

Nurses are dark-haired, the whole lot of them

Auður Ólafsdóttir, interview with Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson, from the book: *Blonde Nurses*, Reykjavík 2001

Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson: The idea for the Nurse series came about when I was living in London in 1996-97. There was an anti racist dialogue going on there, which sometimes assumed peculiar forms. For example, the authorities were harshly criticised for appointing too many blond nurses at London hospitals, especially Finnish and Polish ones. People from outside Iceland tend to link the blond people in my works with the fact that I have blond hair and blue eyes myself, and are tempted to jump to all kinds of racist interpretations, cf. the golden hair used in Nazi propaganda for racial purity, associated with the Hitler Youth, lederhosen, red cheeks, etc. People in France in particular have read my work that way, less so in Britain. But that kind of semiology is entirely in the mind of the spectator and his responsibility, not mine.

Q: Why this obsession with nursing? Is it linked to some kind of fetish?

BSB: A nurse – we always associate that word with women, don't we? – Suggests a lot of things to many people. Above all she's an image of care and help, trying to make the best of often difficult circumstances, and in that respect she's also a healing, curing mother figure. To many people she's also linked with the sexual image of woman, which brings us close to the realm of all kinds of fetishism. So you could say that her image throughout the ages spans the whole spectrum from the gentle Virgin Mary and Eve in the Garden of Eden to Florence Nightingale.

Q: Have you ever been nursed?

BSB: At one time, yes.

Q: Your works carry a hint of faded memories, and the time they are set in links up with the childhood and games works you started doing around 1993.

BSB: I started painting late, and my first paintings were in bright colours. Then as a postgraduate student in Strasbourg from 1991-93 I started working with the colours of that symbolic childhood world, including light blue and yellow. After that, air and light started to dominate my works. The Nurse series is part of the light section that I've been developing on in recent years. The works are so vaporous you can almost blow them away. Timelessness belongs to their airy, imaginary world. I consciously locate the nurses I create in the past, so they are more akin to the classical image of the female nurse. For their setting I went to old photographs from *The History of Nursing*: the uniforms, caps and hairstyles are from the sixties and seventies. The works show some customs that have been abandoned now, such as when student nurses sewed a button on their caps for each year they had studied. In some cases the faces may be familiar, but above all the paintings stand for group anonymity and so they change a lot when the concepts are elaborated. I paint images of pictures, my pictures

are an idea for a narrative. Maybe you could associate my recycling of time with pop art, they are quite ironic even though the subject is certainly deadly serious.

Q: You're not afraid of narrative?

BSB: No, I'm not afraid of narrative. The narrative is part of the subject, just as the technique is part of my conceptual world. So the idea, technique and subject go hand in hand. I once wondered if I was an impressionist. The impressionists painted the air between the eye and the object, while I'm not painting concrete objects, but rather imagined ones. My air is different from that of the impressionists; you could say I paint the air between the spectator's eye and the idea, and the gravitational pull of the work lies in that imagined air.

Q: You're fond of closeness to the spectator, then?

BSB: I once described myself as whispering rather than shouting. These are low-key whispering works, based on capturing the attention of people who are prepared to linger. The works depend on closeness to the spectator, who really has to go up to the work to see it. I'm thereby brought closer to that person, in that sense the works can be compared to a dialogue. That's a different and more personal form of expression. In my nursing paintings I try to let the spectator enter a protected cotton wool environment; just as I use the play of light from still lifes in my games paintings to draw the spectator into the work as a participant in the game. Sometimes I keep works for a long time before exhibiting them, they're not in any hurry. The work finds someone to look at it when it's ready.

Q: Are there a lot of blonds in the nursing profession?

BSB: No they're dark-haired, the whole lot of them. I only found one genuine blonde in *The History of Nursing*.

Interview taken by art historian Auður Ólafsdóttir at Charles de Gaulle Airport, Paris, December, 2000.

Translated by Bernard Scudder.