

JA So Ati, I met you about ten years ago.

AM Nine years ago.

JA At the gallery, through Gregory Volk.

AM Actually, it was seven years ago.

JA You were working only on paper then, making highly chromatic, straightforward landscape pieces. When did you become fascinated with these more abstracted and complexly layered “landscapes,” or “spacescapes,” that you’re doing now?

AM In the ‘90s. I would only work in small scale on paper and it was much more simple than what it is now.

JA Did you always work on paper?

AM No. When I was in school in Vienna I worked on big canvases and also did a lot of sculptural works. But when I came to New York I had to reduce my scale because I didn’t have a studio and I worked at home, so I just started to work intensely on this small paper format. I would do a bunch of small drawings and put them together into a big piece like a puzzle.

Going back to the landscape question...that started when I first went out West to Wyoming and I saw the western landscape for the first time, which is very open, and very different from what we have in Germany. You can travel across Germany in one day, which is nothing compared to the distances you travel here. So I really got into that part of the American West, how it got explored, and I did a whole show about that called “Homesteads” which was about exploring and settling the West. And then from that exploring trip I started getting into outer space and exploring ideas about space.

JA Your work has definitely shifted into a more complex, almost psychedelic context, using a very intense color palette that aligns itself with psychedelic notions. But is it more about abstraction, or just intuitive painting, or does it develop from the technique? I’m thinking of “Twin Peaks,” the big diptych canvas

AM My working process is actually getting more and more complicated. I started this painting with a whole number of sketches that I put on top of each other—and now I do the sketches in airbrush—probably about ten different sketches. I begin by warping a grid or warping a landscape or warping a specific thing, and those are the first layers I put on. Then I go over it with the paint and sometimes I put something totally different on top of it. So then I have the contrast between the airbrush that I leave showing through in some areas and the sharper edges of the paint on top.

JA That’s on your canvases? You started the canvases about a year ago, right?

AM Yeah, about a year ago, and right now they’re getting bigger and bigger.

JA You felt limited working on paper?

AM Yeah. I like to make a lot of different layers and on the paper I am limited. I can only put so many layers on and I got to the maximum. If it gets too thick it actually comes off. But on the canvas I can go on forever. I go over over over...

JA So what’s your issue with scale? Why bigger? Is bigger better? Are the compositions more developed?

AM Yes, the compositions are more complicated, more developed, and also the larger scale brings in other dimensions, like more energy, more speed, more complexity.

- JA When you begin a painting it doesn't seem like you have it all planned out...it seems very serendipitous. You start it in a very loose manner, using airbrush now, and it develops as you go. Do you have a single idea when you start?
- AM No, no never. I have an idea when I start with that airbrush sketch, but that's only the first step and then the piece totally takes over. It's a process. I just go step-by-step and look at it and talk to it and see what it says. It's like I switch from channel to channel, from one space to another space, creating a mental and visual concentration and density.
- JA Some of them still reference landscape but they have much more of an outer space orientation; there's no signifier in terms of place. They have more of a foreground / background now and abstraction in that sense. It seems much more evolved and away from that landscape orientation even though there are still signifiers, and you still kind of read into it that way.
- AM Well, before I had actual landscapes and actual figures, like horses or astronauts or spaceships, which you could still identify after I was finished. The final painting came out of the beginning sketches and you could still see them in it. But now the sketches really just start the process where I put a bunch of different realities on top of each other on one piece of paper or canvas. They can be different perspectives, warped spaces, or just normal landscapes...trees, mountains. I put one sketch on top of another so they overlap. Through the overlapping I get new dimensions, new intersections or new spaces, which I then go into and that tells me where to go next. I try to connect everything through the process of painting and then it becomes way more abstracted. It becomes like an interactive web between the sketches that are like servers—they're all overlapping and some of them are totally different and then it starts to become a web. So I'm connecting different sketches and layers, just as everything and everyone is connected through WiFi networks and cyberspace.
- JA Your process seems very kinetic in that way. It does drive a very motion-filled, almost futurist, image.
- AM All the sources I use now are very different too. I use a lot of things from way back—ancient maps or whatever. I also try to use the aerial view of things, like NASA reports or topographical maps. It's a micro / macro-cosmos situation: transforming vast spaces and distances into a miniature scale, or fitting a universe into a nutshell. That also gives a surrealistic aspect to my work. I want to connect all those sources and see what happens on the paper, then something new comes out of that. And I really never know what's going to happen. It's like a vision reporting on places I've never seen and have never been to. It's a filtering of the information overload in my mind, and I then transform certain interesting parts into the works. Sometimes I have a new idea and I put a new sketch on top of everything I already have there because it looks like it needs something. And then it might change the whole painting again.
- JA What influenced you in doing this kind of work? Was Hunterwasser an influence?
- AM I studied in Austria and he was one of the teachers at my school but it's probably more because I'm from Munich, where the Blau Reiter group was working. Franz Marc, August Macke, and Kandinsky were very influential.
- JA Are you fighting that influence now?
- AM No, I'm not fighting it. Paul Klee was also very influential when I started.
- JA Your work is becoming very unique. I mean, you have your own voice in the work and you really developed it on this translucent, vellum-type paper you use. Your use of wood stains is really unusual too. How did you get involved in these materials?
- AM When I was in school I was working in oils and egg tempera and I really liked egg tempera for awhile but then I started to work on this specific paper and I got into the wood stain through Joseph Beuys because of some work he did with wood stain. I just started to experiment. I love to experiment...I should be a chemist or a physicist or something. Even with colors, I just mix everything. I mostly work with inks now and airbrush colors, but I mix everything, even those. I work with both of them on paper and on canvas.
- JA But now you're leaving paper behind again?

- AM I still work on paper and I've started to work with different paper now because of the airbrush—my other paper doesn't take the airbrush. I just love to try different things because I get bored. I can't do one thing twice. It just bores me.
- JA It seems like your influences now are from more contemporary artists, like Julie Mehretu. The influence also has more to do with scale.
- AM The influence is definitely more from contemporaries, even other Pierogi artists, like Sarah Walker or Yoon Lee, are influential. Then when I was in the show at the Whitney Julie Mehretu and Matthew Ritchie were very influential. That's why I like New York because you actually meet those people and you see their work all the time and that's very important.
- JA That's how artists used to develop, they used to form schools so they could sit around and talk about ideas, and drink.
- AM Now it's more that everybody wants to do their own thing but you still want to see what the others are doing or you are very interested in what they're doing and you want to talk to them about it. You want to know about their ideas. For me, that's very interesting actually, and very influential.
- JA But if you didn't see Mehretu's work, or work by artists like her, would you be working with large scale or when you saw this did it blow your mind and you thought "I've got to try this"? Because once you go on canvas, the sky's the limit.
- AM It was very encouraging. Plus it was time for me to change from the very small scale to the big scale. I was always playing with that because I did big canvases when I was in school. When I first came to New York I didn't have a studio so I had to cut down the scale. I still have a relatively small studio which is in my home. I worked on this small scale for about eight years and it was just time to get bigger again, and then everything kind of fit into place. I saw those large scale paintings and I got very encouraged to do something with that again. Plus I changed my techniques...I changed almost everything.
- JA To adapt to the scale in a way?
- AM Yeah, but the idea to use the airbrush came before I had the idea to do something big. I just wanted to use it for a long time. What I like about airbrush is that you can work very fast with it, which is a problem with my paper work because it takes forever. I go over and over and over and I do a lot of thin layers so it's very time consuming. Whereas with the airbrush I can do it very fast and it shows the speed in the work too, which I like. I like all kinds of contradictions in the work. I like the viewer to look and find things you don't see at the first glimpse. I want to complicate the viewers' assumptions and engage their curiosity.
- JA There's a real intuitiveness about the work.
- AM It is very intuitive. Of course I never know when I start what it's going to be at the end. So I just go step-by-step and it's a process. The working process is similar to going through a *derivé*: you do the right thing at the right time but in a very unconscious way. It's like a psycho-geography, like the drifting type of thought that the Situationists used. Like DeBord said, "If you just wander about in a *derivé* in the right spirit you end up in the right place." It's a very unconscious technique that everyone has access to, you just have to use it. That's kind of how I paint. I just let myself drift. Of course, there are parts where I make decisions very consciously, but then when I actually work it's very unconscious.
- JA Some of the imagery is definitely planetoid. It's almost science fiction.
- AM I definitely have a big affection for space right now. I could be a space woman. That's what I want to be in my next life. That's a good point, though, because when I was in the "Invented Worlds" show the Whitney I had a discussion with Elizabeth Sussman, the curator, about it. I read a lot of Sci Fi books. In literature Sci Fi is acknowledged, but in visual art there's nothing like Sci Fi that is acknowledged as a genre, except comics, maybe. I really think there should be a Sci Fi genre.
- JA It is dangerous territory in a way. You pull it off because of the visual intensity of your work but it can be sort of marginalized, this genre of work. But yours has an amazing visual aspect outside of that context; it becomes an abstraction and a painting.

AM Where I'm going right now is definitely towards abstraction. We were talking earlier about Elizabeth Sussman's catalogue essay for the Whitney exhibition. In it she identified two directions that the artists were taking: one direction was going from figurative to abstraction and the other one was the reverse. I'm going from figurative to abstract.

JA Color is such a dynamic aspect of your work and it is really powerful in that way. Why do you use so much color?

AM When you look at my color palette at the time when I was studying in Vienna, I was basically only using brown and ochre tones and maybe red. It was totally different. It was much darker. At this point I'm getting brighter all the time. So I don't know when I'll reach my limit.

The other important thing is that I really try to connect a lot of different things, basically everything, which sounds stupid...

JA The Theory of Everything?

AM When I use sketches to start a piece my references could be anything from outer space imagery, a regular landscape, a bird's-eye landscape, a carnival, or just a photograph. I pick things that at first glance don't have anything to do with each other, but then I put them on the paper and once I do that, they are together on the paper and I try to connect them. I just think everything in this world is connected somehow.

JA Well you have these lines that could go on almost endlessly and connect.

AM When I'm working I try to find lines or paths or trails that go and connect the different ideas which are on the paper.

JA Theory of everything, that's a good title.

AM That's a big title though.

JA Theory of almost everything.

AM That's better. Quantum theory is completely different from the theory of relativity which describes the stars and stuff, and when you try to bring them together it doesn't work. Einstein could never figure that out. So now they try to make a new theory which is the theory of everything, which is also called string theory, which goes into 12 dimensions. So it sounds really complicated, but in the end they're going back into what everything is made out of. And they think everything is made up of tiny little strings that vibrate and how they vibrate describes what elements they make up. But so far no one has been able to prove it experimentally.

JA Is your work connected to physics like that?

AM I think physics is cutting-edge because it actually describes and explains our reality.

JA Well, it's just as abstract as some of what you're doing.

AM Even though I have no idea about the mathematics and everything I love to read about it and I do that all the time.

JA How do you research it?

AM You can read a lot of it on websites or in physics magazines. I read physics books too. You can read some of Einstein's stuff, or essays by Brian Green who tries to write in a way that everybody can understand. Scientists try to make it understandable for normal people now, which is nice.

JA How does music affect your work?

AM I listen to very different kinds of music, from classical to electronic to hip-hop, to whatever. I mostly listen to music while I work, and sometimes I use phrases from the lyrics as titles or put them in the pieces. You can compare the way I work with sampling, like a DJ sampling music. You just take different things and put them

together into a new work, a new piece of music, or a piece of art. You just use what you want and then edit it in a way that makes something completely new.

JA DJ Ati. So when you're listening to music does that affect your work or is it more of a general influence?

AM I think it does influence the work because it puts me in a certain mood. Sometimes I have a really hard rhythm and I probably paint faster. I think it definitely influences the mood I'm in.

JA Where do you want to go with this?

AM To space...I don't know. As I said, for me, the experimental part is very important. I want to keep it interesting for me and for the viewer. I'm really into exploration.

JA So that's where space and painting combine.

AM I want to explore new worlds, new frontiers.

JA Do you treat your canvases, or your frames, as a metaphor for a window? Are you looking out at someplace? Are you going through a portal?

AM I don't really want to escape reality. I want to invent new realities but it doesn't have anything to do with escaping. I mean, I like living in New York, actually. I'm pretty happy here. I think it has a good energy, for me at least.

JA It's like what Gregory Volk wrote in his essay about your work last year. He said that the earlier works were more direct landscapes, but then the later ones, when they're landscapes, are as if you're looking from outer space and you're seeing both the earth and space simultaneously.

AM Yeah, the early works didn't have all these levels. It was just a landscape with five moons or something, so the weird thing was the five moons. That's what I tried say about connecting everything and creating this web to connect it. I really think everything is connected so the theory of everything makes total sense for me.

JA Your abstractions have an emotional aspect to them. Your landscapes have this element too, but now it seems to be more involved in the process of the whole abstraction of the work.

AM And it has to do more with the density of a lot of different layers. It's just way more complex now.

JA Well it's very compelling that way. You can fall into it and it's more open.

AM You really have to look more too, because there are a lot of layers and you really need time. If you stand in front of one of the big canvases, for example, you really need time to get into it because there are a lot of details. There are a lot of things you can discover if you want. I try to hide things. I try to make it complicated. I don't want everything to be visible right away because I think nothing is visible right away. Black and white does not exist in this world. There are a lot of layers, a lot of details that you should look at.