

Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson

Póra Þórisdóttir, From the book: *Icelandic Art Today*, Hatje Cantz, 2009.

Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson began using images of blond nurses as a theme in his paintings about a decade ago, in the wake of the BBC debate about British Parliament Member Diane Abbott's statement that too many blond nurses from Finland and Poland had been given jobs at British hospitals. Birgir was fascinated by "blond ideology" and the reverence for as well as the critique of it; he was also captivated by the appearance of political correctness in Germanic nations, manifested in a deletion of their own image as atonement for the historical self-worship of their own race in the past. Birgir began to mute or "numb" the colors in his paintings, just as a nurse would numb pain, and he removed any personal characteristics in order to focus on the image itself.

Birgir's paintings can be read as a critical self-examination of Western society, of the notion that spiritual purity is mixed with the idea of purity of race, and of how this relates to purity of physical appearance and social conditions. Blond nurses alongside fair-haired doctors eliminate diseases and illness, which denote impurity. In following with these ideas, Birgir created the series *Touching*, in which deathly pale painting of body parts before and after plastic surgery are shown along with medical equipment and close-ups of operations and physical "corrections." Western civilization is bolstered by soap and sterilization, even to the extent that it borders on the unhealthy, as in the case of chlorinated food and water. The image of Western people is such that this image becomes numb, loses its color, finds itself on the verge of disappearing altogether. This fixation on perfection has led many Westerners to stop reproducing, so that the "white race" is a disappearing one in the literal sense of the word.

The people in Birgir's paintings are like stereotypical figures who have been copied repeatedly, to the extent that the original image is almost lost. If we look closely, we might find a certain feeling of anxiety in his works, but also a sense of regret and melancholy. The nurses' uniforms and the smell of the hospital, which in a subjective way stick to the work, refer to times past when nurses were likened to angels who held power over life and death.

Traditionally the woman's image is turned into a metaphor for the whole of society, she is the cultural product that we have to explore in order to understand what we have made of ourselves.

In Birgir's *Blonde Miss World 1951*–series (2007), large portraits depict each beauty queen since the beginning of the pageant as blond-haired and blue-eyed. These supposed attributes of beauty have become pale blue, muted, and transparent. When the viewer concentrates on making out the women's faces, the sky-blue eyes seem to be the most prominent features, fixed points that live their own lives in the paintings. The works are not hazy, but rather contain an apparent clarity, a fluoroscopic view in which the light is blinding and the model becomes a flickering apparition. This is the Western analytical perspective that has beautified the world and created Western visual art. Though exalted, artificial, exterior beauty may disappear through "purifying" self-critique, one may still question the humility of such an act.

Humility is precisely the subject of Birgir's most recent works, where Christ, the Virgin Mary, and a young girl appear unexpectedly in photographs. Birgir uses objets-trouvés found in the world of mass-produced artifacts, white porcelain figures that he paints in pastel colors so that they assume the appearance of the figures in his paintings: that is, they are all fair-haired and blue-eyed. Birgir then photographs the statues from all angles, reproducing them again on photographic paper. The iconographic references are manifold and reflect the same ideology found in Birgir's paintings. The purity and beauty in these pictures are not as volatile as in his paintings; the analytic eye is replaced by the innocent blue-eyed gaze of the young girl; and the Holy Mother and Son lower their eyes in obeisance. Through a process of various alterations, reproductions, and repetitions, the bourgeois artifact has become unmistakably a piece of modern art. The critical tenor is no longer present: it disappears through the artist's process, and the image is made innocent again.

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