Torsten Andersson
Galerie Nordenhake Berlin
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Torsten Andersson, *Ljuskrona av trä* (Chandelier of Wood), 1980–89, oil on canvas, 59 × 51 ¼".

It's circa 1960, and some people are once again starting to say painting is dead. In its terminal state, the monochrome, it has transformed into an exercise in rendering space and void. But at the same time, in Sweden, Torsten Andersson (1926–2009) is frantically attempting a resuscitation. His painting *Molnen Mellan Oss* (The Clouds Between Us), 1966, although not on view at Galerie Nordenhake, lent its name to this exhibition, in

testimony to the decisive role it played in concluding a period the artist termed his “struggle for language.”

Among the works on display, *Ljuskrona av trä* (Chandelier of Wood), 1980–89, seemed closest in spirit to this effort: It depicts a lumpy canvas with a red form captioned LJUSKRONA/TRÄ (chandelier/wood) painted on it, leaning on a dark-blue cube. The background is white, and the two artworks shown in the painting never existed. Such is the language Andersson so struggled to develop: imaginary objects in imaginary space, figurative depictions of abstract shapes. The composition works like an infinity mirror to deflect art’s game of interpretation versus representation back onto itself. Like other artists at the time (Georg Baselitz with his upside-down imagery comes to mind), Andersson collapsed the distinction between abstraction and figuration, but not only that. By choosing sculptures as his primary subject matter, he also called into question the relationship between the flat and the spatial object. When we think back on one of Andersson’s paintings, do we not think back on a sculpture?

The question also arises as to whether the content of Andersson’s paintings is pure form. Is it more important that we understand what is pictured to be a sculpture than what, exactly, that sculpture looks like? Andersson’s later series of paintings “*Tygskulptur*” (Fabric Sculpture), ca. 2001–2004, and “*Pinnaskulptur*” (Stick Sculpture), ca. 2004–2006, likewise tell us what material these imaginary works are made of. But what about the material of the paintings themselves? Andersson is famous for destroying the vast majority of his own creations, letting only the strongest survive. And those that did had a rough go of it. The canvases in this exhibition look bruised and mishandled and, in a few cases, were not originally stretched by the artist but have now been mounted to stretched canvases.

Andersson’s subjecting his work to a Darwinian survival of the fittest suggests that his struggle to forge a unique painterly language must have been hard-won. And like the children of a tough-love parent, the works have suffered. Light and gestural though they are, they bear traces of their forceful submission to the artist and his medium. This approach risks rendering paintings whose greatest quality is their immediate goofiness

unnecessarily claustrophobic. The fictitious artworks were shown not as they really would have been—stringent and economical—but as wonky and idiosyncratic. Stripped of conceptual contrivances, Andersson gives us modern art in a rare, unalienated state. Just as the celebrities in Elizabeth Peyton's portraits can look suddenly like old friends, Minimalist sculptures, under Andersson's brush, appear charmingly insecure. No rescue mission necessary: A painting's a painting's a painting.