

George Pusenkoff: Erased Paintings

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In 2003, George Pusenkoff began a series of works he entitled *Erased Paintings*.

The artist had already, in 1997, produced a painting with a title that at first glance seemed mysterious: *Twice Erased De Kooning/Erased Rauschenberg (Twice Erased Drawing De Kooning (1997))*. This key work refers to an early iconoclastic piece by Robert Rauschenberg, who in 1953 erased a Willem de Kooning drawing that the master of Abstract Expressionism himself supplied for this purpose.

Rauschenberg had the idea for the piece after he had produced a series of *White Paintings* (1951), but before his mid-fifties breakthrough with the so-called Combines. The *White Paintings* were his response to Abstract Expressionism and his first try at creating a different type of painting. Rauschenberg came to the conclusion that merely opposing himself to the older generation or emphasizing his differences from them was an insufficiently radical move, and so he decided to perform an act of erasure, which was essentially congenial to the Dadaist iconoclasm of Marcel Duchamps. In his later Combine Paintings, Rauschenberg continued the Duchampian tradition of the readymade by integrating it into a new conception of the pictorial that would significantly influence the later development of art. Rauschenberg combined the readymade with painterly gestures similar to those employed by the great Abstract Expressionist masters themselves. By fusing two contradictory elements, he thus created a new visual reality.

It was only a matter of time before Rauschenberg achieved a fame comparable to de Kooning's and himself became the target of critiques on the part of younger artists. In 1997, George Pusenkoff erased Rauschenberg's work. He thus illustrated a chain reaction across three generations of artists who have sought self-identity in such contradictory forms of artistic thinking as hero-worship and negation. Moreover, Pusenkoff conducted his polemic not with the works of the "classical" Rauschenberg, but with the older man's uniquely negative gesture of erasing de Kooning's drawing, which in its time had symbolically called into question the entire tradition of Abstract Expressionism. By erasing the already erased, Pusenkoff reached the "zero point" of an artistic tradition that had arisen during the Renaissance. It was vital that he define the *tabula rasa* of painting before trying to formulate anew the principles of painting, postmodernist principles he could call his own.

Pusenkoff had to take one more step to complete the break with the past. He engaged in a polemic with the most charismatic figure of the Russian avant-garde, Kazimir Malevich. Malevich wasn't a member of the generation that had immediately preceded Pusenkoff's own generation. Nevertheless, in view of the prolonged historical vacuum between them and the fact that the age of the Russian avant-garde had for such a long time been hushed up that it was almost forgotten, Malevich could now serve as a point of reference for the new Russian art.

In 2000, Pusenkoff decided to erase Malevich's Black Square on a computer screen. This work had for him the same iconoclastic significance that de Kooning's drawing had for Rauschenberg: erasure was an act of liberation. The negation of the western artistic tradition, which had found its supreme manifestation in the *Black Square* of 1915, had itself to become the object of a negation, thus clearing the way for an entirely new kind of painting. Here, the word *erased* presumes a radical critique of painting. For Pusenkoff, however, this instance of erasure wasn't an act of destruction. He wasn't seeking to forget the art that had come before him. Rather, he was making a positive attempt to overcome it and thus create his own art.

The nineties might be called the decade when painting made a comeback. Artists actively turned to the tried and true painterly tradition, but only a few of them succeeded in discovering something new on this battleground. Pusenkov had no need to return to painting: he had never left it. He was engaged in seeking a new instrument for evolving the artistic tradition. He attempted to devise something that would breathe life into the canvas and reanimate painting. In the works from this period Pusenkov questioned the significance of painting. He queried its emergence and disappearance, the line between worship and iconoclasm, between tradition and its negation. The artist didn't forget that the new has its roots in the old and that the history of art consists of both ruptures and continuities.

The "art about art" theme had already been present in Pusenkov's early works. He achieved fame in the nineties for his experiments with iconic images by Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, who in their day had themselves experimented with the works of Leonardo, Manet, and Picasso. Pusenkov thus used new strategies and technologies to renew the dialogue with masterpieces by Matisse, Van Gogh, Kirchner, and others. His goal was to understand them in terms of his own sensibility and restate them in the idiom of contemporary art, to free them from the dust of time and give them new life. For Pusenkov, the masterpieces of art history are cultural readymades that one can and must work with.

In 1995, Pusenkov incorporated into his paintings an important element that laid the foundations for his digital painting — painting that is first projected on a computer screen and only later transferred to canvas. Pusenkov employed various strategies in order to develop a unitary stylistic method. First, he enlarged the pixel, that module of digital imaging whose square form was now made recognizable. Second, he began drawing the menu panels and file icons that serve as frames on the computer screen. In addition, he began visualizing in his paintings the effects produced by the monitor's scan lines. Having made explicit the digital origins of his works, he took the resulting studies and sketches and turned them into paintings using a complicated technique for applying multiple layers of paint to the canvas. A different and striking pictorial world arose that supplied the artist with a whole series of new expressive means and the chance to remain true to his own artistic temperament. The super-rich potential of this technology and Pusenkov's wild imagination feed each other. Digital technology opened the door to a conceptual and visual development of painting that would otherwise have been impossible to realize. Simultaneously, it made it possible to conceive a new pictorial aesthetic to match the postmodernist sensibility of the digital age.

We can trace Pusenkov's further artistic evolution in the series *Erased or Not Erased*. The previous erasures of Rauschenberg and Malevich can now be viewed as an important step that was transformed into a new idiom. Pusenkov was attracted to onscreen erasure because it gave him the ability to control artistic expressiveness, which had achieved its zenith in Abstract Expressionism but is an essential quality of any genre of painting. In the new series Pusenkov has retooled Jackson Pollock's brilliant invention, dripping. He creates and destroys the "analogical" component of the picture, replete with color and expressive energy, while developing in parallel on the computer the gestures of "digital erasure actionism." In the end, the white lines of destruction play the role of photo negatives. In combination with virtuoso painterly technique, they give birth to works in which two multi-vectored actions are present. These actions complement each other, united by the energetic dialogue between them.

Pollock used the drip technique to free himself from the need to use a brush. Using digital technology, Pusenkov goes further: he frees himself from color and material. Depending on the situation, his expressive gestures can be spontaneous or deliberate, while the pictorial field can be anything. Contrasting with the colored background, white light always produces new combinations — and new paintings.

To erase or not erase? “To be or not to be?” We already anticipate the continuation: “That is the question.”

The answer is to be found in the work of Posenkoff himself.

Rauschenberg continued to erase the de Kooning drawing until it was no longer recognizable, until it had disappeared. Posenkoff erases what he has drawn himself. His goal is to construe a discursive space between these two contradictory actions that would be like the space that existed between the readymade and expressionist painting in Rauschenberg’s Combines. In Posenkoff’s case the poles of this space are digital painting and traditional painting. This entails, on the one hand, the controlled act of erasure, which deletes only certain sections of the image; on the other, it entails a free and expressive action that is profoundly intuitive in nature. It is not a matter of dripping, but of the final product. Even a picture produced with the drip technique (whose main principle is spontaneity) can be controlled. The artist thus conducts a dialogue in the field of his work. He tries to maintain a balance between the expressive freedom of color and erasure, between affirmation and negation, between the closed and open surfaces of the picture, between movement and stasis.

In some paintings, erasure and the expressive gesture related to it might prove stronger than the painterly gesture. In other paintings, this balance will be reversed. There is only one thing we can say for sure: we are always witnesses to the play of these forces. We are forced to experience the clash between two worlds. The fundamental principle here is dualism. The canvas is a battlefield on which two polarized forces struggle in order, finally, to be reconciled. In some works, these worlds seem to be in harmony. In other works, on the contrary, the deleted traces are static. They gain power by contrast with the vivid, expressionist painting.

Erased painting draws its life from this tension. Our gaze wanders from one surface to another. What is seen is always ambiguous.

Posenkoff has inverted the action of erasure: he has transformed a destructive act into an act of creation. The gesture of erasure has lost its materiality while gaining a new, spiritual connotation. The mode of sensual painting that has emerged through its agency has been granted new degrees of freedom and has set off to conquer new, unknown territories for art.