

Nifca interview with Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson

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http://www.nifca.org/stopforamoment/narrative/artist_birgir_birgisson.html

STOP FOR A MOMENT PAINTING AS NARRATIVE

Birgir S. Birgisson

How would you define your relationship to the tradition of painting?

I chose painting specifically for its tradition. I actually started my studies within graphic arts and, more precisely, woodcuts. After that I studied in the multimedia department at the art school in Strasbourg, even though it was specifically painting that I was preoccupied with during that time. However, I wanted to get rid of questions about technique and medium. When it comes to influences or references, I don't really have any painter that has contributed to what I do technique-wise – references come from painting itself and its histories. Because painting has such a rich tradition, these formal things are not really the issue. Strangely enough, most of the people in the media-art department were painting and in the painting department students used other media. As for why, I don't have the answer.

Does painting have some specific qualities that have contributed to your using this medium?

When I started to paint, I soon found out that it suited my ideas and, nowadays, I would not use any other medium. It was impossible to reach a sense of timelessness and the overall airy feeling that are present in my works with other media. Painting has endless possibilities. I chose painting, so as to be free of questions about technique or media, but now more and more people ask, why I paint so lightly, in an almost transparent manner. People ask whether they really are paintings. I have in a way reached a paradox, a place where painting that should be there isn't, and still these questions come up. Normally, when painting is discussed, the questions focus on the medium's inherent formal qualities, and not so much on content. That does not happen so often with other media. One is always in a defensive stance when it comes to painting. In my opinion discussions of that kind are a way to avoid confronting works, ideas behind them, or substantial matters. I could not achieve the sense of timelessness, or the overall airy feeling in my works, in any other medium.

Do you make sketches? Sometimes the starting point is an old photograph of nurses from publications like *History of Nursing*. How much do they contribute to the composition of the work?

I use photographs to get a certain feel or idea. Some details in my works, like nurses' caps or uniforms, are based on those photos. I'm not after a sense of the 1970s or

1960s, even if most photos are from that period. The colours that appear in paintings are not those in the photos and their function is to create a feeling of lightness. They are images of memories or pictures that come to your mind. They should be so vaguely painted that the viewer can almost blow them away with a snap of the finger. My works just become lighter and lighter. The most recent ones have almost disappeared.

The evasive quality of the picture also gives room for viewer's interpretations and, on the other hand, demands concentration from the viewer.

I have said that my technique is close to whispering. Whispering is more effective than shouting or speaking aloud. I believe that this quiet quality of my works enables me to get an almost personal contact with the viewer. They say that one should be loud and drop bombs nowadays, but I can't be bothered. One of painting's positive qualities is that it gives the viewer the power to decide when and how and how long one spends with the painting.

I have been thinking about the time you spend looking at the work and, when it comes to my paintings, they just become more visible with time. It is also an important part of my working process and, at the end of the day, they become really clear to me, and when I return in the morning they have more or less disappeared. So I have to get reacquainted with them again. Same goes for the viewer as well.

Do you work with several paintings at the same time?

No, just with one work at a time. I have to limit myself to one at a time.

Do you work with other media nowadays?

Not anymore, except for drawing. When I did woodcuts, they started to look more like paintings, and in a way my works now are a continuation of that.

Your works do have woodcut-like elements. They are flat, devoid of depth and the figures also have strong borderlines. They are also still.

Stillness is very important to me. I like the fact that the movement in the image or the inherent narrative is dependent on the viewer. I also used strong contrasts when I depicted teenagers in a very still manner, even though in reality they are considered to be restless and on the move. The stillness acts like a starting point for a story or narrative. It is like a freeze-frame of a movie.

The starting point for the Blond Nurses series was the anti-racist media uproar about 'blond' 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?

The Blond 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.

Some of your newer images are quite disturbing – they contain elements that are not solely soothing.

They are still just about nursing – about the act of somebody healing you. It is up to the viewer whether there are sexual or violent elements in them. To me they are almost like religious images. One of the paintings to be shown in Proje4L depicts the act of making beds. It is about a strictly ruled process of eliminating the corporal – the repetitive procedure of reaching white and clean zero point over and over again. I'm not sure where these close-ups will take me. Hopefully some place interesting.

How do you make the personal into the general? Do your works provide tools for living, or what standpoints do you take?

You mean like making the world better? Of course, my works pose questions about social issues like racism. I wanted to re-create a situation paralleling that when an MP complained that there were too many blond nurses in British hospitals. I wanted to examine the world that she was afraid of. 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 she wants. The Blond Nurses series put forward an image of a cotton-wool-like world which, 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.

One of your paintings is now in the Landspítalinn University Hospital in Iceland. How have your works been received there?

I have received many invitations to have tea with local nurses, who have been keen to show their photo-albums to me. I have not done that yet, though.

What do you read?

At the moment I am reading a book about fly-fishing. That is currently my literary source of inspiration. I also play in a country-punk band called Arnar og Kekkirnir.

Kari Immonen