

THE PICTURE TURNS ALIVE

The picture turns

alive,

when you firmly

watch it,

and as long as

you keep an eye on it,

it becomes

*itself.*¹

There is nothing that more aptly describes my meeting with Elisabet Norseng's new series than the final stanzas of her own poem "Surface". The shapes and colors are undoubtedly both vibrant and captivating.

Elisabeth Norseng's images are completely her own, as I see them. It makes it hard to write about her art. And Mårten Castenfors confirms my feelings in the catalog to the exhibition *(un) blind* which showed the group *Crew Cut* in museums in the Nordic countries between 1997-98. Here he writes that Elisabet Norseng lives dangerously as an artist, since her art is not formatted according to a recognizable concept and therefore is easily misunderstood by both more time-conscious contemporary interpreters and by backward-looking traditionalists.

² I did not wish to misinterpret her new pictures. Although I have been familiar with her art for over ten years, my assignment to write a text to the brand new series was more difficult than I imagined. My approach was to consider the closing stanzas of the ten years older poem. When we talked about her origins and thoughts on the new series, it appeared that she had chosen the same poem cycle, but other verses. Therefore, the poems from the book have become a recurrent theme here.

My field of work over the past seventeen years has been photography. Since the contents of photographs are so dominant, the photographer and the circumstances surrounding the recording recede for those viewing the photo. It is clearly easier to understand that there is a will behind oil on canvas or pencil on paper than it is to select a detail from a myriad of possible sections. So what does the photo have to do with Elisabeth Norseng's drawings? Well, I see two similarities in her way of working. On the one hand, her general passion for working in series, as if she wants to tell a story completely to the end before commencing a new one. Or expand on a topic until there is no more to research. Not surprisingly she has recently begun to express herself through film and – you got it - photography.

Opposing this is her insistence on the paper's format, i.e., the frame that the drawing relates to. It is also the format and the edge which is decisive for the photo. It is often thus with photos, that one can sense or imagine what the photographer has omitted. That which is related to the picture, but that is no longer there, outside of the photograph's edges. In Norseng's new series the lines seek outside the frame she has drawn up on the paper. She lets the line itself suggest that it may explode the frame. That the frame is a restriction or more likely a challenge as it is formulated in two other verses in the poem "Surface":

Universes made

playing with borders, which

is a discovery

of time.

How to make

use of

limits

and their purposes.

In *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary attempts to draw up a " history of vision." ³ In order to do that he takes up the viewer's position. The viewer has in the past centuries had to adapt to new ways of seeing and interpreting what you are watching. Crary's point of departure is that there is not enough to describe a dialectical relationship between the avant garde art experiments and "realism" in the late 1800's popular culture to explain the changes, as the history of art has traditionally done. One must see both phenomena as overlapping components of a society where modernization of *sight* had begun long before. Modernism's experimental art from the 1870-80's and photography after 1839 can be seen as late symptoms of a trend that began much earlier. The Renaissance's constructed central perspective and the *camera obscura* can stand as examples of the viewer's dominant status from the 16-1700's, while in the 1800s countless visual machines occur; the stereoscope, the zoetrope, or stroboscope, dioramas and theater-like peeping cabinets who raise the viewer to both specialization and ability to a flexible interpretation of what one sees. The many optical aids are meeting places for philosophical, scientific and aesthetic discourses that overlap with society's mechanical techniques, institutional requirements and socio-economic powers. In other words, many fields outside of me affect how I consider something and how susceptible I am in seeing and interpreting anything I am not used to seeing.

So what has this got to do with Norseng's image world? Well, for me her drawings in particular challenge my gaze. The cultural ballast we carry with us allows us to go into a drawing, photograph or painting and analyze the picture, both in what it does to me and why it affects me like it does. But I can also step back and refocus, and then the drawing itself

changes. By Norseng's drawings having an open interpretation, she allows both her drawing and me to play. In a sense we become equal partners. My meeting with the picture becomes genuinely my own, and the picture is shaped in my image, just like the picture helps to form me over again. I can choose to recognize specific objects such as flowers and leaves, landscapes and characters, or I can see lines and colors that turn up and force their way out. But it can also happen that the image grabs hold of me and reveals an inner landscape that I sense but do not understand.

And When I don't

find out, I keep it

happily;

it has become my piece. ⁴

Norseng's world of imagery seems always to have been abstract and exploratory. From the dense intense ink drawings and paintings in the 1980s that are reminiscent of abstract expressionism or action painting in the 1950s, but nevertheless turned out not to be. The transcription of day and night, snow and earth to poems and pictures had a sensual, tactile and musical quality, full of longing, but also a willingness to confront and understand. Only five years later have the lush lines and the masses of black and brown ceded their place to intermissions and voids, and become the almost invisible, minimalist characters that illustrated the Norwegian Cultural Council booklet *Culture in Norway*. ⁵ Floating indeterminate objects, circles, dots and squares were playing on the white paper. One might think that they, in good old minimalist spirit, were a reaction to the earlier Expressionist drawings. But for me they have naturally grown out of the first. Still, they had something concrete about them, or perhaps more in common with mathematical formulas than the later drawings, dots on paper from a small sketch block at the exhibition in the Oslo Art Society in 2004 and in *Aria e Vento* from the following year. ⁶ Now the focus had really moved. Maybe from outer earthly to the inner mental or extraterrestrial perspective? The black had become white and other cautious were added. The rapid, almost manic disappeared in favor of points or circular rings that relate to each other and the space they float in. But at the same time these new drawings are still about how the line and paper, color and void, surface and space are dependent on each other and constitute two sides of same coin.

A single dot on the surface

a newborn universe

wherefores shapes

starting two dance and play.

From nothing

to a something

by adding

a dot.

Surface turned

from emptiness

through simplicity,

Into a special

place. An independent

something. ⁷

For me, she here precisely describes her works on paper up until this new series. But really, also the new presented here. The dots or circles danced and played and converted the paper surfaces into quite special rooms. There two-dimensional became three-dimensional. The paper was transformed into space or universes where the stars vibrated against me or away from me in the endless white room. At the same time they conveyed a silence or pause in the cacophony of images and opinions we met every day. They were free of loud opinions, revelations, or entertainment.

We also see that she describes her own working method in these stanzas: time consuming, deliberate and focused in dialogue with the material. And it is this dialogue that rubs off on me as a viewer. That requires quiet intensity in that I listen and see.

Askeladden walks

out into the world

in constant surprise,

and when he finds a something

a nothing disappears. ⁸

Askeladden, the Norwegian folk tale's ideal protagonist, is the naive and seemingly dull, who has the ability to find what others cannot see. Objects that turn out to be crucial at the moment guiding the development of the situation towards its solution. Elisabet Norseng is such an Askeladd. She has gone out into the world and found something that has possibilities to stimulate the consciousness of those who meet her pictures. For me it is precisely a very simple and tight form-vocabulary that has the ability to both initiate associations and a fascination and desire to want to understand how the eyes seek and find what has meaning. The images are both familiar and infinitely demanding and challenging. It is simply impossible to say that there is nothing. Even if you shrug your shoulders and go past, you will be forced to stop and go back.

Precision will

release the power

and humility of

the origin. ⁹

Today's meandering color lines that sometimes resemble simple drawings of flowers or children's early drawing attempts are again something new. Here it is not possible to see similarities with abstract expressionism. These drawings are lighter and more controlled and also playful in a brighter way. To me it seems that she may perhaps rather has found inspiration in early French modernists. Despite the dis-similarities, they still have an important thing in common: exploring the limits of paper and drawing applying dissemination opportunities. One can also claim that it is a fundamental modernist project, but if one wishes to analyze Norseng's art, it isn't as simple as all that. Because she has a completely different agenda. She creates moments between herself and me with the drawings as an interpreter. Or maybe it's more correct to say that the drawings are the meeting place. The drawings also have their own life and thus never completely allow me to find a solution. And they offer a different atmosphere at the next meeting. With their playful, but targeted fat lines, sometimes in dark earth colors and others in light and finely tuned tones, they place me in constantly shifting moods. It is not enough to be curious with ones' eyes and to analyze with one's intellect, Norseng's drawings take me in and do not let go.

And when I don't get

bored of it,

with colors strange

and ugly,

and far beyond

my imagination, then

I keep it;

what is this? [10](#)

by Hanne Holm-Johnsen

translated by Eric Scobie

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¹ Excerpts from the "Surface. From Nothing to a Something "(p. 42) in Elizabeth Norseng: *Fuggevole come la neve*, Publisher: Salon Privé Edizioni, Rome 1999

² Mårten Castenfors: "Something larger than oneself", p. 25-29 in Riksutstillingers directory *(un)blind* Oslo 1996

³ Jonathan Crary: *Techniques of the Observer. Wed Vision and Modernity in the nineteenth century*, MIT Cambridge (USA) 1990/1998

⁴ Excerpt from "My Piece" (p. 58) in Elizabeth Norseng: *Fuggevole come la neve*, 1999

⁵ *Culture in Norway. Guide for the 1997-98 tour operators*. Publisher: Norwegian Cultural Council 1997

⁶ Elizabeth Norseng: *Aria e Vento*, Publisher: Salon Privé Arti Visive, Rome 2005

⁷ Excerpts from the "Surface. From Nothing to a Something "(p. 34) in Elizabeth Norseng: *Fuggevole come la neve*, Rome 1999

⁸ Stanza from the "Paper" (p. 46) in Elizabeth Norseng: *Fuggevole come la neve*, 1999

⁹ Stanza from "My Piece" (p. 58) in Elizabeth Norseng: *Fuggevole come la neve*, 1999

¹⁰ Excerpt from "My Piece" (p. 58) in Elizabeth Norseng: *Fuggevole come la neve*, 1999