

JUSTICE

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Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson

This catalogue was published to accompany the solo exhibition Justice by the artist Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson at The Corridor, Brautarholti 8, 105 Reykjavík Iceland. The show was curated by Mika Hannula.

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Hunang
Dugguvogur 3 · 104 Reykjavík
www.birgirsnaebjorn.com

NO JUSTICE TONIGHT

No Justice Tonight is a song. So is I Fought the Law. Don't Stand Too Close To Me, is also a song, but I am not sure it belongs here. But this one definitely does: Up Against the Wall, You Motherfuckers - even if, in a second thought, it might be, not a title of a song but a line from a song. Whatever, it fits and it works.

Because because because.

This is not a normal case. This is not a normal set of works, and what the works, these acutely contesting and provocative 10 paintings by Birgir Birgisson deal with and address is certainly not a normal setting.

We are gazing into a deep dark abyss of justice as its opposite injustice. We are talking about stuff we do wish that we would not have to talk about.

On the face of it, this new body of work called The Supremes by Birgir is rather straightforward. In a coherent continuation with his recent paintings, he has taken up the existing official portraits of the 10 members of the Supreme Court in Iceland and turned them into something else. Just a year ago, he gave a somewhat similar sweet but perhaps not all so tender treatment to all the members of the parliament in a series called Hope. They are also the same size (50 x 40). As the curiosity of the time-line will have it, as well as then as is the case now, there is an election coming up.

Obviously, there are always a number of reasons why in representational democracies an early election is called. A rather typical case in point, and absolutely not only a monopoly in Iceland, is when politicians are caught raw with their pyramid-high hypocrisy. In the current case, many of the politicians and at least two of the members of the government were highlighted through the leaks of information in the so-called Panama papers to have acted against, not

exactly perhaps the law, but what they themselves claimed to be a good practice of governance. It was far, very far from fair play and transperence.

But, well, whether or not it helps, or adds either more insult or injury, all those who were caught with their hands deep inside the cookie jar can easily refer to the amazingly high number of similar cases - a volume of habit that is very close to being accepted as a common way of doing daily business, right here, right now.

It was just another day at the office, so to say.

* * *

But there is more. This time the serious reason for a new election call connects the dots between these ten members of the Supreme Court and the above-allocated notion of not normal.

It is about justice - the sense of it, the lack of it, or even downright mocking of it.

There is no other way but to state it directly. This reason points to a process of pardoning, a sort of an amnesty to a sentenced criminal, a person who has served his/her sentence. The custom of restoring honor refers to a very local tradition to give sentenced persons for a chance of an amnesty that would take away their social shame - and allow them to save face, clean their name, and even to be able to serve in various governmental and volunteering functions and positions. The cause and effect of cases like this starts with letters written on behalf of the person, applying and asking for the pardoning, and the decision is made by the Ministry of Justice.

So far, not that dramatic or unnormal. We do want to forgive and let all of us to have a second or third chance. The thing that is so unfortunately difficult to comprehend is that the crime in question of the process of pardoning was this: a series of ongoing rapes of an under-aged stepdaughter. And no, sorry, to be precise, it was not one, but actually two cases (Hauksson, convicted for repeated rape, Hreidarsson, convicted pedophile) of restored honor that were donated in silence and which, when brought into the media attention, lead to dismantling of the government and to new elections.

To quote a somewhat reliable source: "The story involves Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson and his father, Benedikt Sveinsson. Here's what happened: Several months ago, Sveinsson drafted a letter of recommendation for Hauksson, arguing that he should have his "honor restored." In Iceland, convicts can have certain civil rights restored by submitting letters of recommendation extolling good character. Hauksson and another convicted pedophile, Robert Downey (formerly named Robert Arni Hreidarsson), received full pardons over the summer." (Washington Post, 16.9.2017)

And yes, this is where everything stops, and the needle drops. This is where we stare and this is where we do not comprehend what, how and when - and why?

How do you bounce back from that? Why would anyone possibly even think there is a way back to something of a core community after repeated case of rape and pedophile? This is not to scream for murder, this is just to ask: can there be amnesty for a case and a person like this? Why would a system, any kind of judicial system allow this kind of a whitewash of a horrible crime?

Or, lets leave the politicians and the ministry of justice for a second. Let's turn this the other way around? What would you do - if you had to face this unthinkable thing?

One thing is sure. None of us can know, and most of us don't want to even start thinking about it. There is a gap - between what was done and what our imagination allows, and how this inability actually protects us. You do not go to the other side unless you have no choice.

What we can do, and almost automatically do, is that we can refer and relate to various narratives, movies, books or plays. Of these, there are plenty around. We can recall the Danish The Crime series, or in the American remake of it called Killing. There and then is a case - not of a stepdaughter but a daughter being mutilated and killed. We see the hurt and helplessness, we see that whatever happens next, to the people, to the families, to the community, it is not going to be good.

The question remains, way out of the realm of fiction, the ethical issue stays: what would you do? Revenge, wish to wipe that person away - or what? Do you wish that a sentenced criminal is accepted back to the community, with the not so candid help of a high placed politician and his relatives?

Now, would you?

* * *

What about the paintings?

It is hard to look at them. What we see is what we assume we see: common people, just like you and me - almost. By their professional role, they are very much the elite of a society. But they do look so blatantly, disturbingly normal. Or if we are able to stand and gaze a bit longer, they look a bit weird.

This weirdness has not that much to do with the way they are painted. Sure, there is no face-lift, no TV gala make-up, as ever, Birgir is not decorating these everyday people - but he is not either rubbing it in. Through detachment and alteration of medium and use of faintest of shades of color, he paints them into being - both into a corner and out there into the open exchange.

We hear a clash and a collision. A version of a reality is turned into something else, something different.

There is already something strange, even something wrong with the set-up and the original sensibility of the paintings. This is a bunch of powerful people who look, interestingly enough, as if they are not feeling that swell. They seem to lack a bounce, energy, and a will. Almost all of them are kind of eternally lining up for yet another extra shot of C-vitamin.

Why do they look so very lame and so out of joy? Are they already in shame - hiding behind their miseries? No, because then they would have stepped down and turned what they know into the public realm. But that has not happened.

So, what is going on? Destiny? Poetic justice? Irony of the impossible? Snorkel of sanity?

I do not know.

What I do know is that what Birgir has done here is creating an event out of a thing that is unacceptable and horrible. Certainly, it was not the paintings that made this issue public, but it is with the means of a painting that Birgir is lifting this scandal, these ten people and their passivity, the irresponsibility of the system that they stand for to yet another new level - a recognizable, not representational level.

This is no more abstract theory or constellation. We have a face, a person. We have ten of them, a human face x 10. It is not their fault, but they must face the facts - and the burden of the established position, the responsibilities that it should acknowledge. It is no longer an anonymous no-body, it is a demanding set-up of distinguished body, a consciousness of a conflict.

The act of eventualization, according to Foucault, is about recovering the way things are connected and at the same time a break and a breach of what is taken as self-evident, and well, normal. "It means making visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all" (1991, 76)

This is where it is at. This is open, this is direct, and this is effective. This is visual culture at its best, taking no prisoners, taking no precautions but hitting and hitting it hard where it hurts. It is not a celebration, nor a glorification. It is raw and it hurts.

These people - they cannot hide anymore. Neither can we - not not watch and stare.

As I said before: Up Against the Wall, You Motherfuckers.

* * *

So, what about justice, or injustice. Or, well, even poetic justice?

We do not have to be cynical to realize that this scandal will pass. There will be new scandals, and new people on the top who claim that they are even cleaner than the rest of their crew while being even dirtier than the ones before.

It is the game of the same same - and predictably not much different.

What remains, what goes under the surface, what adds gravity to the process is these 10 works, these 10 paintings. They do not evaporate. They stay, they demonstrate, in silence, and as paintings, their solemn silence is where their power, their dignity lies.

What also stays, in terms of poetic justice, is this old idea, now in a round about way realized in these 10 works, an idea of what if the people who are on the top of the top of the society, having the power and freedom but acting without almost any responsibility and accountability, what if they would be marked somehow? Not by something violent or vulgar such as tattoos or stickers, no no no. We do not want that because then we actually would have to get closer and to touch them. But what if they would be forced openly to carry their shame, their mistakes, their misery, carry their tilted and stained roles not just in their offices but also all through the everyday?

As we witness, this time these paintings do make it happen. But I was thinking about something more, something extra - as poetic justice?

These people, they are jurists. Thus, they have studied the law. I assume this is a common practice through the Nordic countries, especially the up and becoming lawyers, when they party, they party hard and they dress in these mock-workers overalls. (So far, it is practiced to absurd dimensions especially in the university towns in Sweden and Finland, perhaps picking up other countries, too) They party and imitate the working class, attaching ads and oh so funny comments to them. Nothing wrong in that, expect it looks awfully stupid and is kind of embarrassing. Not necessary to themselves but to the other human beings around them.

So - the promised idea?

So, what if there could be an universal rule, a no-exception rule that if and when these people put that mock-overall dress three times on, they are out. The lightning has struck and it is no longer possible to get rid off it.

So? So then we would, when looking at the people in the parliament, and at the supreme court, instead of looking at the typical cavalcade of suits and sharp dresses, and of course, so very cute ties and kerchiefs, we would gaze at an attitude of vulgar stupidity that also dresses as it thinks and as it stinks - and most importantly, these people could not hide behind their roles and positions, and we would not be able to take these people anymore any more seriously that they actually deserve.

Sure, they would still have the power, but they would be laughed at - all the time. They would be forever prisoners of their own hype and the dark side of the moon of its self-serving self-importance.

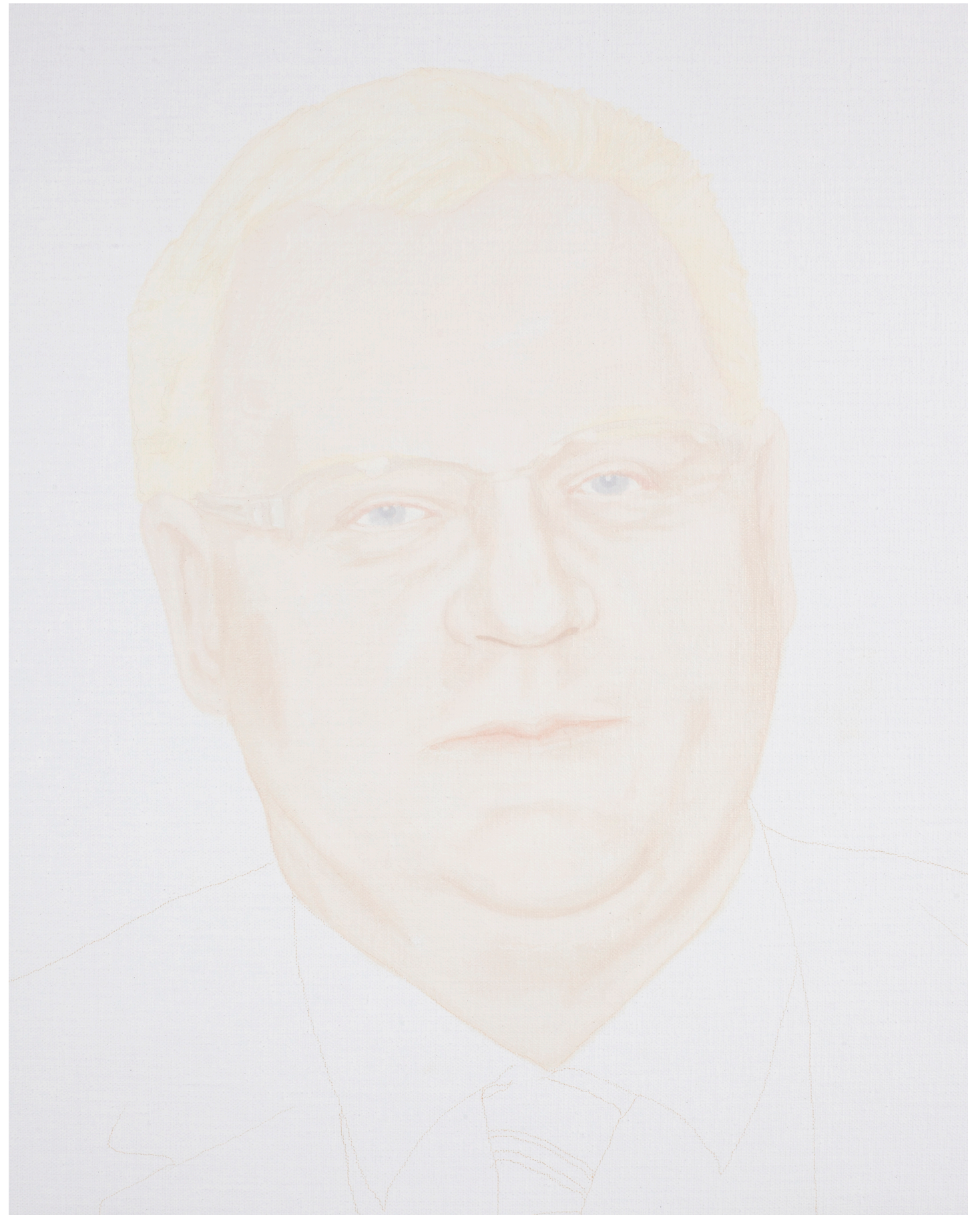
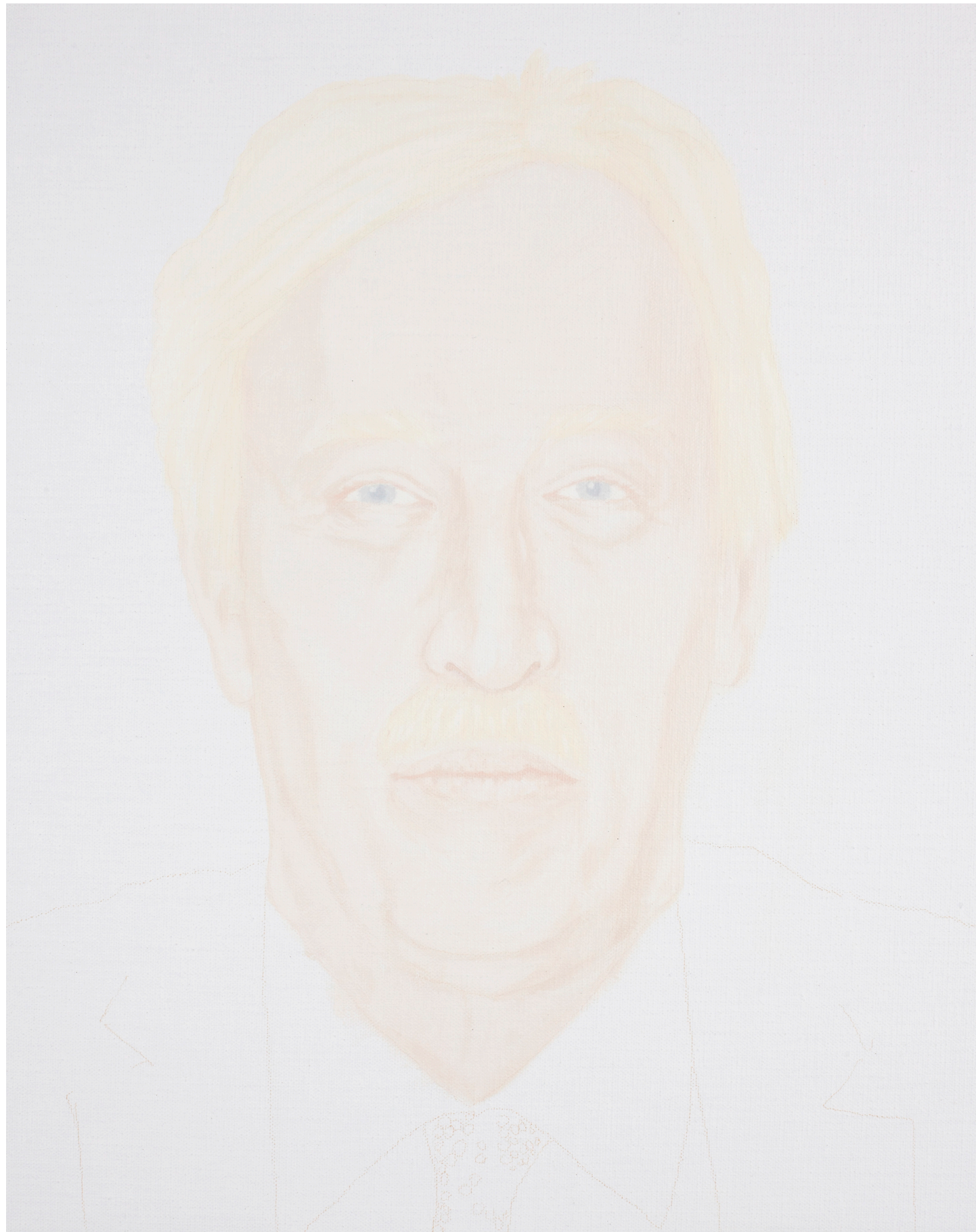
So, how about it? Anyone any ideas how to realize this wonderful view and vision? Tell me, please, tell me: Will there be Justice Tonight?

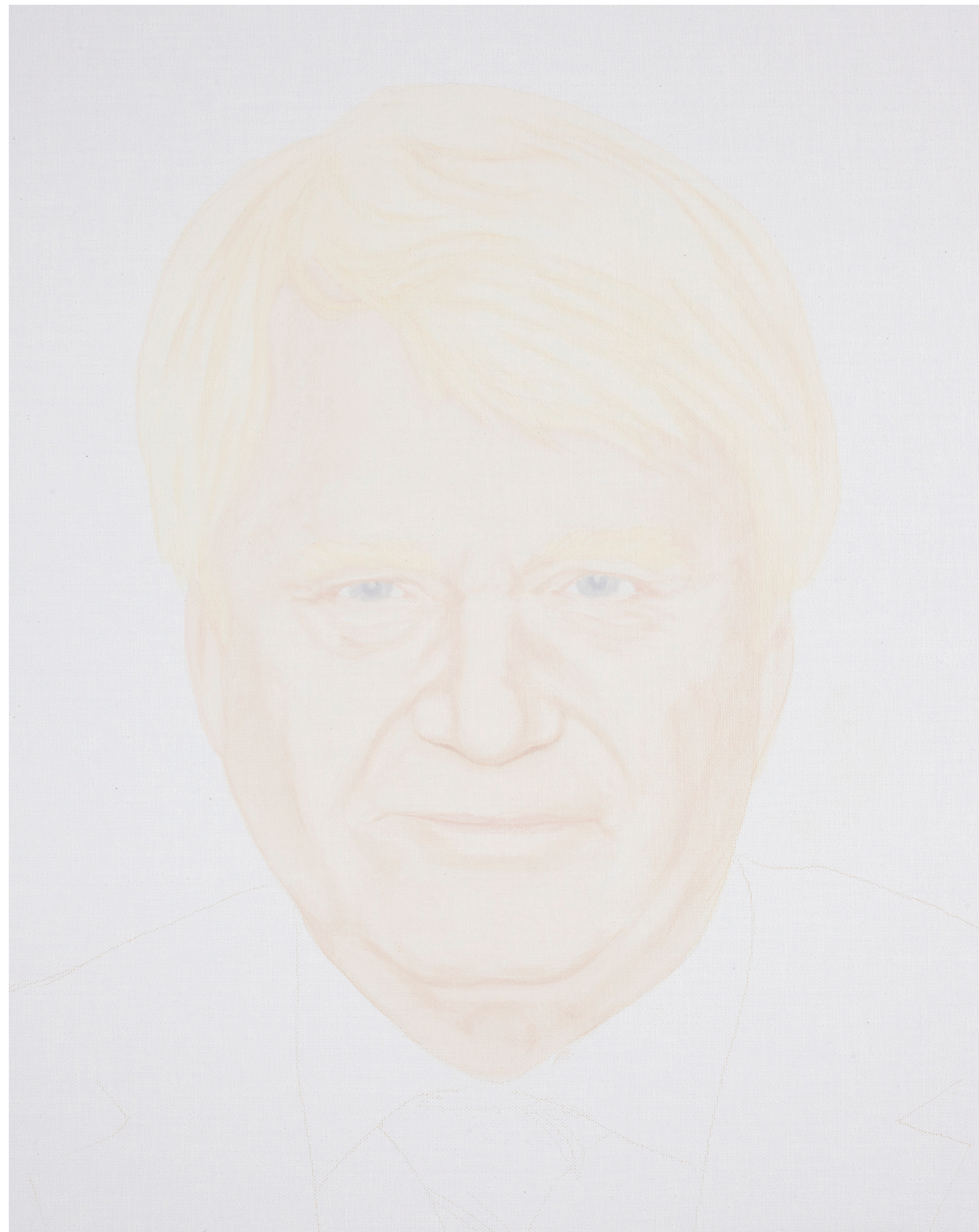
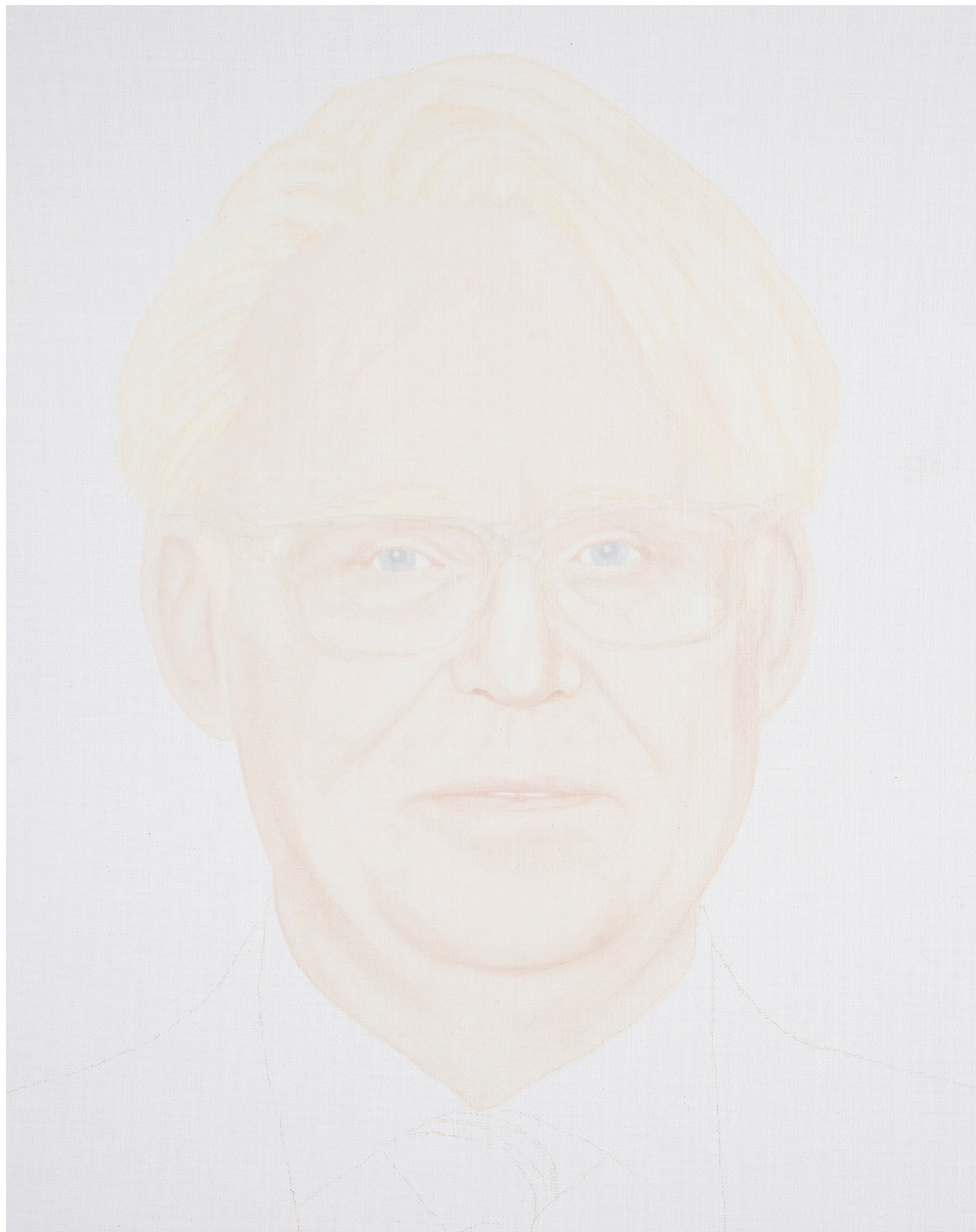
Mika Hannula

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THE SUPREMES
Oil on canvas, 2017
50 x 40 cm (x 10)





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 and Hannula also curated Birgisson's solo show Hope, at Hafnarborg Art Museum, Hafnarfjörður.

