

# Bjørn Eriksen and Jonna Pedersen: Deadpan Danes on a Mission of Cool

There can be a peculiar seductiveness in uninflected things. Case in point: the Danish painters Bjørn Eriksen and Jonna Pedersen, who excavate the surface of the everyday world to offer a plethora of perverse pleasures for those attuned to the semiotics of the banal.

Although they paint separately for the most part, and each has worked in a more or less expressionistic manner in the past, the two artists appear to be on a shared mission of late; so much so that, after I suggested in a previous review that Eriksen's figures might look very much at home in Pedersen's urban settings, they even experimented with painting together on the same canvas, presumably to see if they could merge their different visions of ennui into a definitive synthesis.

Such a collaboration calls to mind when Picasso and Braque were cooking up Cubism and became for a time the Bobbsey Twins of art, almost hard to tell apart. However, in spite of the synchronicity of their styles and symmetry of their names (suggesting an old fashioned vaudeville team - perhaps billed as "The Deadpan Danes") Eriksen and Pedersen each stick to their own schtick.

For Bjørn Eriksen it is the human figure. Although his earlier work was apparently influenced by the Scandinavian neo-primitivists of the Cobra group and the German neo-expressionists, his present paintings seem more akin to early Alex Katz, when there were still faint traces of New York School "process" in Katz's figurative style. But being a postmodernist, Eriksen's hints of the hand may be more beholden to the so-called "Bad Painting" movement of the 1970s, in which deliberately crude paint handling was combined with narrative intimations for ironic effect.

The double irony, though, is that even when he aims for bad, Eriksen is a very good, which comes across particularly well in his portraits, such as "Laila," depicting a woman with a red rose in her hair whose somewhat frumpy Mona Lisa demeanor he manages to endow with a winsomeness akin to Elizabeth Peyton's wispy rock and roll androgynes. Capable of aping the clumsiness of folk art by making a tan shadow on Laila's face as harshly palpable as a caramel wafer, he can turn right around and sever the dark curve of her shoulder from the dark background with a sinuous sliver of light that could have been cut with a razor.

Such contrasts between awkwardness and grace animate all of Eriksen's paintings in compelling ways, giving the topless girl with her name tattooed on her pelvis in "Rita Meter Maid" an archaic formal simplicity akin to Modigliani, as she raises an arm above her head to display a clean-shaven armpit; heightening the nerdiness of the four grinning guys in identical checkered sportcoats posed frontally like a publicity shot for a barbershop quartet, in "Please Return"; emphasizing the burlesque-comic inanity of the bozo in an ill-fitting suit bending over in a kick-me posture with a blond bimbo who looks like she's posing for a pin-up calendar balanced coolly on his back, in "Anything Goes."

Bjørn Eriksen based the latter two paintings on old photographs that he found while visiting New York (perhaps they were discarded by some low-rent theatrical agent like the one played by Woody Allen in "Broadway Danny Rose," while divesting his dusty files of former clients). But by virtue of his mastery of the deadpan manner, he manages to make the people in the pictures look perfectly bored, as though striking such outlandish poses is all in a day's work.

The first picture Jonna Pedersen ever painted was a copy of a work by the Danish Cobra artist Asger Jorn that she fell in love with in the Silkeborg Museum. For a while, earlier in her career, she worked in a similarly frenzied gestural manner, before becoming enamored of the bland facades of shops on streets devoid of people, yet somehow seemingly haunted by their absence.

The urban environment that Pedersen evokes suggests the aftermath of one of those "smart bombs" that can supposedly wipe out an entire population without destroying property - a Godsend, some might say, given the relative value of real estate over human life in today's world. Sans signs of life, everything appears pristinely undisturbed in Pedersen's paintings. But while Denmark is technically a welfare state, remnants of rampant consumerism are everywhere evident in the variety of signs plastering the storefronts.

Not knowing Danish makes them all the more intriguing, even though Pedersen supplies English titles. In "Tanning Salon," under the shopfront that says "Consol Solcenter," a poster in the window shows a tiny figure in a swimsuit exulting with upraised arms on a beach. Since the human presence is so rare in Pedersen's paintings, this minuscule detail seems almost spooky, a remnant of vanished natural joy embalmed in an urban mausoleum as alien as one of Yves Tanguy's surrealist boneyards.

The desolate effect is enhanced by Pedersen's meticulously detailed style, in which acrylics are employed like tempera paints to produce flat, dry-looking color areas that can appear simultaneously bright and muted. She paints every brick in an obsessive manner reminiscent of Ben Shahn's early social realist cityscapes; yet her jazzy use of commercial signage and abruptly cropped word fragments as abstract shapes recalls Stuart Davis.

Indeed, Pedersen's paintings function dynamically as geometric hard-edge abstractions, as seen in "Nord Flex," a picture of a window and door store in which the rectangles of the windows depicted on the signs rhyme visually with the actual windows in the building facade above the shopfront. The compositional tension is further heightened by the white traffic lines in the gray gutter, which contradict the two dimensional picture plane with implied perspective.

Yet to put too much emphasis on the formal attributes in the paintings of Jonna Pedersen would be to short-change their universal symbolic resonance. Not many artists, after all, can present one with a bland stucco structure called "Gastronomia Italiana," in what appears to be Danish strip-mall, and make something about its deadpan eeriness evoke the night the notorious renegade Mafioso Crazy Joey Gallo went into a place called Umberto's Clam House, in New York's Little Italy, and ended up face-down in his calamari.

Both Bjørn Eriksen and Jonna Pedersen employ the deadpan manner to imbue seemingly simple subjects with a narrative suggestiveness that resonates far beyond the ostensible content of their pictures. Together, they make for an exhibition in which subtle psychological subtexts abound, stimulating a host of imaginative interpretations and ultimately rewarding insights on the part of the viewer.

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