An abstract sculpture composed of several thin, rectangular wooden sticks of various colors (orange, blue, green, black, white, red) and natural wood. The sticks are arranged in a complex, overlapping, and somewhat chaotic manner, creating a sense of depth and movement. Some sticks are vertical, while others are horizontal or diagonal. The background is a plain, light gray wall and floor.

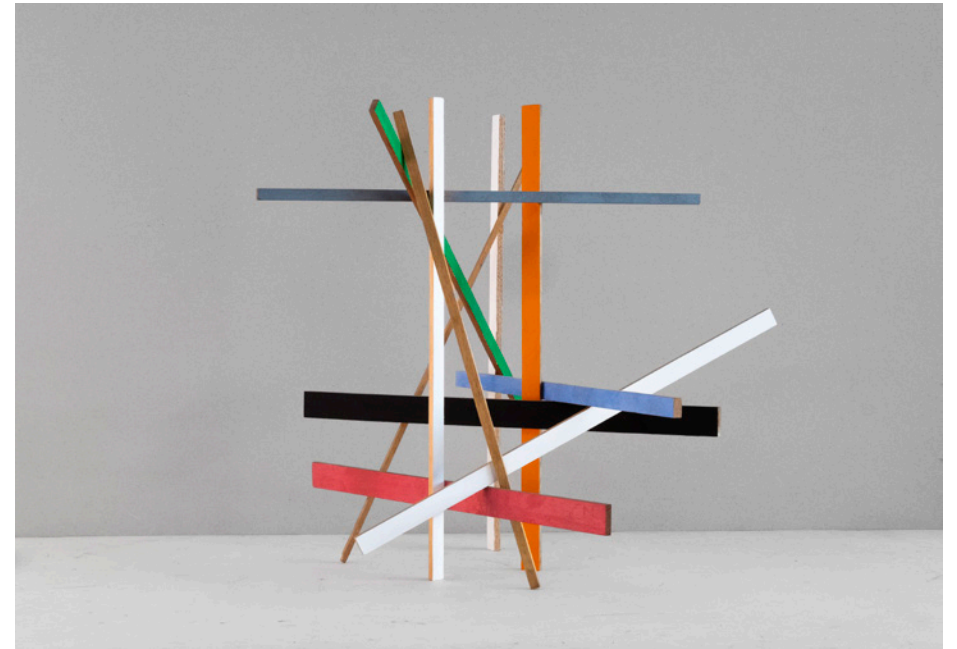
Et in  
Americae  
Ego  
Stile

Peter Ole Rasmussen

Peter Ole Rasmussen

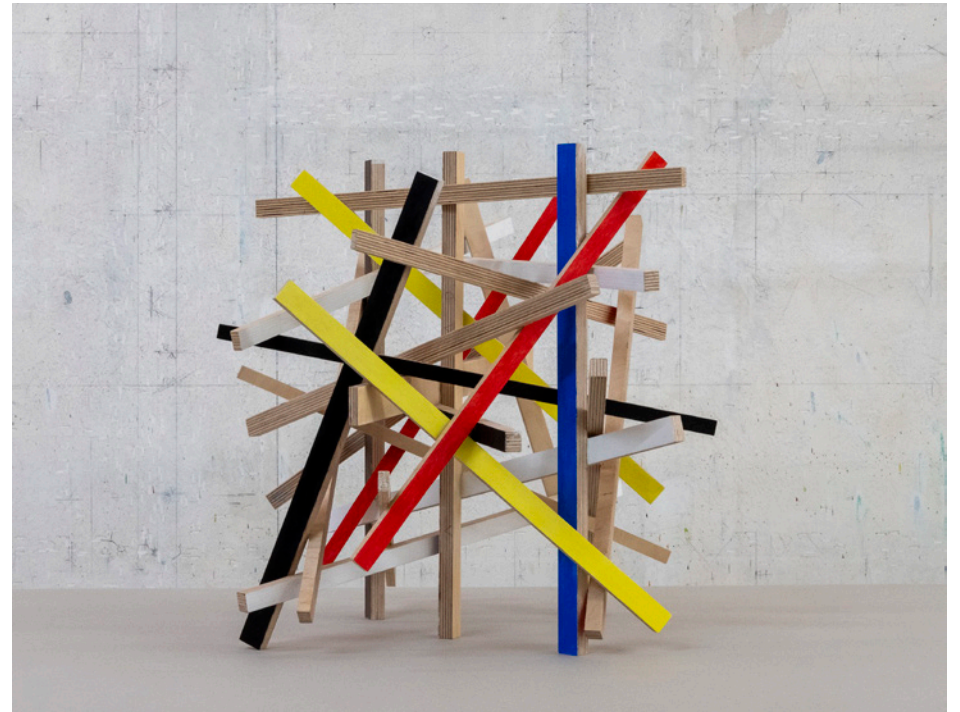
Et in Americae Ego

Stile



Essay by Sean Rainbird

This survey brings together groups of recent work by Peter Rasmussen on canvas and paper as well as related three-dimensional structures in wood – a new departure. The selection, with a focus on work spanning the pandemic and beyond, 2019-2023, was a consequence of conversations Rasmussen had with Emma Hill, Director of the Eagle Gallery, during that time. These works are put into context with reference to earlier series in the essay by Sean Rainbird.



Title page: *Stile Piano Lesson 2* 2023 oil on wood and plywood 55 x 55 x 55 cm  
Opposite: *Stile Three Musicians* 2023 oil on plywood 55 x 55 x 55 cm





## Peter Ole Rasmussen – Art to Art and Back Again

‘Does the artist’s mission consist only in arranging their material, and allowing the beholders to extract from it whatever enjoyment they may, each in their own way?’  
(Delacroix)

In Peter Ole Rasmussen’s recent work we encounter his responses to earlier masterpieces that have attracted his interest. Each of these historical works examines the arcs connecting life and death, success and failure, located in the religious and philosophical narratives explored by great artists he admires. Beneath these grand trajectories, Rasmussen is preoccupied with the formal processes of painting, and with the dynamics of the image, as inspiration and transformation between different languages of figuration and abstraction. Perhaps intensified by the disruptions of the pandemic lockdowns and touched by personal bereavement, Rasmussen has closely studied several earlier paintings. These include the smaller, later version of Eugene Delacroix’ ‘Lamentation over the Dead Christ’ (1857, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe), with its Christian cycle of sacrifice, resurrection and redemption, and Nicholas Poussin’s ‘Et In Arcadia, Ego’ (1638-9, Louvre, Paris), where, even in paradise, humankind remains conscious that in life there is the inevitability of death. In small reference paintings, made before abstracting certain elements from these and other historical forebears, the artist has created loosely painted paraphrases as an initial point of departure.

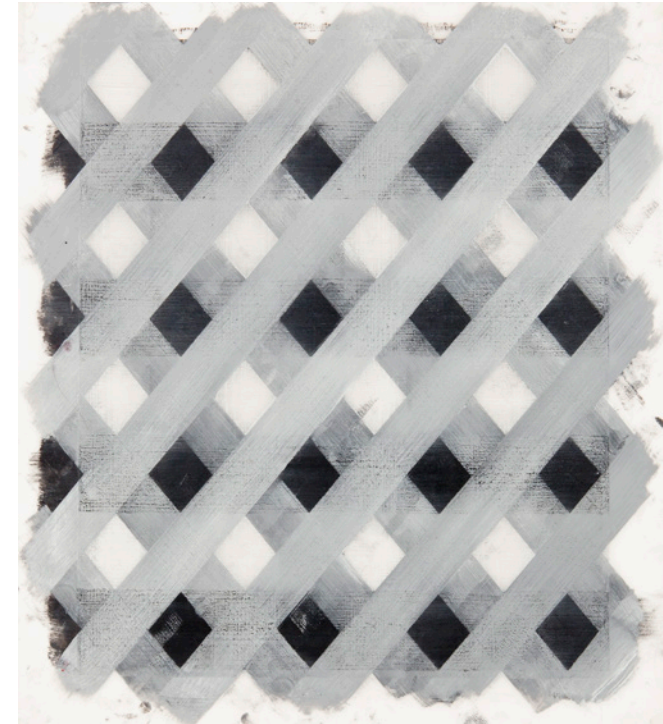
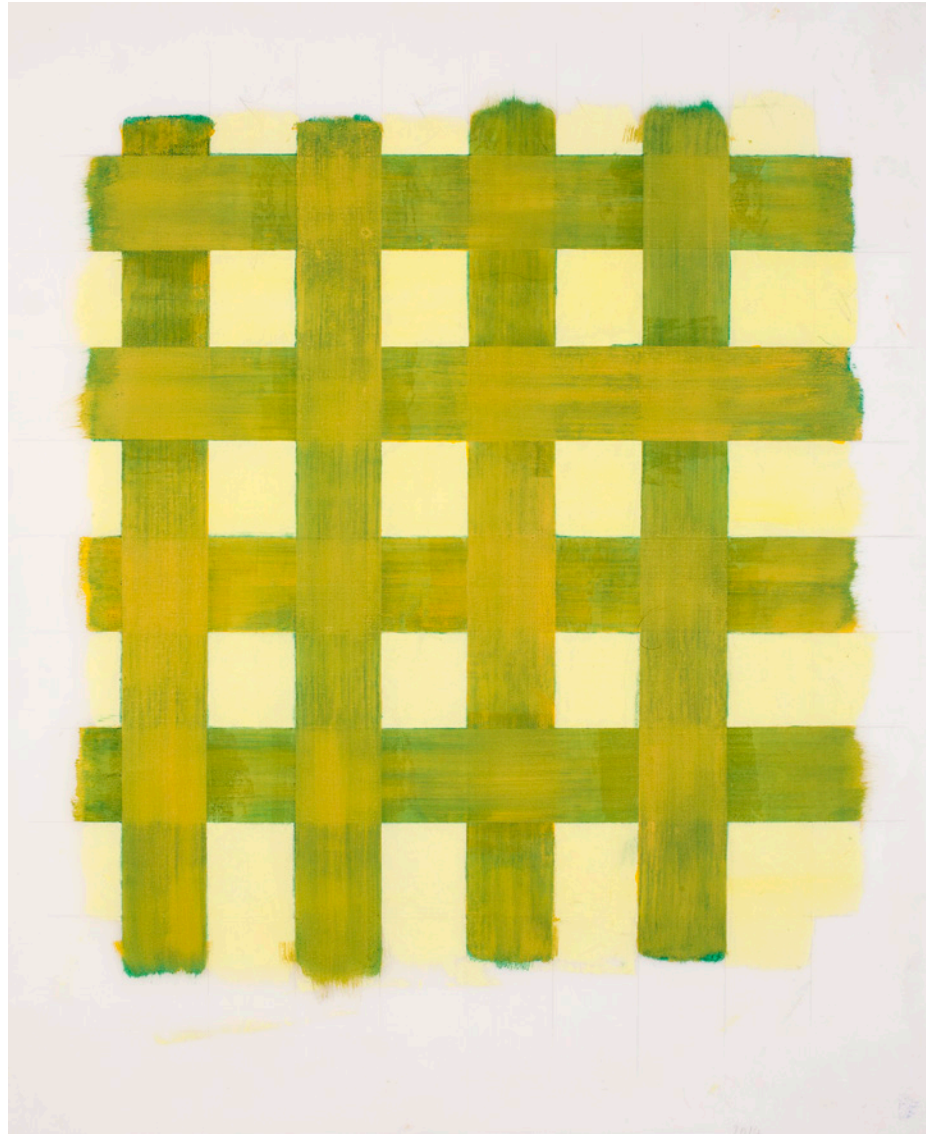
This survey focuses on a selection from two recent series of work. One is titled ‘Et in Americae Ego BD and Friends’ and consists of 12 small canvases that combine Poussin’s Arcadian shepherds with Bobby Darin, an American entertainer. The other group emerges from the many ‘DVH Stile’ (i.e. ‘diagonal, vertical, horizontal’, also incorporating a wordplay relating these works to the modernist Dutch De Stijl group) abstract works on paper, canvases and, newly, in three-dimensional forms. Beyond the inspiration of Mondrian and De Stijl, these are based on paintings by Delacroix, Tintoretto, Manet, Picasso, Poussin (his ‘The Healing of the Blind’, 1650, Louvre, Paris) and de Chirico.





A visit to Rasmussen's east London studio, currently near the Regent's Canal, formerly near London Fields, is an exercise in locating quiet, steady progress, across many years of concentrated work. It is almost axiomatic that making art can be a lonely preoccupation. Artists require an extraordinary degree of perseverance and self-sufficiency in the generation of ideas and in their determination to bring them to a satisfactory conclusion or state of fruition. Cameras and computers have miniaturised and digitised methodologies, offering innovative, mobile, often swifter, technologies for creating art. It might be argued that they, and constantly rising rents, have reduced the need for, or viability of, maintaining spaces purely for making art of a material nature. Social media harnesses the instantaneous 'now', short-circuiting more expansive processes about how an artist develops an idea within a given space. Moreover, it is anathema to a slow unfolding of process. Painting, as ever a slower medium, weighs its venerable status, going back centuries while using its own battery of more slowly changing supports and materials, against new media that sometimes offer more overtly tantalising solutions. Thirst for new vehicles of expression, might make a temporary splash in the market. They do not, however, invalidate less clamorous forms of innovation found elsewhere, as the enduring survival of painting as an artistic medium attests.









In this state of seclusion, perhaps as a result of it, Rasmussen has created a quizzical alter ego to filter and distance his perceptions of the modern world in art, sport, film and architecture. In some of his works a humanoid bear is present, nonchalantly inhabiting the contemporary interiors created by the artist, contemplating, regarding and assessing his often stylish surroundings. The bear's silent presence suggests some contrary stances. Are we shown only what the artist/bear wishes to divulge, without deeper interrogation? Or have the visual triggers in our lives plateaued to a state of meaningless conformity and banality? Has the bear, indeed, become merely a helpless onlooker?

Rasmussen's interiors often contain identifiable works of modern art – sculptures recognisably after Giacometti, for example, juxtaposed with some of the artist's own abstract images – in rooms giving views onto modernist tower blocks. His bears are not cuddly children's comfort toys, nor naturalistic renditions of animals in the wild. They comport themselves like human beings, raised on their hind legs as a kind of everyman-beast. It is as if these hybrid creatures embody a cloak of invisibility. They stand in for the artist-as-observer, hidden in plain sight, as neutral in their emotional temperature as they are discreet about expressing any judgement. They represent a full-body masking device, or disguise, taking the artist's place in the mis-en-scene and betraying little outward emotion about where they find themselves. Their self-containment evinces an aura of disinterested mystery.

The passage of modern art from its triumphant phases – Giacometti's sculptures and the De Stijl grid are paraphrased in Rasmussen's interior spaces - to its later demise in the 1960s, is communicated with a sense of detachment, unencumbered by expression or emotion. A distinctive, self-effacing presence, and in contradiction of the real animal's aggressive nature, Rasmussen's bear is anything but assertive. He retains a signature presence, bearing subtle but unmistakable witness, rather than leading any overt charge in one direction or the other.



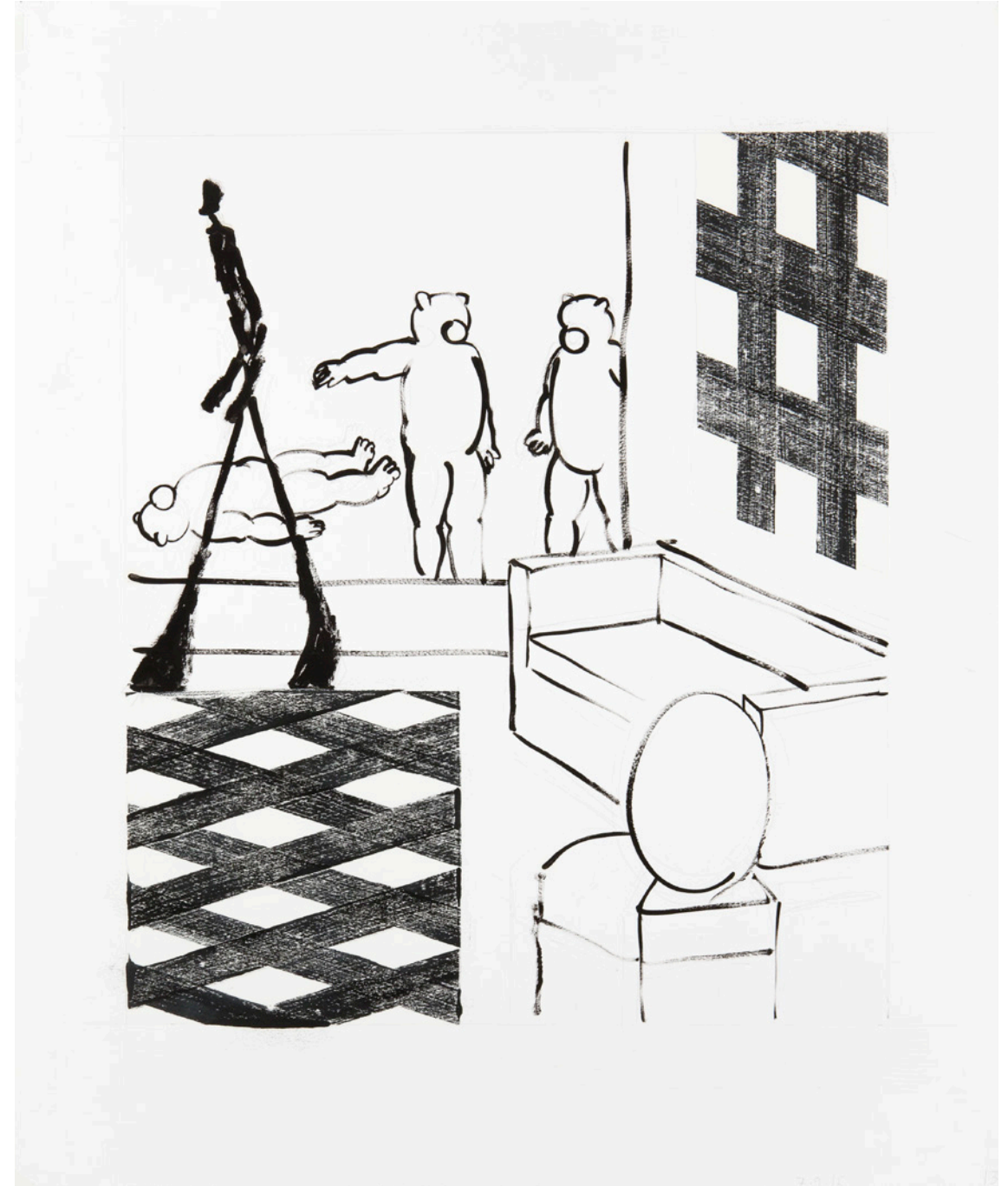
*Bear with Painting* 2012 oil on canvas 95 x 85 cm





Accompanied by this unusual, self-distancing companionship, Rasmussen has struck his own distinctive currency for working the surfaces of his canvases and works on paper. He presses two surfaces together – paper to paper, or paper to canvas - transferring paint from one to the other, then working further with the traces that the transferred pressure leaves behind. This creates distinctive, mottled textures, somewhere between printmaking and painting. The transfers erase the primacy of the brushstroke while enabling the merging, overlapping effects of the colours Rasmussen employs, through the subsequent carefully controlled taping and layering of his successive bands of colour.

In spite of the exquisite colour combinations the artist achieves, his art appears cerebral rather than overtly expressive. It appears carefully considered in its creation of multiple, minute changes in balance and dynamic which unfold as he moves from one variant to the next, dating each to the day of its creation. Rasmussen controls his elements - 'DVH' (i.e. diagonal, vertical, horizontal) as he calls them - while exercising a rigorous consistency in his selection and blend of colours. The consequence is an art that progresses in deliberate, unhindered steps, while also avoiding obvious peaks and troughs. Rasmussen defines structural and compositional fundamentals, then develops these through large series of



variations. The resultant sequences of works on paper, sometimes numbered in the several dozens and usually of similar dimensions, remain consistently of high quality. It is as if visual editing happens in the artist's mind, before the actual making of each new variant. This is akin to the print technician guiding a non-expert through the complex technical stages of printmaking, knowing in advance what each decision will lead to in the subsequent steps of the process.

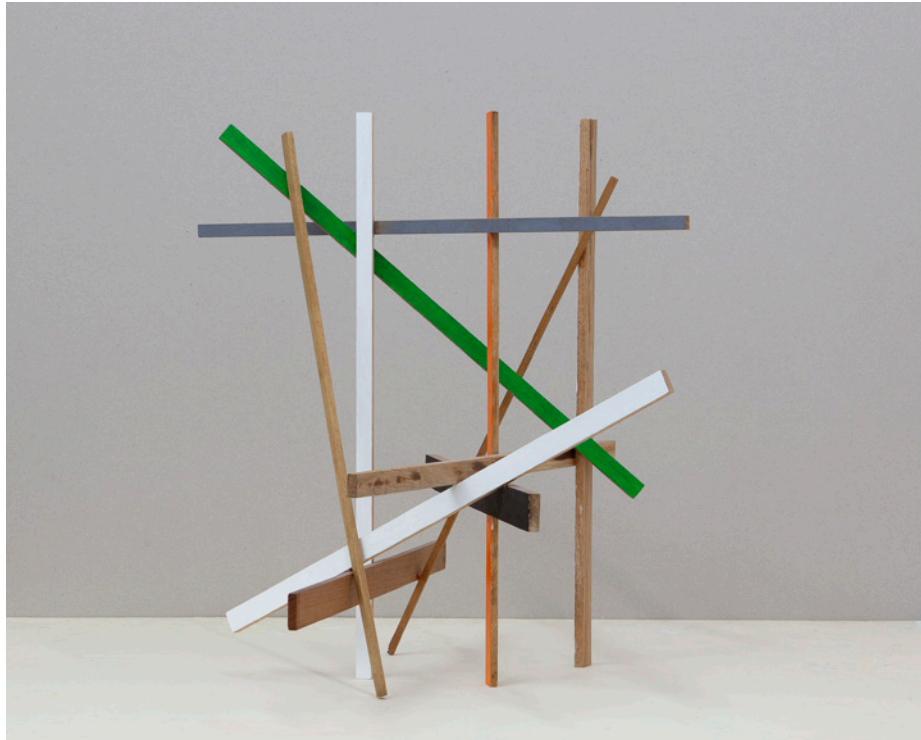
In the selection of his works in this exhibition, Rasmussen deploys his characteristic, underlying grids, albeit in looser arrangements, to offer a unique interpretation of earlier moments in art, life and culture that mark, for him, significant points of note. These new works have moved beyond the orderliness of the more rigid grids composed of horizontal, vertical and diagonal patterns found in many of his most significant recent series of fully abstract works. Here, the diagonals are unmoored from the strict perpendicular and horizontal geometries found in precursors, such as Mondrian's paintings, and in the works of other De Stijl artists who embraced more openly the diagonal angled at 45 degrees. This greater freedom has enabled Rasmussen to more closely attune his subtly angular, abstract structures to the idiosyncratic modulations in the earlier paintings he has selected for closer scrutiny. Echoing the emotionally charged, graceful and dynamic projection of bodies, limbs and gestures in specific paintings by Delacroix, Tintoretto, Manet, Matisse, Picasso, Poussin and de Chirico has enabled Rasmussen to explore different tonal and emotional registers across the related sequences of his own works presented in this exhibition. The colours, linear axes and abstract compositions in Rasmussen's works create their own dynamic pictorial scores. They extend to every part of the surfaces he is working on, amplifying the gestures, figure groupings and settings in the earlier paintings that captured his attention.

Rasmussen has confidently extended this greater directional freedom now present in the flat plane of paintings into the three dimensions of sculptural constructions. Although he has made works in three dimensions before – ranging from small paper objects held in the hand to the 'is it open, shut, or both simultaneously' riddle, a large door swinging between two door frames mounted at an angle and based on a precedent in Marcel Duchamp's Paris studio (titled 'L'Age d'Or Et in Americae Ego', 2014) - these constitute a new development in Rasmussen's art. He has pursued them in a similarly consistent manner to the paper and canvas works, creating a series of constructions. Each is made with thin wooden battens.



*L'Age d'Or (Et in Americae Ego DVH blackwhite/DVH black)* 2014 oil on paper, board, plywood, tulip-wood, hinges





They are glued at points of contact or intersection, suggesting a frozen moment of stasis that might at any moment collapse into a pick-up-sticks heap. Individual batters have painted planes, either a combination of colours, or contrasting black & white. These emphasise particular lines, angles or connections in the airy, open structures, distantly recalling the harmonious, communicative interplay of limbs and gestures in the Delacroix, Poussin and other earlier paintings that inspired them. Moreover, their three-dimensionality and purely abstract construction frees us from the front-on view we encounter with paintings. Instead we can circle these objects, unless the artist has elected to offer a more frontal viewpoint by placing them on a shelf aligned to the wall, rather than placing them on a freestanding plinth. The trigger of visual cues taken from these selected works, though, has long since evolved into the independent interplay of lines, bands, colours and planes in Rasmussen's new compositions.

As elsewhere with the appearance of Giacometti sculptures in his paintings, modernity also makes an incursion into the re-imagining of these historical subjects. Rasmussen has introduced what at first appearance is a puzzling addition to the orchestration of abstracted limbs and gestures in his works inspired by Poussin's 'Et in Arcadia, Ego'. Where we might expect to find the plaque upon which Poussin has painted his quotation, we instead find a faceless figure seated on a bar stool surrounded by a group of fans, who looks outwards with what we assume to be a dazzling smile. The title denotes 'BD', shorthand for the American singer Bobby Darin, who shot to fame as a singer in the late 1950s, featured in several award-winning films during the early 1960s and became a television star during that decade. He later became a political activist and was present on the day of Robert Kennedy's assassination in 1968. By then Darin had uncovered his complicated personal life – most notably that his 'sister' was in fact his mother. He died young, at the age of 37, of heart failure.

Rasmussen's superimposed image of Darin, derived from a publicity photograph, shows the singer as a shooting star of the television-age music show. The perfect façade nonetheless conceals details of a more tumultuous life, shining brightly before fading away. The presence of death in life – due to his weak heart, Darin was sometimes given oxygen after his performances – and a more sober truth behind the public image, underlines the illusory nature of success and the fictitious fluff



Left: *Et in Arcadia Ego* 2004 oil on paper 125 x 100 cm

Right: *Bobby Darin and Friends* 2004 oil on paper 125 x 100 cm

of modern celebrity. In this case inhabiting Rasmussen's 'Et In Arcadia, Ego'-inspired works, the promise and demise of modernity exposes, alongside the detachment of Rasmussen's observer-bear, the more banal reality of much of our existence. The artist, by drawing attention to this, in the masterpieces of yesteryear by Giacometti, Delacroix, Poussin, among others, as much as the continuing state of affairs today, conveys a sense of life's essential fragility and the continuing need for art to address such questions. The irony, though, of Poussin's masterwork housed for the ages in one of the great museums of the world, now counterpoised with new works developed in seclusion in east London, prompts the viewer to acknowledge all variety of ways in which art is made, and how the loftiest of subjects finds its way back into our everyday experiences when viewed through a contemporary lens.

Sean Rainbird



*Et in Americae Ego BD and Friends 5 2020 oil on canvas 50 x 44 cm*

















Connections

The stile, the structure with steps set into a wall or fence, acts as a bridge between separated fields. De Stijl, the Dutch art movement, which was active in painting from 1917 to 1931, used simple geometric compositions with mostly horizontal and vertical lines and primary colours.

Stijl and stile have a mutual second linguistic meaning of an upright doorpost or jamb, echoing the essential verticality of modernism. Matisse said 'The vertical is in my spirit' (Jazz 1947).

DVH Stile is a series of paintings and constructions that are responses to paintings from different times and places.

*Et in Americae Ego* is a meditation on the nature and origins of modern art. It is a series of paintings and objects reflecting on the development of modernism, its early twentieth century rise in Paris as the capital of the art world, moving to New York after the Second World War, and its demise in the 1960s. Mondrian, the chief proponent of de Stijl living in Paris before the war, spearheaded this move in 1940.

*Et in Americae Ego* is an adaptation of *Et in Arcadia Ego* the title of a painting (1637-38) also known as *The Arcadian Shepherds*, by Nicolas Poussin. In the painting the shepherds ponder the Latin inscription on a tomb, its ambiguous translation 'And I (am/was) (also) in Arcadia' (Or: 'Even in Arcadia there am I' ie death) evoking a past idyllic, golden age of pastoral innocence and harmony.

In *Et in Americae Ego BD and Friends* Poussin's shepherds are intermingled with the figures of Bobby Darin and two dancers from a still of his 1961 American TV show Bobby Darin and Friends, harking back to the time of the Endgame of modernism and the fading golden age of visual innovation and exploration.



The idea of looking back at a lost and irretrievable 'Golden Age' as a requiem to Modernism also comes into play in a painted object, *L'Age d'Or* (DVH blackwhite, DVH black, *Et in Americae Ego*) 2014.

The sculpture consists of a large door on hinges able to be closed in either of two door frames. The wooden structure refers to a 1927 photograph taken in Marcel Duchamp's apartment of two adjacent door frames conjoined and adapted to the artist's specifications to accommodate a single door that would close one doorway or the other as a space-saving solution.

The two openings of *L'Age d'Or* could be seen as Duchamp's choice of direction in modern art: through one opening cubism and abstraction; through the other his 'non-retinal' readymades, 'Large Glass' and conceptualism. One side of the painted door is DVH blackwhite whose printed diagonal, vertical and horizontal bands of black and white paint simultaneously refute and assert the flatness of the surface. The other side, DVH black, similarly printed, recalls the black paintings made by Ad Reinhardt between 1953 and 1966, which he described as 'the last paintings that anyone can make'.









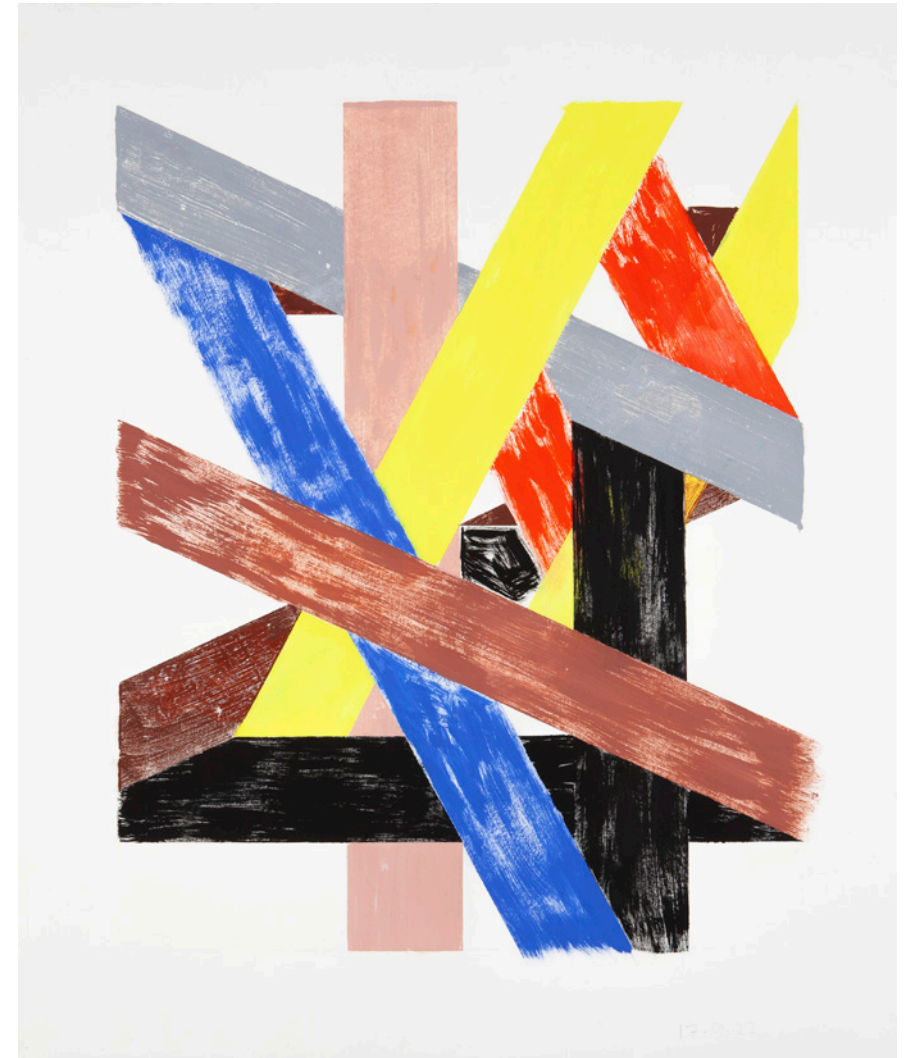




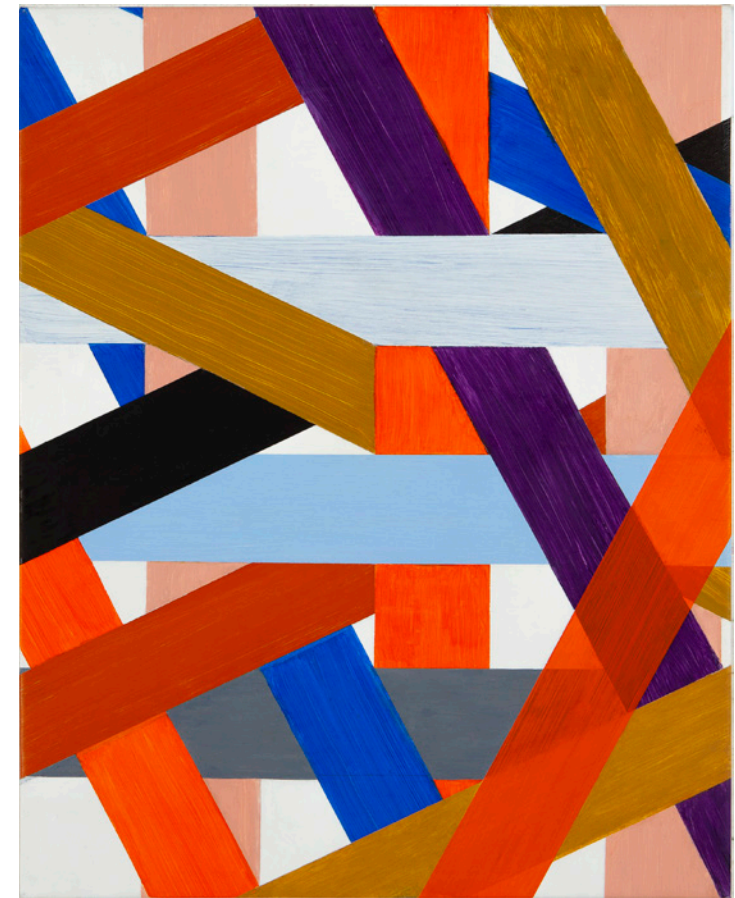






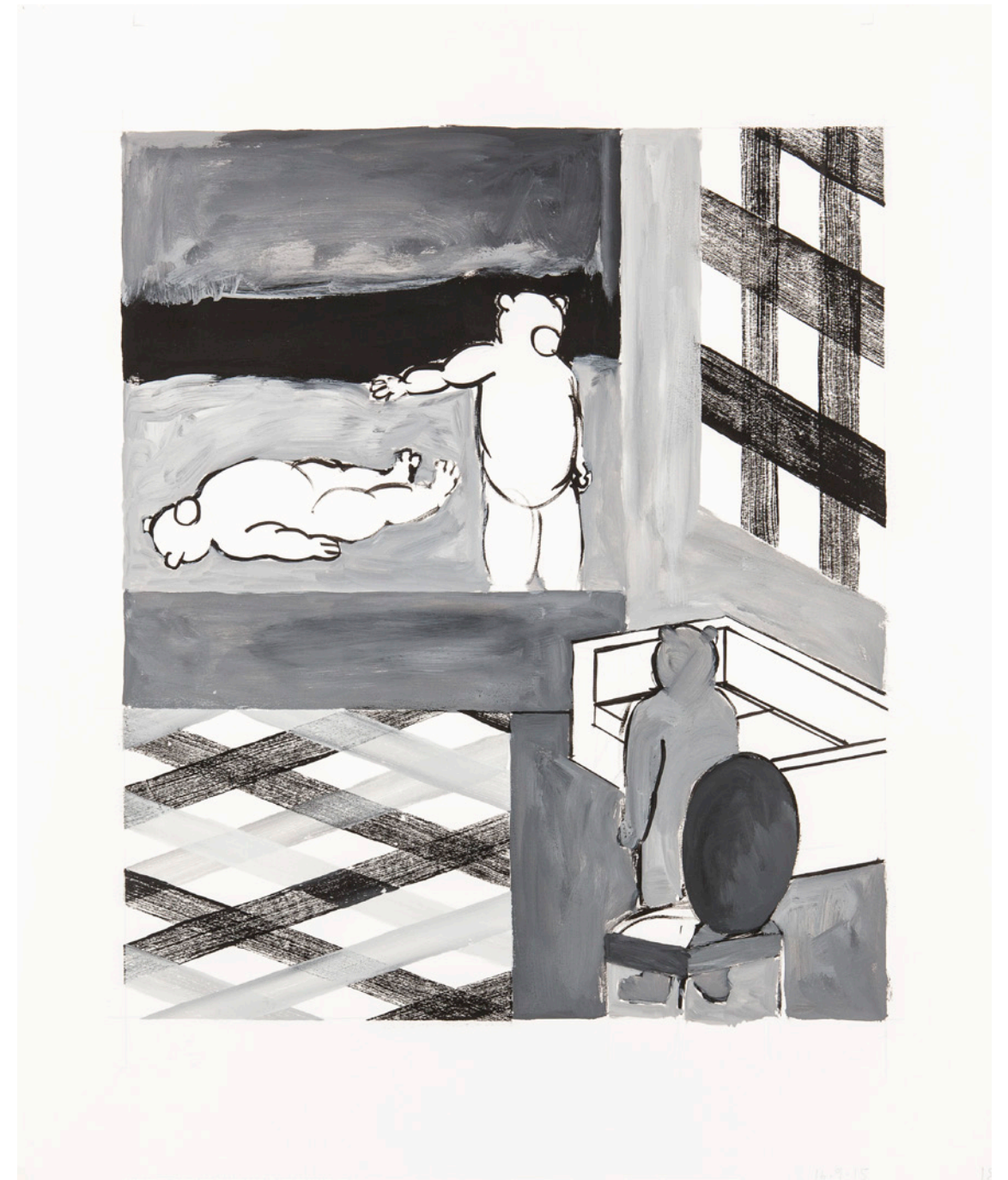






Opposite: *DVH Stile Last Supper 2.3.22* oil on paper 75 x 62.5 cm  
Above: *DVH Stile Last Supper 2023* oil on canvas 50 x 40 cm

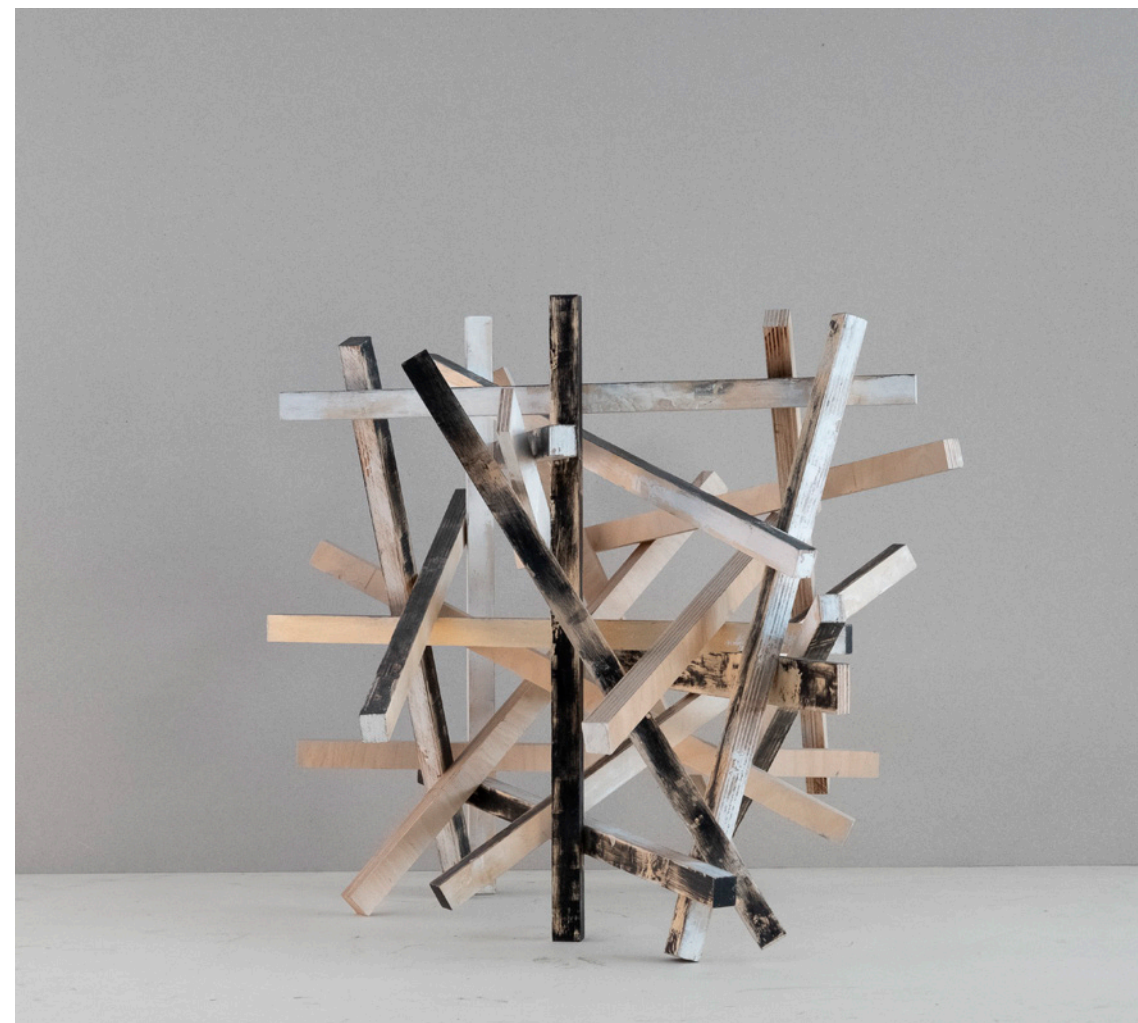


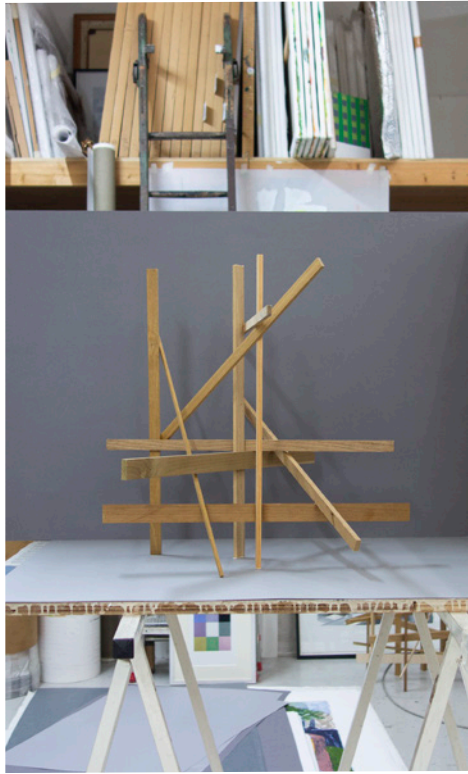












Many thanks to: Mieke Chill-Rainbird, Maud Cotter, Martina Geccelli, Sigune Hamann, Emma Hill, Marcus Jansen, Elke Kupschinsky, Sean Rainbird and Chris Rasmussen.  
Also thanks to: Acme Studios, Hackney Council and Marcus Harvey and Turps Gallery.

This publication coincides with Stile, Rasmussen's exhibition with Eagle Gallery/EMH Arts at Turps Gallery in 2024.

[www.peterrasmussenpainting.co.uk](http://www.peterrasmussenpainting.co.uk)  
[www.emmahilleagle.com](http://www.emmahilleagle.com)

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Copyright Peter Rasmussen and Sean Rainbird  
Design Sigune Hamann and Peter Rasmussen  
Edition 500  
Printed by Gomer Press

ISBN 978-0-9572258-4-8



