

PAIN IT BLACK

PAINTING AS A ZOMBIE MEDIUM

Mika Hannula



DOES CONTEMPORARY PAINTING merit our attention? To answer this question is both very simple and slightly complicated. It is simple in a general sense, but obviously gets tangled up in various contexts and histories when one attempts to be more precise. However, this is exactly what I will try to do in the following text. I will focus on Nordic painting, and seek to provide an abstract and practical framework as a reply to this question.

Starting from an abstract level, if and when we hold true to the principle of being against formalism of any kind, and consequently, if we prefer content and content-driven practices, I think it is crystal clear that as such there is nothing special about contemporary painting. The point is, of course, what is done and said with it. Therefore, painting, or any given medium of expression, is meaningful and deserving of fully attentive recognition if it is able — right here, right now — to be critical but constructive, self-reflexive, aware of its past traditions but not stuck in them, tolerant, and open-ended. In other words, painting is in a constant process of trying to question, refigure, and think through what it is, what it wants, and what it might become. Only when these notions come together can painting avoid being boring and painful, and instead, really emerge as something pleasurable.

That was, let's say, the philosophical part. Easy, isn't it? But what happens when this is combined with the day-to-day practice of painters? Do we have (and this is put with just a tiny bit of irony) a Leninist situation where the reality, like it or not, must succumb to the demands of the theory? Or are we so lucky that both sides could actually support one another? My modest claim is to try to demonstrate how both sides can, in the best of cases, intertwine and cohabit in a very fruitful way.

I will concentrate on Nordic painting because of my own background, and because of a series of three exhibitions on contemporary Nordic painting that I have been researching and working on during the last two years. I curated these shows — all carrying the same title "Stop for a Moment" — together with Kari Immonen, curator at the Nordic Institute of Contemporary Art (NIFCA). Each of the exhibitions explored a different theme and included a different group of artists. They took place first at Gävle Konstcentrum in Sweden in February-March 2002 ("Painting as a Place to Be"); then at Proj4L in Istanbul, Turkey, in April-June ("Painting as Narrative"); and the last will happen in the Wäinö Aaltonen Museum in Turku, Finland, this September-November ("Painting as Presence"). Therefore, not only are my views transparently personal and biased, but they

are proudly so. This is how I situate myself.

And now, finally, to the cases. I will begin with a quote by the Danish artist Tal R, which magnificently characterizes a special attitude and a strategic sea-change: "Painting is a zombie medium. As a painter you are a little bit like a guy showing up in a tiger suit at a techno party. So your dress code is outdated, but you might still have the best moves on the dance floor."

What is so significant to me here is the artist's ability to laugh at himself, and to simultaneously laugh heartily with the medium. We are witnessing an attitude that has moved beyond the heavy burden and the troublesome past of painting. It knows its past, but it moves forward with dedication. It has a perspective, and a strong enough sense of itself to be able to question and to keep on keeping on, shaping and shaking the possibilities of painting.

Admittedly, this strategy requires nerve, and it presupposes a well-developed identity. You have to have a lot of guts, or in the words of a not so famous pop song, you need balls bigger than King Kong's. But seriously

JUKKA KORKEILA, Untitled, 2002. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 42 x 60 cm. Courtesy Anhava, Helsinki. Opposite: TAL R, Visier, 2002. Oil paint and crayon on canvas, 200 x 200 cm. Courtesy Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin.





From top: BIRGIR S. BIRGISSON, *Blond Nurses*, 1998-2000. Oil on canvas, 160 x 110 cm.
Blond Nurses, 1998-2000. Oil on canvas, 130 x 160 cm. Photo: Vigfus Birgisson.
 Opposite: MARIANNA UUTINEN, *Open*, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50 cm.
 Courtesy Anhava, Helsinki.



speaking, it has to be made clear that this attitude is a far cry from the macho bravado that became a symbol of the late '80s. The strategy is neither insular nor protective, but rather enjoys the ability to take and confront risks, and is not afraid of falling down and getting up again.

Interestingly enough, when Tal R is asked about his working practices, he talks precisely about the same thing: "Contrary to what one might believe, the more skilled I have become in painting, the more time it takes to do them. In the actual act of painting, the workload is okay, but it takes a lot of thinking and pondering before I start. And a lot of sleeping in the studio. Making paintings has become more complicated, because I am now more sure of myself, and I am more ready to explore possibilities, to take risks and find those side-tracks. The more I make paintings, the better I get at finding those important detours and sidetracks within the painting."

When gazing at the practicalities of studio work, another important aspect — besides the new attitudes and strategies — is how contemporary painting deals with the question of time. Or to state it more accurately: what kind of time is at hand, and how does it relate to questions of content?

To begin, all the interesting painters that I have met seem to cherish a particularly individual version of time. This is apparent both on the personal and the collective level, leading to a certain stickiness. A version of the local discursiveness of painting does not, contrary to the often-heard lame claims against painting, hinder its ability to travel across national and contextual borders. But certainly it is more time-consuming, and also more aware of its movements, in critical but caring relationship to both its roots and future routes. However, just to make sure we are still on the same page, I am not referring to time as in whether we need to get to sleep or not, but to a sense of time and temporality in terms of individual pace and rhythm. It is about how one reflects, relates, and anchors oneself to contemporary society and to the available alternative contexts of painting.

A very telling example is provided by the Icelandic painter Birgir Snaebjörn Birgisson, who participates in the politics of representation — right here, right now — by focusing on the slowness and stillness of the medium: another splendid example of how painting's supposed disadvantages are turned to its advantage. A starting point for his series "Blond Nurses" is the anti-racist uproar in the British media concerning the proliferation of blond nurses working in hospitals at the end of the '90s. These populist xenophobic claims repeated the usual story about how foreigners take our jobs, etc., but this time the clash was about blond nurses particularly in hospitals in London, who often come from Finland and Poland. They are an extremely uncanny series of mysterious, bland, and feeble paintings (yet powerful in their powerlessness). They are about racism, the symbolic horizon activated by the image of nurses, of healing and of helping others.

"A blond nurse is a many-faceted symbol in the Western world and gives room for many interpretations. I do not want to create a closure of interpretation, and it is important that the viewer can take the narrative where he or she wants. The 'Blond Nurses' series puts forward an image of a cotton-wool-like world that, at the same time, can be something really scary. My paintings depict the human effort to hide the fear, blood, and guts behind an image of purity. They can be read innocently, without seeing the inherent paradox, or one can interpret them as images of power and control."

However, it is high time to look at other strategies in painting, within which the connection to social issues is perhaps not so straightforward, but which still actively participate in the mass imagery of contemporary society. All demonstrate a distinct need and ability to take part in the production of meaning by their own adequate means, wants, needs, and fears. It is a strategy where a taken-for-granted and shared background is uniquely combined with a personal experience. There are a number of artists I could choose to concentrate on, including Robert Lucander, John Korner, Cecilia Edefalk, and Lene Vaering, but let me focus on two Finnish artists whose works have an interesting interconnectedness in terms of content.

At first glance, a political reading of Jukka Korkeila's works might take too much imagination. On the other hand, it is not so hard to comprehend them as extremely physical entities. Photographic reproductions of his paintings fail to duplicate the raw presentness of his works, which include expressive paintings on large canvases, drawings, and lately, pre-existing paintings combined with paint applied directly on a wall.

What are they actually about? To be frank, they are about sexuality. More precisely, they are about the representation of male homosexuality. What we see are variations of Korkeila's alter ego. A figure of flesh, blood, sweat, and tears which we are not accustomed to meeting in the media. A figure that is almost overwhelmingly surrounded with hundreds of details borrowed and stolen from the artist's everyday life. Thus, we have a filter-like practice of presenting a proud but fragmented version of a sexual identity, which does not hide its complexities and contradictions. Shot from another angle, it is definitely not an image of your typical consumerist golden-brown tanned sex machine who lacks a gram of unnecessary fat in his body. Instead, we have the necessity and demand of nearness, a conflictual physicality of painting. A fat slob, a great big bear in terms of gay politics, who looks like, well, any of us.

And yes, here is the ever-important bridge. The core of this work is no longer about a certain sexual minority. The center is taken by a problematic that concerns all of us — no matter what we decide to do or not do in our bedrooms or hallway closets. Korkeila's version, in all its fragmentary vision, stands for the necessary plurality that is part



As a painter you are a little bit like a guy showing up in a tiger suit at a techno party. Your dress code is outdated, but you might still have the best moves on the dance floor. *Tal R*

of the heterogeneity of both image and reality, be it focused on the shape of your body, the color of your skin, or the nature of your confession. These images, in the end, are about nothing more and nothing less than tolerance.

But aren't examples of the representation and reproduction of racism and sexuality too infallible and obvious? I don't think so, but in case you are still not convinced, let me end this article by referring to a temporality within painting that has nothing to do with political correctness. Instead, we enter the la-la-land of female sexuality, which does not pretend to be cool, but which rather challenges itself and the viewer to face the music — and to be aroused by subtle nuances, to be activated to a sense of being by a process of mutual recognition and reciprocal respect.

This example is put forward by Marianna Uutinen, who employs a snapshot aesthetics which thankfully leaves no room for boring second guessing. As a viewer, you are on the edge of a kitschy but classy play with pornographic connotations. Her practice merges speed and slowness, and combines references to glitter, glam, and disco with the embedded-

ness of deeply felt melancholy. This attitude resides, for example, in a painting about panties. When asked about autobiographical elements in her works, Uutinen answers: "I relate through a subjective position towards general views and claims. The starting point for my works is often tragic, a certain kind of loser attitude. This is not so straightforward, but is rather very ambivalent, a continuous changing of sides and positions. For me it goes back to questions of gender and the ambiguity related to not having a very strong sense of identity in terms of gender. This ambiguity is apparent in my paintings and their themes. When I paint images of panties, for example, I always see them as being both-and. They are at the same time object and subject, something one watches and something that actively looks back. This ambivalence of reflexivity relates to the notion of how a painting starts to push and pull, how it answers back when you are making it. So what I am seeking in my work encompasses both of these sides and the interaction between them."

Mika Hannula is the director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki, Finland.