

*Per Christian Brown in conversation with art writer Mona Gjessing:*

## **With half-closed eyes**

Berlin-based Norwegian artist Per Christian Brown is conducting an artistic research project that focuses on the connection between our dreaming and our scientific minds.



Per Christian Brown. Photograph: Jens Jürgen.

The curators of the art project for Nord University's Bodø Campus selected a video by Per Christian Brown, *Reveries of Material Interiority* (2015), and six of Brown's photographs because they are characterized by "a quest for knowledge in a soundly scientific spirit". These works form part of Brown's aesthetic treatment of *La terre et les rêveries du repos* (Earth and Reveries of Repose), an essay by the French philosopher and epistemologist Gaston Bachelard dating from 1948.

**Mona Gjessing (MG):** Artistic research is characterized by a diversity of forms of knowledge, with theories and methods being gathered from different sources. In your project much weight is attached to the

insights that a person may have from daydreams. The daydream, it is claimed, may reveal "the treasures in the inner nature of things". What do you mean by that?

**Per Christian Brown (PCB):** At the heart of Bachelard's great project is the idea that humans have a genuine imaginative ability that equips us to fantasize beyond the bounds of what is comprehensible. The world that surrounds us, our things and memories, have infinite interpretative potential, and each and every one of us carries a hereditary sensitivity for processing these experiences and impressions. The daydream may be an inner means of escape, it

may offer consolation, or it may supply us with mysteries that stimulate us to further thought. Some people have the ability to link the present and the past and to vanish into boundless psychological universes. For artists, daydreams are important not least for their creative potential.

MG: Bachelard studied the emergence of images in relation to matter and emphasized the importance of the four elements: earth, fire, air and water. In what way would you say that you have allowed yourself to be influenced by Bachelard?

PCB: For me, becoming acquainted with Bachelard's philosophy was a major discovery, and I've got really into it, so to speak. In many ways, the aesthetic treatment of Bachelard's philosophy has become my life's work, and it is a significant pathway in my artistic research. Some people might claim that Bachelard is a bit "over the top", that his imaginative world is slightly suspect, but it appeals to my personality and my way of creating images. Over my many years of work on Bachelard's texts, I have allowed myself to be influenced by his quest for underlying truths, beyond the classical understanding of properties and symbols that our culture attributes to the four elements. Bachelard points out that the small often reflects the large, and there are clear lines of connection between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic. Bachelard's main hypothesis, however, is that poets have a particular ability to create new connections through language. I support that idea wholeheartedly.

MG: The narrator's voice in your video is warm, gentle and dark. Will this kind of voice succeed in persuading visitors to Nord University in Bodø to forget the flood of images in our fast-moving and simplified media-driven world and allow themselves to be moved by the world to which you draw their attention?

PCB: I have faith in the viewer, but I am interested in making active use of a narrative voice when communicating with the public. I want to trigger a kind of meditative process that departs from reality and enters a universe of visual narrative. The narrator's voice is crucial, and in recent years I have been working with an elderly English man who, in addition to perfect diction, also has the ability to inhabit the text that he is reading, and add verbal colour to the different elements of my work.

MDG: I experience the visual style of the video and the narrator's voice as closely connected. Sometimes these two elements are accompanied by a third: music. Why did you choose Mozart's elegiac Piano Concerto no. 4?

PCB: Classical music is one of my absolute passions, and I have a large collection of recordings that I've been building up since I was a teenager. To me, music is the ultimate form of expression, because it has the ability to arouse such strong emotions within us. Music is also closely linked to memory. It can put us into states that images alone cannot succeed in doing. The amalgamation of music and images is a complex process, because it is the sum of them that reinforces the narrative and gives the viewer a greater sensory experience. I do it with caution; the music can easily take control. My ambition is to achieve a fusion that is in harmony at a deeper level. This andante movement by Mozart expresses an existential solitude and, at the same time, a quest for transformation. In the video, I attempt to convey the idea that nature reflects the solitude we are surrounded by and bear within us, and accordingly this piece by Mozart fitted like a glove.

MG: Bachelard's texts are very rich in content. Do you have plans to create more video pieces based on his texts?

PCB: Absolutely! This is the first video in a series of three that are based on his essay *Earth and Reveries of Repose*. The next film will be based on the fourth chapter, which is about the house, and the final film will be based on the sixth chapter, with the cave as its theme. In his chapter about the house, Bachelard writes that he feels sorry for people who grow up in apartments rather than houses. According to Bachelard, it is essential to have lived in a house with a living space, cellar and attic in order to become a complete person, with a fully-developed ability to dream. Perhaps this isn't so easy to understand, but it becomes clearer when Bachelard quotes Rimbaud: "In an attic in which I was shut up as a twelve-year old, I got to know the world and I illustrated the human comedy. In a cellar, I learned history."

MG: On the subject of caves: five of the six photographs chosen for this art project do actually

depict volcanic caves on Iceland and abstract tableaux of rocks, minerals and floating colour pigments photographed in various glass aquariums. Why this fascination with the Icelandic landscape?

PCB: Ever since 2013, when I was working on my 16mm film *The Flame that Dreams*, I've had a strong desire to visit and work in the strange volcanic landscape of Iceland. My fascination with volcanic action has grown in recent years, and I am fascinated by how magma and the richness of volcanic minerals and elements create shapes, structures and colours.

One of the photographs included in this art project, *The Cave Series, Thrihnúkagigur* Volcano 3, is an image of the interior of a volcanic magma chamber. Þríhnúkagígur (three-crater) volcano is unique because they have engineered a system that makes it possible to go 200 metres down into a huge cathedral-like space that bears the traces of a volcanic eruption that occurred about 4000 years ago. It is a magical place and perhaps one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. The insides of the walls are marked by intense colours that were created by the various metals melted into the mass of magma, for example a gold colour, which suggests the presence of iron, and green, which suggests the presence of copper.

The reason I've mastered a method of creating scenic compositions in water, by using various rocks and liquid colour pigments, is because I want to use photography to produce something that is more abstract, something that the viewer has to relate to and decode in a way that is different from a more "figurative" image. The process involves a lot of experimentation, among other things, to find out how the weights of different pigments govern the types of formations that are created when they are dissolved in water. While iron oxide, which is often used in black colours, is a heavy metal that falls to the bottom, cadmium and other red and yellow colours are lighter, and behave differently. The images become a kind of combination of things controlled and uncontrolled, and it is this combination that I find exciting to work with at the moment.

MG: I would like to talk a little more about your video work *Earth and Reveries of Repose – Reveries of Material Interiority*. In the film, the forest, and particularly the lush forest floor, is continually the focus of attention, but even so the viewer does not have the feeling of being transported to a particular *place*. In the rolling credits we read "Filmed in Germany and Norway".

What criteria do you apply when choosing the locations for your films?

PCB: I have different relationships with, and emotions about, the places where I film. Sometimes I have actual memories that drive me back to a place, other times I discover new places, either deliberately or by chance. I'm a collector of images, and it is in the editing process that a particular image of a forest or various trees is merged with the text, that is, the narrator's voice. The Norwegian landscape is rawer, darker, perhaps more substantial than the birch and oak forests of Germany. German forests have more history and more cultural references. I'm thinking for example of the great oak tree that is the dwelling place of the hero Siegfried in Wagner's opera *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie), where all the rooms are penetrated by branches. Germans see the forest as a sacred place. Perhaps I have a more intellectual relationship with nature in Germany than in Norway, because I didn't grow up there. **In any event, it activates different narratives within me.**

MG: In dreams, a dark forest may suggest a phase of disorientation and that area of the subconscious into which a person is often unwilling to go. In one of your earlier works, the film *The Aerial Tree* (2012), and in your most recent video production, the forest is the setting for the film. But not a dark forest, rather quite the opposite. Why is this so?

PCB: To me, the classical psychoanalytic interpretation of the dark forest is not interesting. The forest is so multi-faceted, it is not a single environment, but countless locations and worlds; it is home to trees, undergrowth, birds and animals that are just as dependent on light as we humans are. I try deliberately to avoid presenting the forest as a dark place, because from an art historical perspective that is associated with something that is mystical and romanticizing. It is the forest's diversity that I want to show in my works: The tree as a link between earth and heaven, the roots that burrow down into the depths while the branches reach up towards the light, the dichotomy between dark and light.

MG: The viewer cannot avoid noticing a certain erotic subtext in quotations such as "Man is the only creature on earth who wants to explore what is within other creatures" and "The desire to see what is within things makes the gaze into something piercing and penetrating". Both these

quotations suggest a connection between the sense of sight and sexuality. What thoughts do you have about this connection?

PCB: Sexuality permeates everything we do. Our thoughts are characterized by urges, and our gaze, the ability to see, is driven by a desire to see behind that which is visible, to remove the façade and explore what is concealing itself behind it. This urge is hereditary and our need to understand more of the world is fundamental to all development.

MG: How would you say that your artistic practice fits into the field of contemporary art?

PCB: Artistic research and the linking of art and science is something that many artists are doing today, so in that sense at any rate I glide seamlessly in.

MG: The French philosopher Jacques Rancière claims that art is political through the type of time and space it creates, and through the way it delimits that time and occupies that space. We can imagine things and then create things that don't exist, in other words, the artist has an *indirect* power to change social structures, to reorganize and reallocate. What do you think about the connection between art and politics?

PCB: I agree absolutely with the idea that the poetic imagination, with regard not only to nature, but everything that surrounds us, can contribute to changing patterns of thought, both individually and collectively. Rancière's ideas about the connection between art and politics in a way legitimise an artistic practice – including my own artistic practice – in which aesthetic expression and ideas about beauty are fundamental. With Rancière's backing, it's possible to reject any accusations of escapism once and for all.

MG: Finally I have a question about the photograph of the young man holding a flower under his chin, *An Inner Light # 3*. You also had this photograph in your solo exhibition at Galleri RAM in Oslo a couple of years ago. Am I correct in my understanding that this is also part of an ongoing series of photographs?

PCB: Yes, that's correct. I've taken the title for the series from the alchemist, physician and astrologer Paracelsus, whom I came upon a few years ago. Paracelsus claimed that the inner light of nature exists in all things, and that this light is linked to mankind's quest for truth. The alchemist is the great dreamer who bases his research on fantasy and imagination, and I'm fascinated by precisely this combination of the rational and the irrational. Subsequent work on the photographic series *An Inner Light* involves the use of metals, copper, silver and gold. This work is technically demanding because the optimal reflection – that is, the flower or metal object reflects light back onto the person holding it – is only achieved with the final intense rays of the sun, just before the sun goes down. Accordingly there's also a little "magic" in managing to capture the moment just before the light disappears. *Lumen Naturae*, which is what Paracelsus calls the light that irradiates nature and mankind, is in many ways the light that lies hidden beneath the surface, the "essence", if you like, and it is perhaps this light that I want to try to reveal in these images.