

The following article by Ransu, was published in the NY Arts Magazine in relation to my show in the US, when the Blond heads Nordic race series was on show in the US.

The Horrific Purenness of Blond Heads

Birgir Snaebjörn Birgisson (b. 1966) is an Icelandic figurative painter whose work hints at minimal thoughts as presented by Kasimir Malevich in the 1920s. An artist that over a period of time took his works through a cleansing process by rejecting duality and embracing absence of color, pure white, pure light. Yet, different from the modernist thoughts of Malevich, Birgisson deals with duality in a stunning manner. In the early 90s, Birgisson painted the innocence of children's games in pallid colors that became more transient with each passing year. In the late 90s, his work took a subjective turn when he read an article in a British magazine that stated that the majority of nurses in Britain were blonds. (Correction: ...heard a discussion on the BBC4 radio, regarding the comment made by Diane Abbott the British MP that to many blonde nurses had been hired into the British hospitals.) Birgisson then began his "Blond Nurses Series" in 1998, aware of the duality created by the clean pale surface and the racial issues that the images might provoke. His first nurse series showed groups of blond nurses posing for pictures. Later, he began painting the nurses as they were making beds, folding sheets or washing patients, as if he was showing us a cleansing process. A change from something dirty into pureness. It was therefore not surprising that when the paintings were first shown in London, Reykjavik and Berlin, many got offended by them and saw them as nationalistic propaganda.

In 2004, Birgisson took this duality a step further. Knowing that it would provoke even harsher reactions than the blond nurses, he began painting series of portraits he discovered in a book published by the German Nazi party in 1936 that showed images of the ideal Aryan look. (Correction: ...published in 1927, in Munich, Germany, by J. F. Lehmanns Verlag.) The series, titled "Blond heads - Nordic race," was Birgisson's contribution to the show "New Icelandic Art" at the National Gallery in Iceland in 2004-2005; the larger part of the series was on display this summer at Boreas Gallery as the gallery's inaugural exhibit after transferring its location from Brooklyn to Pittsfield.

The portraits are painted with pale transparent colors. One does not, however, escape confrontation with the mere terror of Nazi Germany as one looks at these blond heads with stinging blue eyes and it comes to mind that during WWII, the Nazis were actually conducting their own cleansing process by slaughtering millions of people that they labeled "dirty."

Adolf Hitler, who in his younger days applied twice for studying art at the Academy in Vienna but was rejected on both occasions, was not a stranger to aesthetics and saw himself as a man of good taste. In his famous speech at the opening of "Die Grosse Deutcher Kunstausstellung (The Great German Art Show)" at Haus der Deutcher Kunst in Munich in 1937, Hitler vowed that he would rid the German people of decadent foreign influence such as cubism, futurism and dadaism, and he finished his speech by stating, "From now on we are at war which will clean such dirt from the German culture," thus using modernist art as a proxy for his later horrific cleansing operations.

There is, of course, a vast difference between Hitler's ideas of pureness and Malevich's, since one suggests racial pureness and superiority while the other suggests spiritual pureness and unity or oneness. By projecting both ideas at once, Birgisson creates an aesthetic crash and provokes inner conflicts where he may well be caught in the line of fire himself as he is of Nordic lineage, blond with blue eyes. Hence, it is easy to misinterpret his work as nationalistic instead of acknowledging the direct reflection of racial issues and the duality that becomes almost palpable in these pale quiescent images that hit you with ceaseless whispers, that send chills down your spine.