

SOMETHING LARGER THAN ONESELF

By Märten Castenfors

It has been a long time since an artist could aspire to be a truth-teller or mediator; someone who remained outside society but whom society nonetheless respected because of his or her ability to reveal, fantasize or heal. In other words, Icarus has burnt his wings in earnest, and the result is that many of today's young artists have abandoned the prophetic calling of art and chosen to work instead with contemporary issues of a more immediate concern. In many cases this art, too, which is often based on video, photography and mechanical installations, has broadened the universe of art with an unexplored cynical style, but a frantic yearning to meet the insatiable desire of mass culture for spectacular novelties that have transformed art into merchandise and a fashion among other merchandise and fashions. The alternative is not like that of the ostrich burying its head in the sand and nostalgically continuing to uphold the perpetual correctness of devising new twists and turns to solve formal problems – be it those who assiduously guard a moribund tradition or those who slavishly follow the prescription of the the art magazines for success, neither of them are advocating a constructive artistic attitude.

Naturally there are also a great number of artists who pay little attention to the conflicts and factions that are prevalent in the art world and who try instead to obstinately develop their art as a visual language. For them the superficial style is not an end in itself but merely an instrument with which they can affect a viewer. However the problem for these reflective artists (who can be found in every school of art) is that we live in an age in which art is rewarded if it can be classified into easily understandable, simplified categories – those who end up off the beaten track are easily dismissed or remain unnoticed.

According to this logic, the Norwegian Elisabet Norseng is an artist who is living dangerously, for her art is not formatted according to any easily definable concept and therefore runs the risk of being misunderstood by both fashion-conscious contemporary interpreters and retrospective traditionalists. Already in Elisabet Norseng's expressive period of the 1980's we see the blossoming of a teeming, flourishing natural style in Indian ink, chalk and charcoal, which despite obvious parallels could neither be derived from a turgid Pollock, a spiritual Michaux or an expressive Baselitz. Through these early, monumental explosions with their unruly rhythms, Elisabet Norseng showed that she had found an intricate and independent middle ground from which an extremely individual picture emerged; each line and stroke of colour is called forth with an intellectual stringency as well as a sharp contrast between sensitive fingers and powerful hands. Her works announced a major, unabashed presence through their nerve, which was transformed into a lusty calligraphic style that developed as Elisabet Norseng occupied her alternative artistic space.

In the beginning of the 1990's there was a major alteration in the mood of her works – a challenging silence with greater serenity and concentration replaced the eruptive cascades. What one sensed in the individual strokes was a shift of expression from clamorous song to whispering poetry, a refinement in order to arrive at a clearer symbolism for the transitory nature of being. In 1993 Elisabet Norseng had an exhibition at The Living Art Museum in Reykjavik, Iceland, for which she had a strange catalogue printed in which the pictures seemed void despite the fact that there were factual picture captions and exact specifications of works of art. Thus, in the *nothingness*, of the invisible

By Mårten Castenfors

something important was concealed, and on closer study extremely subtle strokes became apparent on the surface of the paper – in the whiteness one imagined more than one saw, a few spots, shadows or lines that were fully sufficient to fill the often monumental space of the pictures with significant activity. Despite the extreme reduction of the strokes, these were in fact an attacking body of works, where exactness and temperament were absolutely crucial for the conviction of the visual information. It was therefore a precise composition, which invoked a dialogue between the surface and what was added to it, and an extremely refined sensibility emanating from the white space providing an active dualism removed from mere chance. The white, almost invisible world with its few accents was also natural continuation of the darker, more expressive, serially discovered musicality in which the visual arguments were further sharpened.

Paradoxically what was nearly invisible, thus became more visible than that which de facto was there.

Behind this ethereal language we may also sense an austere artistic ethic. With her form of expression that shuns photographic reproduction so that the viewer must see the original painting, Elisabet Norseng makes big demands on the viewers' physical and emotional presence. Tauntingly the white becomes a visual exploration of the viewers' sensitivity and ability to perceive greatness and strength in the minute. Elisabet Norseng primarily aims her work at viewers who are willing to partake in a dialogue with the sublime. She speaks to those who want to be deeply moved and who know that great art is like a passage where the familiar meets the wonderful.

In practice then, Elisabet Norseng has found a valid alternative, a reflective artistry that observes the state of things without following current trends or straying into the subtle traps of tradition. Her multi-dimensional works undoubtedly transcend both the fashionably correct and the stagnant, i.e., the merely illustrative. She does not constrain her stylistic language like a minimalist, does not search for the beautiful like an aesthete, nor does she dash off flurries of strokes like an expressionist. Just as in the 1980's she makes her way through the swamp of gratuitous labels by sticking to her own territory, where existential observations and insights converge in a unique style. As a result of these expressly communicative demands, every dash of colour is applied in a spirit of absolute seriousness. When we confront these vibrant strokes directly, we clearly perceive that they *take* – every dab of colour that crystallizes transforms into a point of concentration, which expands into vast words – the gaze shifts and the energy of the work is activated. When one finds oneself in the dynamic state between intellect and intuition, between control and spontaneity, the greatness of Elisabet Norseng's works becomes apparent, that is to say, their unique ability to reveal the *punctum saliens* where a nothing is transformed into a something – a something that is larger than oneself.

MÅRTEN CASTENFORSoct. 1996 stockholm
art historian
art critic