in black on the reverse: PER KIRKEBY 1989 Fünf. On the stretcher with labels from exhibitions in Oslo, Stockholm, Humlebæk and Valencia (see below) as well as of Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne. Catalogue raisonné: Larsen M 961. [3097]

Provenance

Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne / Corporate Collection, Germany (acquired in 1991, 2010–2025 on loan to Albertinum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden)

EUR 150,000–200,000

USD 169,000–225,000

Exhibition

Kirkeby. Pinturas, Esculturas, Grabados y Escritos.

Valencia, IVAM, 1989–90, ill. p. 135 / Per Kirkeby.

Humlebæk, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 1990 /

Per Kirkeby. Cologne, Galerie Michael Werner, 1990,

cat. no. 8, w. ill. / Per Kirkeby. Oslo, The National

Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990–91, cat. no. 40

