

Discussion: Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson & Mika Hannula (Sept. 2014)

LADIES, BEAUTIFUL LADIES

Mika Hannula: Your project with vinyl LP-covers, shown here in the gallery, is called *Blonde Musicians*. It dates from the year 2011 and is ongoing. How did it all begin?

Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson: It began due to another work called *Blonde Moment* – based on an article I found online on the Sunday Times web, published November 18th, 2007. There, two scientists, state that when men see images of blonde women their mental performance drops because they are having a “blonde moment”, as if driven to “think blonde”, mimicking the unconscious stereotype of the blonde. It was compared with similar acts, such as when we talk and walk slower with elderly people. I decided to paint the article and also all the comments, made by online readers, with watercolor, and it added up to 14 sheets of paper, each sized 76 x 56 cm.

What I felt was that I needed to accompany this work with images of blondes. Images to prove that the theory was right. I thought of documenting blonde Icelandic women, doing a series of photos, and found many candidates, quite many were willing to help by participating in fact, but I felt it was too local. I felt I needed photos of women done in a more universal language. Always having had interest in LP covers and also as being a frequent visitor of flea markets around the world, Germany, France, Finland, Sweden and of course Iceland, I started collecting albums that had a blonde woman on the cover, regardless of if she was alone, with a man or whatever. Then I decided to mask the covers out, to paint over everything but the blonde.

The technique is such that I first prime the covers with an acrylic primer, similar to the primer that one uses to prime a canvas, to get a base so the oil colors stick properly. One coat of primer gives a semi-transparent result – so you can still faintly see the images and texts through it. Then I paint the covers with oil, most often only one coat of color. The priming itself is rather quickly done, big brush, visible strokes that then guide the composition of the whole picture. I follow a simple strategy of using max 3-4 colors, choosing colors that are kind of inspired by the colors already on the LP cover.

I only meant to make a small series of maybe 50-60 pieces (covers) that would still be an innocent volume but it turned out to be so much fun that it is an ongoing series. The series also soon proved to be able to completely stand on its own, independent from the former *Blonde Moment* series. The repetition in the work deals with both the reclarification and volume of the mass-produced things – finding it interesting to say the same things often and all over – and the way in which through repetition it deletes the original meaning and gives room to new and different meanings. A bigger and more dramatic series of course, if anything, proves the “theory of the blonde moment” in a more dramatic way.

At first, I showed the LPs with the *Blonde Moment*, but nowadays I show the LPs on their own. The two works were last shown together in an exhibition with Jukka Korkeila and Marcus Eek, at Björkholmen Gallery, Stockholm, called *The Pleasure Principle*, in 2012.

MH: How was it fun to do them – right now there are 420 or so works in the series?

BB: It was fun to make because often it's a relief to have a project. Not constantly having to decide what to work on next – also the idea to be making a work that carries you further, taking you somewhere that you could not anticipate. The point is, that regardless of repetition each album is a fresh start, a new beginning, a new mental performance drop for me, if the theory is right.

MH: Sure, but to reach over 400 copies?

BB: The sky is the limit (hahahahah). I am more relaxed now, not that stressed anymore about finding more covers. But since going to flea markets when traveling gives me great pleasure, I still collect them. But, well, I'm getting more selective. I seem to already own quite a lot of published albums with blonde women on the cover – there is some kind of saturation reached. Nowadays not only I collect them, friends that know the series have also joined in, giving me albums if they find them. It seems to be very contagious.

MH: We move to the next work, next series. *Hats* – here shown as 5 different colors and 4 repetitions each, oil on paper, size 56 x 76. What's the background story here?

BB: There was a flea market in Neukölln, Berlin, this was in the summer of 2013, on a hot day. I bought a pink cowboy hat for my daughter, who had wanted one for a long time. It's a nice hat but still a plastic one or an artificial one. Somehow the hat ended up in my studio when my daughter moved abroad. I guess from the beginning, deep in my unconsciousness, I wanted to do something with it, because a cowboy hat is an object that easily changes your image when you put it on, in terms of music or location. For some reason I thought about Madonna and her album *Music*, that shows how easily just putting on a cowboy hat changes your image.

First thing I did was to photograph the hat. The photo somehow did not satisfy me, and being maybe more of a painter, I decided to paint it, starting with pink color, using only pink. Not mixing any other colors for the shadows, it was just pure pink. Then I tried several versions and, of course, in my way of working, it became a series. It is fun to work with oil on paper, it only gives you a limited time and number of brush strokes, so you need to work fast. The physical aspect was pleasant – light and almost like an action painting, different from how I often work. Then the series grew into other colors, as if the pink was too limited. Instead of having 5 colors in one painting, there are 5 colors in separate works – in this case, the whole work becomes one – when the viewer mixes the colors and shapes together in his head. It sort of references the way printed material is the joining of four or more different colors.

Thinking back, they somehow function or relate to an older series of mine called *Blond Nurses / Uniforms*, where I painted nurse uniforms in various shapes and sizes. Nurse uniforms are image-shaping. The cowboy hats function in a similar way: they are so determining – shaping and making of the image of a person. Certain uniforms and hats can of course and are often also objects related to fetishism.

MH: Next series is called, *Yulia*, so far 3 large paintings, and 9 small ones. Background – why such a politicized figure of the former Ukrainian Prime Minister?

BB: Well, she is also like a role model on the top ten list of blondes, with her amazing hairdo. I can't remember when it first came to me to paint her, but I had intended for several years to work with her image. When I started in 2012 or 2013, she was in prison. That in itself had nothing to do with the act of me painting her, she had been on my mind for a long while, perhaps the timing for finally going ahead was related to her being more on the news – EU trying to put pressure to have her freed from prison or other news related matters on her.

As when making another series, the *Blonde Miss World*, I just found a series of press images of Yulia and after a selection painted them. They are portraits of how I see her, not actual portraits of a person, but a portrait of and from an image. The difference is important, and the distance between essence and appearance – I am rather painting the image of a beautiful, powerful, corrupt or innocent person – all in the same bag, which makes it interesting. The works are not to be seen as a statement on her innocence or guilt, it's not a question of that – it's a question how an image functions in our head, making us as participants, stakeholders in the game.

What also interests me nowadays is the new platform we stand on when making political art. The lack of trust in the founding organizations of our societies such as government, church or media, drives us to do research on our own, and make our own opinion on the matter. This is of course very difficult when there are no grounds to build on.

MH: How do you then avoid being paranoid or falling into nihilism? Why keep on keeping on?

BB: I am, indeed, both paranoid and nihilistic, a certain amount of that is unavoidable. It is what drives us, what keeps us going. Because you don't trust, you keep on searching. But of course, this new platform is not purely negative, it is possible to use it in ways that are interesting, new ways of living and learning.

MH: But the image – its purity kind of connotations – of the work is far from being paranoid and nihilistic?

BB: That is true, but the work is not an end result – it tries to push something forward, it is not a statement of a fact. Its materials being vague and weak, it puts more, much more pressure to the act of meeting, the act of seeing the work – which you have to confront, what's around you. Not necessarily head-on but through the door these works allow us to use.

MH: *Blonde Miss World 1951-*, a series, presented in a major exhibition in 2007 in Reykjavik, with 56 works, sized 120 x 120 cm. It is an ongoing series that contains portraits of each Miss World winner. Here we will see a couple of more of them. What keeps you going here?

BB: It is a duty, kind of, a constant interest in the matter, the process – keeping the series alive – there are also always new “blonde” Miss World winners that are chosen and decorated. It also gives a trajectory, certain kind of a frame to keep on doing. I think the work in itself would diminish if I would stop.

MH: In an interview, done with Kari Immonen, curator for an exhibition called *Stop for a moment, Painting as Narrative* in 2002, Immonen refers to the above-mentioned *Blonde Nurses* series, and its background. Here, a direct quote from the catalogue, with Immonen's question and your answer:

Kari Immonen: The starting point for the *Blonde Nurses* series was the anti-racist media uproar about 'blonde' Finnish and Polish nurses working in British hospitals in the late 1990s. You have recently been painting close-ups of objects used by nurses. Why did you start doing those works?

Birgir Birgisson: *The Blonde Nurses* series came as a response to the issues of race and racism. When I started to paint them, I found out that a nurse symbolises and is connected to various things. It felt like an interesting subject matter. Ideas just came, and now I'm focusing more on the act of nursing, healing and helping others, and on the physical contact between the nurse and the patient.

Looking back at the whole series, and your comments here – how has your relationship with the overall theme of blondes developed through the last 10 years and more?

BB: My relationship with blondes? Funny that you bring a relationship into it. Like most relationships, passionate times, less blissful times. You have to work for it. Hanging in there when hanging in there is needed. Stand by your man - and all that. Harvesting what you sow. You can't live with them blondes but you can't leave them either. For life, or as long life do you part.

But seriously, I find the theme, the image of the blonde and therefore the blondes themselves still amazingly interesting and as a subject matter as fresh as ever. I don't think the mystery nor the definition will be solved or exposed anytime soon.

MH: There is something very special in your way of working, and yes, the evidence of this lies in the results: with a fantastic wide variety of series that both move on the level repetition but at the same time digging deeper into the essence of the chosen project with each new work, each new version. Thus, it kind of begs a question of repetition and its role – but put forward in a roundabout way.

John Irving, the writer of, for example, *Garp* and *Cider House Rules*, has made the following claim: "All writers repeat themselves; repetition is the necessary concomitant of having anything worthwhile to say". Do you agree? And does this also apply to painters?

BB: Irving's quote might be the reason he is one of my favorite writers. I think there's always a certain need or claim for repetition in general. Otherwise rituals wouldn't exist. We wouldn't have what we rightly call a tradition unless having approved to something repeatedly. I'm not necessarily saying that we always want to read the same book or listen to the same song but the idea to be able to relate to something we know already, and refer to it, is there and does not need to be a bad thing. Familiarity can be the drive for seeking further knowledge. With artists and writers I guess it's the same, they want their works to be confirmed or valued and what better way is there, than repeatedly sending out the message, if the message is clear, that is. I also remember a statement from an artist, can't remember whom, that said that we were only offered the privilege of having just one good idea, then it was up to us in which way we were able to use it and take it from there. All in all, isn't it down to the constant proving and being approved, this constant give and take that is involved?

MH: The rather obvious question, to end our conversation, is this: on a scale of 1 to 100, how obsessive of a person, as an artist, do you consider yourself to be?

BB: Not for me to say, is it? But by the blood, sweat and tears put in and all the long hours, I'd say you need a bigger scale. The first 100 do not cover it any more. I'm beyond saving.