

## **BENTE JENSEN on Jonna Pedersen**

### **PRODUCT STORIES**

The Still Lives of Jonna Pedersen

- in the intersection of iconic product and pleasurable memory

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### **A TASTE OF EVERYDAY LIFE**

*"My art is about people, a paradoxical thing in still lifes devoid of figures."*

- Jonna Pedersen

Plainly, visually familiar things, such as product logos, catch our eye in an image-saturated and information-dense culture like ours. A product logo can unleash half-forgotten memories and sensations. We have all had this experience. Expressing the zeitgeist, consumer products can become cultural icons. Product graphics and packaging obviously matter. Visual impact and narrativity characterize those products that are deemed "classic."

Viewing Jonna Pedersen's new still-life paintings triggers the ambivalent sensation of gently being taken back in time as well as into the local supermarket. Her paintings monumentally showcase familiar, even classic, Danish and international consumer products and packaging: Cirkel Kaffe, Café Noir, Colman's Mustard, Ga-Jol, Kings cigarettes, Heinz Baked Beans and Tomato Ketchup, Beauvais pickled beets, Gluten Flour and Jaka Bov. There is crunch and flavor to spare and, not least, a mundane whiff of everyday life mingling with the unmistakable aroma of childhood.

Sensual memories of grandma's pantry and systematized supermarket shelves flood Pedersen's representations of humble everyday consumer goods and their product esthetics. Memories of the taste of grandma's Cirkel Kaffe invariably and acutely mingle with the memories of the coffee tin it came in, grandma dipping a lump of sugar in her coffee, etc. A single product triggers myriad private and pleasurable, or perhaps not so pleasurable, memories in different individuals.

Pedersen's works have always taken their narrative premise from visible everyday life, its objects, forms, patterns and signs. Her still lifes spotlight individual consumer products in a colorful and simple, slightly angular style. The products literally model for the artist. The packaging is always left unopened. Considerable enlarged, the products are shown in isolation without their normal references. Only the packaging, with its signs and symbols, describes the contents. Familiarity, even intimacy, with the product is key.

In terms of form and subject matter, Pedersen extends a modern still-life tradition. Her paintings suggest Cubist and Pop Art influences, while her overarching painting project involves taking back up the processes and methods of a more direct form of painting.

### **STILL LIVES – A CLASSICAL THEME WITH MODERN TWISTS**

*"Encountering Stuart Davis' still lifes at MOMA in '08 triggered a whole new process. I felt a need to try my hand at still lifes and interpretations of the still-life concept. Moreover, I was absorbed by some of the Funen painters' still lifes, especially Fritz Syberg's Lunch."*

- Jonna Pedersen

The tradition of still lifes with food and fruit stretches back to antiquity. It occurs in early Oriental and Egyptian art. Resurrected and vitalized by Dutch artists in the 16th and 17th centuries, the still life develops into a separate genre. Dutch painters depict market scenes, stands bursting with food. New subjects are developed, including floral still lifes, spoils of the hunt (dead animals) and vanitas pictures. The objects in the so-called vanitas pictures, such as skulls, bones, flies, hourglasses and gross piles of material goods, are intended to remind us of the transience of all things. Subjects with sumptuous volumes of food and fruit also become a symbolic expression of hospitality.

Jonna Pedersen's contemporary still-life subjects obviously diverge from the symbolic and moral undertones of the classic-academic tradition, if only in their lack of grossness and sumptuousness in the sheer volume of goods. The artist presents a single, exquisitely selected product, preferably against an anonymous or nearly monochrome backdrop or wall, with the occasional suggestion of a table top or side. The product's normal context is absent. Where, for example, is the dish on which a Jaka Bov canned ham would normally be served? Where is the cutlery, etc.? The product is presented in a neutral and referenceless space.

### **Consumer Products in American Art**

Likewise absent from Pedersen's works is the attention to tactile and sensual external reality so characteristic of, and fascinating in, classic still lifes as well as in more recent Pop Art still lifes. Illusionistic representation is the aim of the classic still life. A similar illusionism characterizes Pop Art's still lifes, including Andy Warhol's iconic reproduction of a mass-produced object, Campbell's Soup Can (1961). Still, the illusionistic depiction of products is not the primary goal of Pop Art. What Pop Art does is denote the aspect of perception in representation: the treacherous nature of vision. Pop Art's parade of commercial products is a vital visualization of potent commercialism. Pedersen's paintings of well-known Danish products naturally bring to mind 1960s American Pop Art and its references to the products of consumer society. The subject matter is obviously related. However, while Pop Art paintings tend to have slick surfaces, mimicking the surfaces of industrial products, Pedersen's paintwork is expressive and impasted. The artist's gesture includes an interpretation of the painted object.

An inspiring 2008 encounter at the MOMA with the academically less restricted and Cubist still lifes of the American painter Stuart Davis spurs Pedersen to more closely explore the genre. Stuart Davis (1894-1964) in the 1920s merges idiomatic American realism with European Cubism in a number of modern still-life subjects. The formal vocabulary and imagery of Synthetic Cubism, familiar from still-life collages by Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris, find their way into Davis's works. In their particular focus on formal vocabulary and geometric challenges, i.e., breaking planes into structural units in the manner of Cézanne, they reinvent the still-life genre. These European and American artists often depict fragments and impressions of the city and everyday life. Davis notably painted consumer products in Lucky Strike (1921) and Odol (1924), both currently on display at MOMA. Pedersen paints a similar habit-forming stimulant, a pack of Kings cigarettes, in Rane's Ziggies (2009).

The Kings painting is an exception because the packaging has been broken, exposing four cigarettes. An official label informs us that smoking kills. This well-intentioned (black-bordered) warning label ruins the once attractive graphic appearance of the products, illustrating the sea change in the perception of tobacco products: they have lost their innocence and their pleasure effect.

### **Danish Lunch Still Lifes, 1906 and 2009**

Aside from their American inspirations, Jonna Pedersen's still lifes get painterly nourishment

from Danish art, especially the Funen painters, open-air artists working around the turn of the 20th century. In 1906, Fritz Syberg paints a hearty subject, *Lunch*, recast by Pedersen in a contemporary still life. Invariably, they become before-and-after pictures of Danish food culture. Syberg's painting is often hailed as programmatic of the Funen painters' painterly project: the desire for realistic depictions of everyday life (especially peasant life). *Lunch* shows a simple, rustic meal accompanied by beer and aquavit. The table is set with a white cloth, napkin, glass, peppermill and cutlery. The robust meal (four full slices of black bread with sliced rolled sausage, beef with jelly, plus egg and cheese) is hard to miss, man-sized slices of black bread topped with cold cuts overhanging the blue-and-white china plate. Even the beer bottle is bigger than bottles today. It is a suitable meal for a hard-working farmer of 1906, though hardly nutritionally appropriate for people today. It is hard to look at Syberg's painting today without a food-phobic wince.

Jonna Pedersen's tableau *Lunch 2009*. Homage to Fritz Syberg (2009) approximates its model, but a few changes have been made to the menu. The white lunch plate here holds black bread with egg, salami, ham and liver pâté, served with local (Ærø) beer and aquavit. The cutlery is modern, cafeteria-style stainless steel. The black and white napkin appears to be paper. Whether the backdrop is a red tablecloth or a PVC or Formica tabletop is hard to tell. There is nothing conspicuous or sumptuous about the meal or the assembled objects. The cutlery is common. The open-faced sandwiches are made with minimal, spare toppings, butter or margarine spread to the edges. Whether this expresses dietary consciousness or a skimpy selection of food in the fridge is impossible to say.

Pedersen's still-life subjects organically link into Danish still-life traditions, as exemplified by the Funen painters: representing the intimate objects of everyday life. Her first still lifes took off from traditional arrangements of objects, such as bottles. She paints classic tableaux of familiar objects, including an enamel coffeepot, now a vase, in *Grandma's Coffeepot* (2009); a coffee tin with a floral pattern, in *Grandma's Tin* (2009); and a delicate aquavit bottle, in *Granddad's Bottle*. Homage to Johannes Larsen (2009). The significance and value charge of the objects lie in their implied or actual familial connotations, including references to childhood.

## THE DUAL MEANINGS OF PRODUCT ICONOGRAPHY

*"What happens when you take elements out of their frame of reference? My interest has lain in familiarity. To me, the outside says something about the inside. It's all about reading the 'barcode.'"*

– Jonna Pedersen

A meticulous, iconographic "realism" characterizes Jonna Pedersen's paintings of consumer products. Familiarity with the products is important to the artist. How do you crack the "barcode" of the products, and the paintings? The products' logos and the paintings' titles suggest certain communicative decoding options. Here, a painting of a box of Spunk licorice lozenges is entitled *The Taste of Childhood* (2009). A painting of a glass of Beauvais pickled pumpkin slices is entitled *The Danish Meatball's Friend* (2009). And a painting of a Bodum French-press coffeepot and mocha-colored cup is *A Modern Break* (2009). The paintings do not directly get their titles from the products. Flavorful work titles hold a wealth of connotations and countless references: *Oner* (2009) (a bottle of Heinz Tomato Ketchup), *New Yorker* (2009) (a can of Savarin Coffee), *...And Buns at Three* (2009) (a box of cocoa), *Party Warty* (2009) (a bag of popcorn), *With Traditions* (2009) (a bag of Gluten Flour), *Danish Classic* (2009) (a glass of Beauvais pickled beets), *4001155000200* (2009) (a can of Beefland's corned beef), *Finnish Trouble* (2009) (Fazer's Salmiakki chocolate) and *Instant*

Comfort (2009) (Café Noir instant coffee).

The titles reveal Pedersen's joy in playing with words in addition to rendering them graphically. Eliminating the contextual framework the artist opens the products up to all manner of potential experiences and interpretations. The logo, the product's significant visual emblem, is the exclusive gateway to the experience.

What thoughts and feelings does the sight of Cirkel Kaffe, for example, and its characteristic logo, stir in a Danish viewer? It is *A Coffee Story* (2009), the title tells us. Add to that the private experiences and memories of Cirkel Kaffe that any Danish viewer brings to the table. Several of Pedersen's titles denote shifts how a product is experienced. The title *Instant Comfort*, for instance, expresses the memory of a need (for both coffee and comfort) that this product has satisfied.

A consumer product's iconography is always ambiguous. There are both denotative and connotative signs to be read. A product's packaging inherently carries a visual or textual content signaling what's inside. There is no controlling the meanings and values that the consumer subsequently attributes to the product. That is entirely dependent on an individual's baggage and frames of reference. In principle, the product is open to uncontrollable added meanings.

## THE ART PROJECT

*"It was great to have so many different media to switch between in my process: painting, ink drawing and collage. Working in still lifes was always very present in my consciousness."*

– Jonna Pedersen

In her paintings of consumer products, Jonna Pedersen has strived to investigate the still-life genre: What is a still life in a contemporary perspective? What elements can be used? But the paintings and the related bodies of work also express a desire to return to a more direct kind of painting, bringing the artist face to face with the subject she is painting, a desire to depict what is present in the most literal sense. Regardless of the substance and shape of the depicted objects, the finished works rest on the same foundation of painterly challenges, deliberations and experimentation.

As mentioned, the subjects of her first still lifes were more conventional arrangements, for instance of bottles. Pedersen's earlier paintings also reveal a profound and inclusive interest in the traces and imprints of human activity, including graffiti, store signs and billboards. In constructing contemporary still-life arrangements, she discovered a dormant fascination with packaging. This evolved into an investigation of everyday consumer products in different media: painting, ink drawing and collage.

The products "modeled" for the still-life paintings. The paintings then modeled for a series of ink drawings of identical subjects. Expanding the stilllife genre, Pedersen incorporated a product catalogue from Gas Collection, a German apparel company, cf. her body of work and book *Gas Collection* (2009). Here, she uses the preprinted people in the photos as still lifes, elaborating on the tableaux by adding or deleting objects. Likewise, *Maria & Joachim* (2009) is a modification of existing arrangements and tableaux lifted from a gossip rag insert. If the royal headliners need, say, a handkerchief to cry into, the artist unsentimentally tacks one on.

## STORIES OF LIVED LIFE

*"My artistic ambition is to say something essential about a universal subject."*

– Jonna Pedersen

Jonna Pedersen's stories about consumer goods are more than representations of actual objects. They are images of our time. Familiar objects from our cultural heritage are interpreted and painted: graphic imprints and sensual experiences with numerous cultural, social and geographical references. Images of uniquely Danish products alongside images of exotic products, Greek olives or American ketchup, tell a story about an upheaval in Danish (food) culture.

Interestingly, and perhaps paradoxically, Pedersen is not voicing a criticism of today's excessive food consumption (fast food, snack foods). She simply showcases individual, hermetically sealed cans, boxes and bags of food, telling little stories about products that all have something to say about our culture.

The product stories extend an artistic genre starving for expressive revitalization and reinvention after Pop Art's ambiguous embrace of the consumer society's brand iconography. Pedersen's still-life projects reactualize a famous statement by the art critic Charles Baudelaire about the demand for depictions of modern life (specifically concerning the work of the painter Constantin Guy): "In order that any form of modernity may be worthy of becoming antiquity, the mysterious beauty that human life unintentionally puts into it must have been extracted from it" (1863).

From time-specific products and objects, Pedersen extracts poetic and universal stories about lived life, including her own. Once again, we get a chance to perceive and experience zesty and fragrant lived life – fugitive and transient, perhaps, but now in a painterly wrapper.

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