

HOPE

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Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson

This catalogue was published to accompany the solo exhibition Hope by the artist Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson at Hafnarborg Art Museum, Hafnarfjörður, Iceland. The show was curated by Mika Hannula.

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Graphic design - Sigrún Sigvaldadóttir

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Big thanks goes to:
Icelandic Visual Arts Fund

A Real Human Being

What you see is not what you get. You see more and you see less - simultaneously. And what you think you recognize is not what it is about. It is, again, much more complex and oh so very simple.

It is about two things, two inter-connected things. It is about hope, and it is about what it means, and is it even possible, and if yes, how so to be and become a real human being.

A hope of a chance for becoming a real human being.

* * *

A wall. We stand in front of it, and we stare at a wall. We keep on keeping on - trying to be with, trying to relate with.

The facts are comforting, they help. They bring structure into an inherent ambiguity. The facts as in numbers that lead us to the latest, but not the last, election in 2013. It was the case of the parliamentary election. In the state of Iceland, there are 63 members of the parliament.

63 is an uneven number. It has to be an uneven number, because when voting about laws and regulations, budgets and budget cuts, there must come a result. A tie is not possible. A tie is not in the books.

But why 64 on the wall? Perhaps for a symmetry, perhaps for paying attention to the fact that the elected body is not stable. It lives. Some change jobs, some change their overall currency of being. Some even leave their bodies. They die.

But perhaps the main reason for the number 64, the extra one is to keep it open, to underline how each and every one of the members of the parliament at that very time are indeed both changeable and contingent. They could be anyone, but they are not.

These 64 faces, these persons behind and beside these faces are one and they are many. They are singular but they are part of a bigger whole.

* * *

These 64 portraits activate our imagination of what could and perhaps should come about, these are portraits of real human beings. They have mothers, they have fathers. They most often have families. They are loved, and sometimes they love back. They have been hurt, and they have caused pain. They have known joy and felt a sudden rush of happiness, even desire.

They are like all of us. Almost.

These 64 are different. They are not special. They are different, because they have a role that is not just a role play, but a role that is painstakingly controlled and continuous.

They represent. Not humanity, not a human being, not a human kind of a situation, not a real hero. They represent the people. They are an aggregate of the nation.

They are one and the same, and they are single and generic. They are more, much more than one should ever expect them to be.

To repeat. These 64 represent our wishes, our wants, our desires and especially our fears. They are a both a platform and a dumping ground for all our anxieties, disappointments, short-comings and insecurities.

Now, hand on heart, who would want to be that?

We know it is impossible, even inhuman. And we know that the propaganda asks us to believe that nothing is impossible. But it is. And it will be.

We are and we are not - same and different. Same as different. This is what we see, this very difference within the same when we see what we see at these portraits of one and many, these ever changing elements that are similar but always unique.

* * *

But what do we see? What do we hear? What do we feel?

When facing ourselves, like with a mirror, and a mirror that keeps on nagging us and wanting us to stay for yet a bit longer, these 64 portraits demand. They are, indeed, extremely demanding.

These works demand attention. They also deserve attention. There is no way to solve them, no way to satisfy them, no way to deny them.

They stand in front of us and they tell a story, no, sorry, to be precise, they tell stories. These are stories that we actually do not want to see, hear, or feel with.

These stories are not nice and neat, nor are they bold and beautiful. These are stories that are about us. They are not necessary scary or ugly but they are - us. In these stories, we never reach what we wish for. We are frail, and we fail. We suck and we are sucked into a whirlwind of everyday events that control us - not the other way around.

What we see, hear and feel for is a real human being. Someone and somebody whose reach always horrible extends his/her grasp.

And that, that truly and duly hurts. It is bound to cause a bruise and a heartache. A commotion and a clash.

* * *

In the movie Drive, directed by Nicolas Winding Refn, and starring Ryan Gosling, from the year 2011, we witness a setting that proves to be more and less than meets the eye. Our expectations are both met and deceived. We see, hear and feel a love story that is quite but not exactly. It is almost. The art of almost.

In a central scene of the movie, the main character has decided to alter his course of action. He no longer only stands for himself, and does things that help himself. He chooses to help someone else, regardless of the consequences.

In this scene, we hear the music. It comes in, and it stays in the background but it also pierces through. We want to stop for it, but the events of the moving images do not allow us to have the luxury of a halt. We move on and the lyrics of the song move on with us.

It is a rather typical retro kind of electro pop song. In itself, nothing much to share about, but the point here is timing and the connections. The character is about to do right, and to do wrong. At the very very very same time. It is an act that inevitable leads to a tragedy. Blood, sweat and tears.

And song, the song sings: "A real human being, and a real hero".

* * *

With these works, with these 64 ones that are there, on the wall, to serve and to shiver, we get the elements of the real crime. We get into the act of wishing well within which our wishes are not so innocent or swell. But we need more, always more. We need something to guide and to balance this endless and never ever fulfilled acts of projections.

We need protection. Not from someone out there. There is no out, and no in. We are the mess. It is our mess. It is our freedom and our responsibility. What to do and what not to do. Or: whom to blame for the boogie that we wished for.

We need protection from ourselves. And it is only ourselves that can provide and maintain that projection for and from ourselves.

Remember: it is our mess, and it is our chance and challenge to confront and deal with it.

Projection and protection.

It is both-and, it is here and now, and it is there and then.

These works, these 64 portraits. They are projection, and they are protection.

Please please please. Try it out, again and again. Be a human being, a real human being and stay - get closer, stay closer. Let these portraits look back at you and let them have an effect on you.

And yes, while doing it, and while failing and then getting up again, if you need a word, a concept, a helping hand to navigate and negotiate with these dangerous paths and tumultuous seas, we have it. For you, and for us. To care and to caress.

It is called hope.

Hope.

Mika Hannula

HOPE
Oil on canvas, 2015-2016
50 x 40 cm (x 64)

Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson, born 1966, studied at The Icelandic College of Art and Crafts, and École Des Arts Décoratifs in Strasbourg in France. Birgir has shown his work widely, both here in Iceland and abroad.

Birgir Snæbjörn has worked with Mika Hannula, curator and writer, on various projects since 2002. Their first collaboration was a group show called Stop for a Moment – Painting as Narrative, Proje4L, Istanbul Museum of Contemporary Art. They have also collaborated on projects such as Happy Together, a group show at Tallinn Art Hall (2009); Pleasure Principle, a painting group show at Kling & Bang, Reykjavik (2011); and in Galleri Björkholmen, Stockholm (2012). Hannula also curated Birgisson's solo exhibition Blonde Miss World 1951- at the Reykjavik Art Museum in 2007 and Ladies, Beautiful Ladies at ASI Art Gallery and also Helsinki Contemporary, both 2014. In 2016 they collaborated in the show Let's Get Physical in Leipzig.

HOPE

Hope. So much, and so little. Or way too grand and not at all enough. Extended and neglected. It contains and connotes everything - and nothing.

Hope. A concept and an idea that is in a great need of a localized articulation - and yes, actualization. A give and take of our freedoms and responsibilities as human beings, as citizens.

Hope. At the same time, so very everyday, and also sky high on abstraction. Perhaps too simple, and perhaps too full of expectations. A gravity that pulls and pushes. A wish and a need that bounces back and forth between reality and fiction.

Hope. Here are 64 versions of it, as in a one entity. Human beings as one and as many. 64 representations of what is good, what is beneficial and what is necessary for the society - for its individuals, and for its common whole.

Hope. When reality bites and fiction strikes, what's your version? Not what's your poison, or your fears for tears, but what is that you hope for? With whom, and to whom? How, where and when, and why?

Hope. Please take my hand, and lead me, lift me - somewhere, somehow and sometime. Here and now. Please please please.

Hope.