

# Shine

‘She cannot do the Man’s Job, and she does not want to do the Woman’s Job, what does she then become? She becomes a deformed Neuter.’ These words were voiced when Norway’s parliament, in June of 1913, approved a constitutional amendment that gave women the right to vote. Norway was one of the first countries to grant women suffrage, and the final decision passed without debate. It had, however, been preceded by heated political debate since the 1880s, and resistance from the status quo was considerable.<sup>i</sup> Now in 2013, this victory will be commemorated, in our society marked by equality (in principle). Yet while the battle for equal rights is largely won in Norway, in the global context it is far from over.

## **I am a woman**

A presentation of five female artists, each from a different Nordic country, to mark the centennial – but doesn’t this already smack of judgmental stereotyping? ‘Female artist’ sounds like an antiquated category, slightly apologetic, even though still in use. For what is the real connection between this highly subjective group of artists: Vanessa Baird, Julie Nord, Hannaleena Heiska, Nadine Byrne and Hrafnhildur Arnadottir, respectively from Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Iceland?

Grouped together, they represent such a wide range in ages, geography, themes and reference points that they cannot be summarized insightfully according to the lowest common denominator. Like all artists, their actions are premised on social conditions and personal experiences. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that men could have made many of the works in *Shine*. Simone de Beauvoir contended that a woman can only minimally ignore her sex in a concrete situation: ‘But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: “I am a woman”; on this truth must be based all further discussion. A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man.’<sup>ii</sup> Much has happened since the late 1940s when de Beauvoir wrote this – but are not women still in some sense ‘second’? Is this not a position requiring courage?

Despite their individual characteristics, the works in *Shine* have the same electric frequency. They shine brightly and reflect a spectacular type of freedom that bursts delimiting stereotypes. All the works seem to stem from some free and wild place, being boldly made by

present-day ‘mad women in the attic’. There is a striking sensory quality here, combined with elements of ritual occultism and something grotesque and transgressive. The quality or mood I refer to is dream-like, fanciful and dark. It is impossible to trace an explicit political agenda carved from a gendered perspective, but neither are the featured works ‘apolitical’. After all, what is a woman? The five artists’ works refute an essentialist doctrine of femininity. They fruitfully expand the categories they thematically treat, yet without further entrenching traditional ideas about those categories. Occasionally one finds aggressive acting out, but there are also cases of introverted mystery. In a vital and active way, the artists explore the cracks and rough spots of apparently clear definitions. Their fundamentally expressive attitude involves a bold, bodily approach – resulting in a complex beauty. It is as if to say: ‘we all (viewers included) are each our own star, pulsating within our own varying orbit.’

### **Dissolution and disappearance**

Vanessa Baird’s drawings, watercolours and pastels all deal to some extent with the dissolution of safe, fixed frameworks. They have a fairytale-like and distorted expression. Baird is in fact the model for one of the protagonists in Mette Hellenes’s satirical cartoon series *Kebbevenner*, about two slightly rabid women and their view of Oslo’s cultural life. Baird often works with archetypes from fairytales. Many of her motifs explore the sphere of home, family and women’s roles. She seems particularly focused on the conflicted relation between a mother and her children, where the children monstrously sap their mother’s energy. We see a complete undermining of the idyllic conception of the blessings of motherhood when the woman is reduced to a worn-out tool for her children.

In several motifs a female figure finds herself in an interior steeped in desolation. It is rendered with a muted palette. One motif shows a woman claustrophobically shoved into a corner, almost banging her head against the ceiling, in a bedroom with a small naked man. Another shows a woman sitting in fireplace flames. In Baird’s works, the vulnerable, estranged position of loneliness is reflected as the outpost of civilization. The family as the privileged social unit appears to be in total dissolution. This way of addressing female identity exposes problems with a social construction that has seemed almost like a natural law. But Baird is generally more concerned about the decay and incompleteness of femininity than she is in its perfection. As critic Arve Rød says, there’s ‘a whiff of disease and sour body odour in Vanessa Baird’s exhibition (...)’. Many of her female figures display her own facial features,

so in this sense she draws her own biography into the artwork's fictive dimension; they become a type of hybrid diary over everyday life and myths.

There is a lack of stringency here that can seem liberating in its challenge to established 'truths' – such as the notion that a mother and her babe constitute a harmonious whole. Now, by contrast, the child is a threat. A mother portrayed as a hideous witch with yellow teeth and warty nose becomes a metaphor for both the discomfort one feels about one's own familial origin and the inevitability of aging. But it's also possible to catch sight of endurance, for a study of branches shows how nature perseveres through storms and destruction. While Baird's circle of motifs has a dark character, her artistic practice also suggests something carnivalesque, humorous and absurd. It has a rawness that breaks with expectations of a demure female sensitivity. And while the pictures exaggerate reality, there is no denying that womanhood has its existential crises.

### **The blind side of fairytales**

Vanessa Baird uses the fairytale form because it enables her to present abysmal life and ambivalence. Artist Julie Nord also used the fairytale's formulas to skew value-related and visual expectations. She is known for creating monumental wall drawings with the symbolically loaded imagery of young girls, rabbits, bats, skulls and flowers. Her skilfully formed lines coalesce into swarms of ornate details. The people in her world wear somewhat old-fashioned clothing, but rather than situating them in any particular era, she puts them on a surreal side track. By combining sources such as fairytales, children's book illustrations and archetypes from horror films, she creates harbingers of foreboding. She seems particularly inspired by the parallel universe of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865, illustrated by John Tenniel), but her expression is darker and includes war scenes from today. The doll-like figures have an almost machine-made appearance, sugar-sweet, with expressionless Bambi eyes. A game of fatal attraction plays out in the drawings, with the viewer feeling both seduced and repulsed.

### **Tableaus of a subculture**

Hannalena Heiska's paintings have an ornamental expression that puts one in mind of Julie Nord's filigrain idiom, especially there where the lines loop about and twine into tattoo patterns. Rather than dwelling on the woman as a martyred figure, she explores the expressive

symbolism of animals. With references to mythology, esoterism and the black metal scene, Heiska conjures forth segments of a subcultural world. The intensity of music comes to the fore in the video work *Today We Live*, which shows young people at a concert. Despite the video having another sound, the soundtrack is from Erik Saties *Gymnopédies no 1*, it is as if the heavy and aggressive tones from the actual *hard core punk* concert hit us with full force, yet our apprehension of this stands in contrast to the realistic details. Heiska zooms in on faces with trance-like expressions. Such animate, psychologically loaded faces can also be found in her presentations of trees and other elements in nature. Even in her paintings, which are like tableaux, the often frozen landscapes appear as mental images of psychological states.

Heiska's work titles often allude to black metal (e.g., *And Love Said No*). They thus emphasize a 'hard' melancholia, a deep depression with romantic undertones. The beauty is almost kitschy and includes a modernized, yearning mythology. The paintings in *Shine* appear as frontal portraits of animals and human hybrids – a wolf, a tiger, a gorilla, a horse. Thus a fundamentally wild nature is united with the codes of civilization. Glowing colours and dark backgrounds converge to shroud the hybrids in darkness and increase their mystery. They reflect a fanatical enthusiasm for the notion of originary nature and the inherent law of predatory animals, both of which are characteristic for Goth culture and heavy metal music. The music scene is an especially pronounced inspiration for Heiska; its genres, which were practiced within small subcultures, have now become more mainstream, leading to greater acceptance of their attendant symbolism, style and visualization. Some people claim to find a unique type of Nordic mentality in this penchant for combining depression and romanticism. But whether or not this is really the case, Heiska's subcultural scenes do indeed bear witness of alternatives to an instrumentally-oriented and commercial world. One can thus also find a similarity with the Symbolists of the late 1800s, who responded to the realism in the art of their peers by evoking mystical places and feverish psychological states.

The vibrant yet unreal quality in Heiska's paintings is also related to her production method. With no preliminary sketches or photos, she paints each work in *one* improvised event. Each colour and brushstroke remains as it was first laid down, spontaneously fixed. The body's gestural interaction with the painting surface, the rhythm she has used, becomes evident. This method requires profound self-confidence. It results in a melting together of the visionary and tactile worlds.

## **The dream family**

Nadine Byrne, who has studied Western esoterism, is also preoccupied with parallel realities. It is possible to see her as a conduit between the spiritual and the physical worlds. She has constructed her own mythology through diverse projects (films, performances, sculptures, books and costumes). The projects are all related to music, but they also involve spiritual forces, dreams and rituals. Occultism and religion permeate her productions; she focuses on visual aspects of cultic rituals in our time.

The film *Dream Family* features colourful figures also seen in some of Byrne's earlier films and performances. These five figures are known as 'the dream family'. Here a *gesamtkunstwerk* (a 'total artwork', a synthesis of all the arts) is underway. Byrne is the film's director and has also created the music track and costumes. The latter appear as sculptural elements alongside the film at Bomuldsfabriken Kunsthall. All the props and paraphernalia play active roles in the total work, which seeks to incorporate dreams, day-dreams, visions and magical moments in one unified poetic expression. The aesthetics of the rituals are linked with nature's own underlying forces.

## **Twined hair and tangles**

With her base in New York, Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir, also known as Shoplifter, has for many years worked with hair as her primary material. It is mostly synthetic and has a shiny, artificial texture, but she also uses elements of organic hair. After dyeing the hair in strong, playful and dramatic colours, Arnardóttir forms it into sculptures, objects and installations. Like expressive brushstrokes, she coils it into meter upon meter of twined braids, or tangles it into massive hairballs. Her practice lies somewhere between conceptual art, textile art, design, fashion and performance. Noteworthy is her collaboration with the vocal artist Björk for the album cover for *Medulla*. This easy-going switching between media and environments gives her production limitless flexibility simultaneously as it brims with character and self-will.

Arnardóttir became interested in hair as a teenager. While working in an antique shop in Reykjavík, she came across a flower made with human hair. She saw it as an expression of a historical connection between the human body and a certain conception of beauty. For millennia, certain hair styles have symbolized femininity, eroticism and sensuality. Long wavy locks have been associated with untamed nature, while neat braiding is a device for

suppressing and civilizing that wildness. With this symbolism, Arnardóttir broaches a fundamental duality; she takes a traditional female attribute and turns it into something that can seem both threatening and alluring, yet not necessarily solely linked to the woman. The unease we feel, but also the allure of the hair, become complex aspects in the textile latticework the artist presents.

Self-absorbed vanity, incarnated in coiffure, is a key concept here. It is first of all a positive expression for creativity, a sense of identity and individuality. Different culture's conventions contradict each other in norms for beauty; ugliness in one part of the world is beauty elsewhere, and vice-versa. The absolute norm is like a ball kicked out of bounds. It becomes neuter. Vanity lies on the surface of Arnardóttir's works, but it always plays the main role. She respects the basic human need for adorning oneself and one's environment, and she understands those who are driven by vanity, who are possessed by an intense love of beauty. A 'neuter' is filled with a continuously redefined content.

---

<sup>i</sup> Per Anders Madsen, "Ikke uten kamp" [Not without Battle], *Aftenposten* (Internet version), published 30 Dec. 2012 <http://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/Ikke-uten-kamp-7079951.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley (trans. & ed.) Vintage, London (1953/1997) p. 15. (*Le Deuxième Sexe* was first published in French in 1949.)



Exhibition: SHINE 09.10.-17.03.2013  
Text: Line Ulekleiv  
Translation: Arlyne Moi  
Curators: Madeleine Park and Harald Solberg  
[www.bomuldsfabriken.no](http://www.bomuldsfabriken.no)