

For more than thirty years Elisabet Norseng has exhibited an artistry with an exceptionally strong inner connection, concentration, consequence and quality. It is an accomplishment capable of impressing, considering that it takes place in a time which constantly seeks towards continuous change and easily ends up with predisposition instead of immersion. Norseng has never compromised concerning her own work.

Some may therefore perceive her art as «narrow». Her impressive vita bears witness to the fact that there is probably a substantially broader interest in the narrow than some are willing to admit. She has exhibited at home and abroad, had major assignments, been purchased and has published art books which distinguish themselves through being beautiful and well-produced. Artistic quality, distinctiveness and depth obviously have appeal and constitute the bedrock of Norseng's art.

Norseng received her art training at the beginning of the 1980s. In her youth she studied under our first female professor of painting, Inger Sitter, who emerges as the Norwegian artist who first succeeded in connecting impulses from American expressionism with French informalism. Impulses that we sense have had significant impact on Elisabet Norseng, but which in the contemporary field was perceived as a thing of the past. She entered the art scene at a period characterized by the abandoning of abstraction and new emphasis on the meaning of form. The era was characterized by a desire for narrative stories. The figurative image, awash with cross references to history and the contemporary scene, was having a Renaissance. Ideally, the canvases were to be large, colorful and created in bold oils.

Against such a background Norseng appeared with powerful drawings in a dazzling interplay of lines, dots and spots carried out with a physical commitment that was akin to abstract expressionism. As a contrast to this more expressive artistic performance, Norseng has during long periods simplified and reduced the pictorial elements in a more minimalistic direction.

Common to Norseng's art-historical references, is that they are based on the importance of how the artist unfolds physically in relation to the pictorial plane and the materials being used. We can follow a line that departs from a point in a new direction, makes a turn and speeds off in another direction, as if the line is a body in motion. A body that sometimes dances weightlessly past, at other times heavily plodding ahead and leaving tracks on the surface, which defines the journey with the greatest degree of precision. As Norseng refined and simplified her form, her expression over the years has become more sensitive and poetic.

It is a form that also has a rich background in East-Asian drawing art and not least how impulses from it have influenced French art in modern times. There it shows powerful grafting onto certain forms of automatic drawing which we associate with the surrealism of the interwar years, and the postwar French abstract art, with artists like Hans Hartung and Jean Fautrier, who both played a major role inspiring Norwegian artists. Taken together, this constitutes the form of abstract art we are talking about, a mainstay within the pictorial art of the 1900s, and not at all an exclusive and isolated sideline.

The relationship between writing and image, is a recurring theme of modernism. On the international stage this connection won a newfound reality towards the end of the 1980s, through the American artist Cy Twombly, resident in Italy from the 1950s –who had a definite international breakthrough with an exhibition at the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 1988. The interest in Twombly signaled that abstract art was not considered to be a concluded historical era, but carried within it the seed for a vital and exuberant visualization of deeply existential questions, which violent figuration had superficially touched on in an illustrative and allegorical form.

Like Twombly, Norseng distinguishes herself through a language that connects the gesture of drawing with the more bound discipline of handwriting and a free improvisation which marks the image area with graphic elements - without clear symbolic functions. She concentrates on building a purely visual language based on the possibilities inherent in visual communication hinged on the exploration of the artistic tools and materials subject to artistic discipline and intuition.

Drawing has traditionally been associated with a close proximity to the primary phase in a creative work, with a special closeness to the creative process. Drawing has therefore gained a special status as an opening inward towards the artist's individual creative spirit. However, the drawing, is at the same time more than any other medium, associated with illustrating an idea, a program or a story. For Norseng, the purely illustrative is something that is rather distant.

A decisive limitation of the effort lies in the image format. Norseng preferably works on standard sized paper sheets and does not seek eccentric solutions concerning the actual image background. On the contrary, the image format provides the surface she expands on, and especially her works of recent years, points in direction of how her spontaneous depictions on the image surface, takes place under the auspices of an overall idea about composition and material choice. It is a practice deeply founded in a legacy of modernism that is linked to the exploration of visual image as form.

It is succinctly expressed in a series of pastel chalk drawings with the collective title “Berøringer” (*Touches*). Her point of departure is a rectangle. The geometrical shape creates a fixed frame wherein she can improvise. We can imagine that she has drawn the contours of growths, beings and things, but the interpretation of the form is not locked by any naturalistic depiction of the seen and experienced. The improvisation over a form does not end up like a rigid ornament. It has more in common with visual signals that sometimes accumulate into a densified form, at other times spreading out like light veils or acting as volatile points floating in air.

In recent years, Norseng has also acceded to more direct motivational references. The motives in a series of aquarelles can be associated with flowers. The images have a stronger impact and impress through their virtuoso technique. She succeeds in balancing a powerful palette of colors and a form that, by a hair's breadth misses the dissolved and deliquesce. These are watercolors that evoke memories of Emil Nolde's incomparable late aquarelles. In other pictures we discern landscape formations and portentous beings, like fish swimming by. In all these works it is more a case of a form

of vitalistic reference to organic forms and the conversations between them, than illustrations of anything in particular. As always with Norseng, it's a matter of transforming a subject into its pictorial equivalent, to appear with visual conviction.

During the last decade, the drawing has again come into focus among younger Norwegian artists, but still it is essentially different forms of figuration that apply. Placed in the Norwegian art landscape, Norseng appears a rare plant. When she occupies such an independent position, it is largely due to that she during long periods has lived and worked outside Norway. Her art has never relied primarily on local soil, and we sense that she has drawn nourishment from her impressions of the international art scene, but first and foremost, her works are deeply personal.

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