

Preface and Acknowledgements

When I first saw Birgisson's paintings of blonde beauty queens, he had finished only six of the projected 56 but the cumulative effect was already apparent. He had hit upon a subject that rested as much upon serial execution as his own paintings, and the outcome was a striking critical unity of form and content. With one beauty queen after another, each much like the previous one, each confirming the validity of the one before, his paintings emulate the production of taste that takes place in a beauty pageant while, at the same time, parodying its effect. It was clear, already then, that the whole series would have to be brought together in one place for an exhibition.

The single minded repetition of identical motifs that characterize Birgisson's series of paintings has a long trajectory in modern art. From Monet's paintings of haystacks and footbridges to the minimalist boxes of the 1960s and beyond, modern artworks have commonly been executed in series. For Monet it provided a means of capturing the ever-changing atmospheric conditions, which no single painting could encompass. A series permits unending variation but, implicitly, the repetition also reminds us of the place of the assembly line in modern life, not only in the manufacture of consumer goods but in the mass production of taste. This is where Birgisson positions himself and where Andy Warhol treaded before him. When Warhol painted his series of the iconic beauties of his day - Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and Jacqueline Kennedy - he treated them with the same serial indifference as Coke bottles, Campbell's Soup Cans, and Brillo boxes.

Birgisson's approach is at once more ironic and more generous than Warhol's. His paintings are carefully crafted and clearly the product of a skilled painter who has spent countless hours getting the balance right between the horror of standardization and the promise of difference. His approach here, as always, is exceedingly human.

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