



Marius Martinussen

Maleri

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Marius Martinussen (b. 1978) is a painter with many facets. He approaches the problematics and challenges of painting through formal experiments, but also through references to art history, different stylistic expressions and art theory. Thus the formal and physical spectre of his work is relatively large. Just as with many of his fellow contemporary artists, Martinussen is often on the move, and always has new projects underway in a variety of contexts. He works just as happily with small canvases, such as in the project Eye Candies, as with large surfaces, for example Feed Me to the Forest or Norwegian Trace.

Idol

On two different occasions, Martinussen has painted large portraits directly on walls. He has painted the winner of Norwegian Idol and World Idol competitions, Kurt Nilsen, and Norway's Crown Princess Mette Marit. The faces are painted in a naturalistic style based upon photographs. The style and the size of the portraits can be reminiscent of wall paintings used as propaganda during different dictatorships and political regimes.

When considering these two projects in tandem, we notice that the princess and the Idol-competition winner share a similar destiny. Each comes from a middle-class background; one was a plumber, the other a typical single mother with a rich mix of life-experiences. Both became involved in a situation that changed their lives drastically and completely. Their lives are like fairy tales from reality. Their new social roles have become objects for ardour, admiration and criticism.

When Martinussen selects these two (in Norway) well-known faces, he uses the same device Andy Warhol used in the 1960s, of re-producing popular culture's icons, in the form of things and people. Yet Martinussen's choice of Nilsen as icon is also conspicuously different. Kurt Nilsen can indeed be described as charming, yet he is far from photogenic. The first thing you notice is the gap between the singer's front teeth. This wily twist on the idea of 'an ideal' also arises when the crown-princess portrait becomes the décor in a bar (which, it is worth noting, is placed in an art gallery). By emphasizing that the royal family is first and foremost a part of popular culture, and no longer a pure aristocracy, he carefully disrupts, consciously or unconsciously, our ingrown conceptions about the difference between high and low culture. In one sense, Martinussen presents them both as idols—as unachievable ideals. Simultaneously he dismantles their status by highlighting their normality and the chance nature of destiny.

Popular

The representation of and enthusiasm for popular culture, trivial culture, music culture, advertising, interior design, etc., can also be traced in Martinussen's other paintings. These can be described as precise and energetic. The artist uses a masking technique and acrylic paint, which creates a clean and precise transition between the fields

of colour; the even monochrome quality enhances the graphic expression afforded by the precise lines. Some of Martinussen's works have an almost linear and calligraphic style of representation. At first glance, they draw associations to art Nouveau and certain graphic elements from 1960s and '70s interior design. This is particularly apparent in a work such as *Hunted*.

Martinussen is an adept and exciting colourist, unafraid of using strong colours or unexpected colour combinations. These cords of colour create a dynamic expression and seem related to big-city neon signage, graffiti, psychedelic posters from the 1960s and diverse cartoon-series experiments from the '70s.

In works such as *Solo*, *Star* and *Crowd*, these same formal elements are also readily noticeable. The pictures are abstract and can seem chaotic. By the artist's own account, they are inspired by visual elements from rock concerts. They can look like small explosions, chance flashes from searchlights or refractions in photo-lenses. On closer inspection, we see that this energy is ordered into an aesthetic expression that reveals a fair amount of control. The dualistic feature—the tension between chaos and control—creates an interesting feeling of energy. The continuously undulating colour and structure gives the pictures a physical anchoring, which stands in contrast to the smooth, perfect and almost cold surface-treatment the artist often prefers.

The contemporary painting.

We cannot take a particular theme, style, method or use of materials as the point of origin for defining the contemporary painting of which Martinussen is a part. The variations are too great and the distance in time is too short for it to be appropriate to think in terms of categories.

Nevertheless, Martinussen deploys an analytical approach to his works, which, to a large degree, is a hallmark of contemporary art as such. For if we look more closely at his project, it is the modernistic and classical concerns of painting he chooses for his theme, reflects over and problematizes. It is an approach many would describe as a postmodern perspective. Martinussen's paintings deal with the established contrasts: of abstraction versus figuration, figure versus pictorial surface, content versus form, colour versus line, and political versus personal issues.

In an essay from 2002, Barry Schwabsky has claimed that the contemporary painting carries, as its distinct inheritance from Modernism and Conceptualism, the presupposition that a painting is not just a painting, but also a representation of ideas tied to painting as a phenomenon. This is one of the reasons why today there are so few antagonisms between representational and non-figurative painting. In both cases, the painting's *raison d'être* is not to reproduce a motif; rather, the motif is chosen in order to visualize the ideas and practice of painting, in other words: the idea of painting as such.

The contemporary painting is created in a cultural context where it is no longer possible to claim that art is one thing. Art no longer tries to answer to a given problem, for example, to demonstrate the essence of painting, such as was the case for many of Modernism's practitioners. Therefore we cannot claim that one way of viewing an artwork is more correct than another. Meanwhile, we can still claim that there are modes of reception, which have more explanatory power, are more fitting, and thus are more relevant than others.

The centre and the periphery

The contemporary painting's fragmentary and pluralistic character must be seen in light of the international art scene's development over the last 30 years. It is no longer the case that particular cities dominate the development of painting, such as New York in the Twentieth-Century, or Paris in the Nineteenth-Century. Better communication and mobility have challenged the monopoly of the centre in more than one field. Today it is difficult to speak of differences between the centre and the periphery, precisely because 'a centre', in our conceptual framework, is synonymous with the place where development and innovation take place, and which the periphery follows or copies. Nowadays contemporary painting is developing in a parallel mode in many places, and numerous small stories can be told about visual achievements. Hence different discourses as well as geographical and cultural points of origin mark the contemporary painting, and these are linked with international voices and actors.

Even though the large problematics of painting, rich in tradition, are what Martinussen (along with many of his contemporaries) broaches, his artistic practice must also be seen in light of international aesthetic tendencies, and the cultural ballast he has inherited through his geographical origin. Such a perspective comes to bear in his various approaches to Norwegian culture, for example, the two previously mentioned "idol" portraits. Other more marked examples with clear references to Norwegian culture are works such as *Welcome to the Mountains* and *Black Spruce Wood*.^{*} The motifs of both works are found in Norwegian nature, woods and western fjords, but they also refer to the concept of what it is to be Norwegian and other clichés about Norway. Not least, the choice of motifs is an art-historical reference to Norwegian National Romantic painting from the first half of the Nineteenth-Century (created by Norwegian painters based in Germany).

Martinussen's works thus reflect different cultural movements of today. His project deals with the possibilities and

limitations of painting, its theory and tradition. It concerns the relation between art history and our own time, the tension between conceptions of what it is to be 'Norwegian' and that of being international, about the carnivalesque tension between high and low culture, and between those things which are deeply serious and those which are spontaneously humorous (often reflected in his work titles). As such, Martinussen balances between a local cultural past and a global visual present, between centre and periphery.

The steadfastness of painting

Throughout art history, painting has held a central, dominant position, and thus has been the most important artistic medium for ecclesial art, public buildings and, not least, for the art world. In the last decades, this unique position has been challenged and weakened by an increasing interest amongst artists and the public for new media, e.g., installation, photo, video, etc. For this reason, many have questioned whether painting has played out its role as an art form. Does the medium still have significance for the contemporary art scene? In spite of intense competition from other media, all indicators point towards painting's endurance and its ability to invoke the public's interest. Given that many young artists, such as Marius Martinussen, choose painting as their preferred medium, this fact bears witnesses to the enduring viability of painting as an art form. Although it no longer may be deemed the most important means for artistic expression, it would still be correct to say that painting retains a very important role in the contemporary art of today, much thanks to young painters such as Martinussen.

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** In Norwegian, 'Black Spruce Wood' has a double meaning; the phrase may allude to a forest, but it may also be interpreted as a mild form of swearing.*

