

## Bokanmeldelse

Katharina Alsen and Annika Landmann

*Nordic Painting: The Rise of Modernity*

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This wide and diverse survey of developments in modern Nordic visual cultures is a much welcome and overly needed addition to the growing, but as yet still relatively slim body of works available on a subject which in recent years has been enjoying an increased international scrutiny. That it is published in English will hopefully further its worldwide appeal and make both the book and its subject accessible to a new and varied readership. The term ‘hopefully’ is used however with some caution since it is not easy to identify what that readership might be. The huge, lavish and copiously illustrated production (237 colour images no less) has the appearance of a coffee table book, whilst the contents are decidedly academic and specialist in tone. This overtly scholarly intent is reinforced by a profuse use of academic citations and an imposing bibliography, but the absence of an index, the latter again more in keeping with a commercial publication. The general reader nevertheless may find her/himself bewildered by a vocabulary and style of writing which in its exclusivity speaks to the initiated, rather than those on the foothills of the subject and in need of guidance, and most of all by the absence of context. Even for the highly intelligent novice, the book provides no structured introduction as to its aims, ambitions or even more succinctly its field of enquiry, but instead catapults us into a speculative rumination on a contemporary art work viewed through the prism of a canvas by the Danish painter Peder Severin Krøyer, without any lucid formulation of a thesis to come. Swiftly the reader is thrown into the early decades of the twentieth century and beyond without an intellectual position or cultural foundation as support for what follows. The result is that one’s feet have commenced on shifting ground and the rationale for the book has throughout its near three hundred pages to be gradually inferred. The earlier sections attempt with great intelligence

to pin down something of the nature of Nordic geography and identity in the face of shifting and mutating national borders, which would appear to place the reader in an historical framework, but which is soon abandoned as the fragmentary nature of the numerous, short, sound-bite chapters (the book has no fewer than 40 subject headings) oscillate from the outset between twentieth century concerns and back to the Danish Queen Margaret I in the late fourteenth century. All of which indeed might be relevant; but for any reader coming new to the subject cannot help but be confusing.

Essentially the authors admirably take to task some of the stereotypical traditional themes or formulas of Nordic art, such as the preoccupation with melancholy angst, romanticised landscapes or desolate interiors. Instead they turn their attention to alternative means and modes of both viewing and analysing Nordic visual culture, from its earliest antecedents to the modernity of the twentieth century and, in the book's latter stages, to its contemporary reassessments and appropriations. In so doing they adopt a non-chronological evaluation and instead harvest a series of case-study conceptualisations under various categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, the body, urban life, and 'postcolonial dispositifs'. The latter again underscores a tendency throughout towards specialist jargon (countless references to *praxis* and *topos/topoi*) which makes it difficult to infer other than a circumscribed readership of academic peers. Indeed Foucault, Benjamin et al. are encountered with predictable and seemingly mandatory inevitability. Without, therefore, prior knowledge of the subject, an intelligent reader could hardly view this as an introduction to the avowed subject of Nordic painting. It is clear that what is *not* being attempted here is a chronological survey of Nordic art developments, despite the objective in the title to encounter the 'rise of modernity', which is constantly glimpsed but never delineated. Instead the accent is more consistently on what it calls 'new perspectives on the present'; which are supplied abundantly and with often great astuteness and perspicacity. However, in the absence of even the most rudimentary skeleton of the socio-political, historical and cultural structure of the Nordic nations, the uninitiated are left to extrapolate or infer the broader background against which the welter of individual practitioners or themed glimpses of the larger whole are situated. Without a framework on which to hang her/his readings of the Nordic paintings being adeptly analysed, the inexpert reader is presented instead with a series of detached ruminations or meditations on distinct themes such as visual blindness, the body, etc. All of which are of undoubted interest and cultural worth, and handled by the authors with incisive ingenuity, but which are difficult to approach or comprehend without the cultural foundation on which to site them, and which the reader is, presumably, believed to already have, since the book does not attempt to supply this.

The strength of the work however is in its inclusiveness. Alongside the expected, there are also encounters with artists from the Faroe Islands, Greenland and the Sami, and whilst the concentration at times on female painters is not by now a revelation, the authors have drawn in an exceptional body of artists with admirable insight and knowledge. Indeed in general the publication opens up to wider than ever scrutiny a heterogeneous range of painters little known one suspects even to the specialists of Nordic art that the book is addressing: Mikines and Käte Lassen to name but two of a wealth of fascinating practitioners. It is here that the fragmentary approach bears its best intellectual fruit as it allows some excellent, autonomous observations and analyses of specific works, themes and ideas,

based always on an impressive breadth of knowledge and awareness of recent research. There are, for instance, thoughtful sections on the Nordic responses to abstractions, with an interesting range of artists working within, but also augmenting, the familiar western European history of that revelatory cultural moment. This diversifies into an elegant appreciation of the attention to facture, the state of the surface of the painting, as well as to spiritual and psychological impulses behind artists such as Hilma af Klint, who is here credited with surpassing in her day the degree of abstraction achieved by Kandinsky, but which remained unrecognised until her work was viewed more widely after her death in 1944.

In essence the book is the obverse of the dull chronological litany of artists, biographies and works in that the predictability and often uncritical aspect of the latter left its readers no better informed than does this consciously intellectual and amorphous approach. But if so, that needed to be stated at the outset since at times the reader is given a distinct impression of a disinclination to communicate, but instead to pose and resolve questions in a wilfully tortuous prose (or is it translation?) where a more straightforward articulation would adequately suffice for the transmission of ideas without sacrificing their often problematic complexity. It is by this reckoning a book that will be good for dipping into with regard to specific concepts of Nordic art; to gain a more intimate and distilled understanding of specific practitioners and concepts, when already embarked on the journey (although the lack of an index may make even this problematical), but hardly a means to approach the subject for the uninitiated – and maybe that is not what the writers intended anyway. But that intention, the nature of the intellectual project embarked on, is ambiguous in the absence of an introduction or an assertion of objectives, to whom the book is addressed, and what precisely is its ambition. In its concluding paragraph the writers state: “It is apparent that no unified narrative can be formed of the history of Nordic art, but that there does instead exist a complex network of art histories.” This insightful and crucial observation, both in terms of its cultural import, as well as the perspective from which this book reflectively approaches its subject, comes late however and as a mission statement it would have served the reader much better as a preface than a coda.