

TRINE ROSS on Jonna Pedersen

VANITAS ON JYLLINGEVEJ

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PRESERVED REALITY

A tanning salon sits on Jyllingevej. Were it not for Jonna Pedersen's painting, very few people would look at it twice. But once you lay eyes on Pedersen's take on this outer-borough neighborhood, which also includes streets like Islevhusvej and Sallingevej, you will never see it the same way again. A bus ride to Herlev becomes an expedition through subject matter – some scenes she has already painted, others you can barely wait to tell her about. You sense that the subject – whether a tanning salon, funeral parlor or laundromat – is saved from extinction, once Pedersen captures it in paint. Like small slices of sealed-in, preserved reality, the subjects lie somewhere between paint and canvas, existing perhaps most acutely in our minds. We recognize the place and the painting at once – reality and the other reality that is the painting.

Not that Pedersen works in a photorealist or anthropologically correct style. Far from it. She lets the lines run every which way she wants them to, to make the painting work. While bricks, cobblestones and pavement slabs are represented in roughly the same colors as in life, they are always just jumping-off points for her work. Everything is related to the whole and to the other colors and shapes. Pedersen simplifies, omits and tightens up, never losing sight of her premise.

In that perspective, the shift that happened in Pedersen's work in 2005 and continues to reverberate through her paintings today is less drastic than it might immediately seem. Until the mid-aughts, Pedersen had been painting in an expressive, intuitively style, transforming and redefining fragments of everyday life, not unlike the remains of the day that tend to appear in our dreams. But the artist was increasingly missing a greater level of consciousness in the creation of her works. The intuitive form was starting to strain and she was looking for a much clearer goal with her paintings.

SERIOUS CRUSH ON NEW YORK

In 2005, she encountered not one but two major sources of inspiration. The first was the city that never sleeps, New York, which jolted her wide awake, and later that same year she serendipitously came face to face with another hoard of imagery: Jørgens Autoværksted, a local car repair shop. But it all began in New York, a city Pedersen took to like a fish to water. Growing up in quiet, rural surroundings, she was always attracted to the world's cities. And of course, New York in so many ways is the ultimate city, not least when it comes to atmosphere. Pedersen was sucked in, spontaneously snapping pictures left and right of everything that excited her eye. Which was a lot.

She soaked it all up, the record button of her mental tape recorder constantly pressed. Back in the studio, she played back the recordings, and the paintings that resulted turned out to be very different from the ones she had been doing just a few months before. She snapped her reference shots in New York quite intuitively, but she processed the images in a different and far more conscious way than before. Expressiveness and occasional nonfiguration yielded to a form that took its lines from the streets. The intense atmosphere was intact, but it now took a more solid form.

As so often before, and since, Pedersen gave herself assignments. One was to create a Kodak Moment (2005). This classic catchphrase usually implies a festive or touching family occasion, but for Pedersen the decisive moment, to stick to photo terminology, was the sight of the Empire State Building rising from the streets of Manhattan. Every line in the painting extends the soaring body of the building, and every shape is highly simplified. Despite the stylization, there is no doubt about what we are seeing. Anyone who ever stood on Fifth Avenue tilting back her head will recognize the sensation. Shortly after followed a painting of another famous building, Flatiron (2006). The lines here are possibly even more dizzying, the stylization focusing on the rhythmically repeating patterns of seemingly endless tiers of windows. In these site-specific subjects, it became natural for Pedersen to title her paintings after specific locations.

Other, lesser-known facets of New York were converted from experience to painting, including a pedestrian crossing leading toward the front of a building covered in strange mathematical formulas. The artist was fascinated by this offbeat ornamentation sharply contrasting the rest of the city's appearance which is generally designed to be speed-read. There are no answers to the formulas, though, as Pedersen underscored in her painting for which she personally supplied the equations. Halt (2006) is a painting that invites you in, thanks to the crosswalk and the cryptic calculations that start you calculating, too. But also because of the lines leading the eye on a head-on collision course with the planes, and the format, a monumental 200 × 335 cm / 131.9 × 78.7 in, which gives the work presence as its own space and reality.

A cascade of paintings on New York subjects followed. The last one we will examine here is Writing on the Door (2007), a portrait of a street door. Pedersen sees graffiti as tattoos on the city's skin that might just as well be found in Malmö, Sweden, as in Manhattan. A form of decoration in constant change, with legions of contributors and no overall plan but bursting with information. Pedersen is planning to stop by this door on her next visit to New York and paint another picture of it to show how it has changed.

JØRGENS AUTOHAL

On another occasion, Pedersen had to act quickly to document a subject before it disappeared forever, when she fell in love with Jørgens Autohal, an auto repair shop. A few months after her first visit to the garage – for a repair job, actually – Jørgen called her up and said she had to act now if she wanted to photograph the place, as she had asked if she could, because he had lost his lease. Also, he wanted prints of every photo to store for posterity in his safe.

Jørgens Autohal had been at the same address for 25 years, which gave the place great sentimental value to Jørgen – and made it a gold mine for Pedersen. Photodocumenting the garage from all possible angles, she asked Jørgen if he was okay with her making paintings based on the photos. He didn't mind, of course, and she eventually winded up with a series of paintings that developed the process of simplification she had begun in her New York paintings. When the finished pieces were presented, Jørgen's wife remarked that Pedersen had "tidied up" the garage in her paintings, though condensing the forms is perhaps a more accurate way to put it.

The highly simplified forms are still recognizable as different kinds of tools. In this body of work, Pedersen created a new form of concentration. Precursors to the style can be found in earlier works, such as Doing DIY Projects Together from 2005, but the garage paintings stand apart from Pedersen's earlier works by being site-specific, like the New York paintings, which

gives the pictures an entirely different feel.

The objects in some of the paintings evoke the shapes of modern sculpture, witness the orange shape in Jørgen's *Autohal 009* (2006) towering like a colorful Henry Moore among shelves of toolboxes. Successfully balancing figuration, on one hand, and abstraction, on the other, Pedersen creates enormous dynamism in the painting, as it constantly teeters between the recognizable and the never before seen, between familiarity and abstraction.

Art historical echoes likewise resonate through Jørgen's *Autohal 033* (2006), whose shapes and colors are a nod to the still lifes of the Danish modernist Vilhelm Lundstrøm, and Jørgen's *Autohal 011* (2006), a painting of five identical tools hanging side by side. The Pop artists were fascinated by this type of vernacular subject matter, while the Minimalists delved further into seriality. Pedersen elegantly incorporates both aspects in her work, while clearly denoting her own times, especially in her painting method. The cropping is audacious, at times even alarmingly so, but always at the service of underscoring the shape of the subject, while implying that we, the viewers, are well aware that we never get to see everything anyway, that the subject, in reality, continues out to every side of the painting.

BARCELONA & BERLIN

Launching her artistic expression in a new direction, Pedersen's work on the two above series also made her think about the things that truly fascinated her. Exhibiting in Barcelona in Berlin in 2006 was an opportunity to look at two great cities with fresh eyes. Again, she gave herself an assignment, this time to investigate what she found interesting and characteristic about these two very different cities. In purely visual terms, Barcelona posed the greater challenge, since its myriad architectural details didn't dovetail with her fondness for clean lines. Even more than usual, she now had to simplify what she saw, boiling everything down to a form that could be read clearly and easily on the picture plane. Barcelona's loopy ornamentation she converted into a new kind of pattern, while the classic Mediterranean shutters and many plazas, constituting an entirely different kind of urban space, took pride of place in her visual take on the city.

In Berlin, the artist found more of the planes she likes to skew and intersect. A powerful case in point is *Weinmeisterstrasse, Berlin* (2007), its freestanding sign bouncing off the poster on a sidewalk utility box. Again, Pedersen does not shy away from modifying her reference, or reality, if you will. Closer examination reveals an extra letter in the poster's headline, which reads "GASTISPIEL" instead of "GASTSPIEL," a deliberate move by the artist to tighten up the visual cohesion of the picture. Likewise, the artist has a New York wall advertise the play "Mama Mia" (not "Mamma Mia") in *Opening Night, Broadway, NYC* (2006).

As always, she treats the colors of her reference to make her chosen hues sing, a tiny swatch of bright blue challenging the dominant earth colors, while white planes form their own rhythmic sequence, zigzagging across the picture plane. The picture's composition is arrived at through a process of maturation long before the artist actually puts brush to canvas. The subject gets a chance to rest and ferment at the back of her mind. Shapes and colors are derived from the observed world, but they have to be processed to become pictures.

HEIGHTENED SENSE OF COLOR

In recent years, Pedersen has also become increasingly concerned with the power of color. All along, it is essential for her to keep moving, give herself assignments and find new solutions. Not surprisingly, one of her favorite artists is Picasso, who went through numerous and

stylistically very different phases and periods in his long life. Another touchstone is David Hockney, notably because of his singular sense of color and eye for simplification. The affinity between Pedersen and Hockney clearly shines through when the two painters hone in on naked trees, as Hockney does in his gigantic 2007 painting, *Bigger Trees Near Water Or/Ou Peinture Sur Le Motif Pour Le Nouvel Age Post-Photographique*, which measures 4.5 × 12 meters and is in the collection of the Tate Britain, London. The same powerful stylization, rendering the trees almost as signs against the blue sky, occurs in Pedersen's *Voldparken* (2008), though it is not directly inspired by Hockney's painting. In fact, she was surprised to discover how much the two paintings resemble each other, especially in the treatment of the trees. Still, there is no question that *Voldparken* is painted by Pedersen. A dead giveaway is discovering another, less conspicuous but classic Pedersen move: an extra "f" has been added above the door to make the line of letters match the body of the building better than in real life. The dusty color scheme that dominates the composition is strongly and tightly juxtaposed by red planes cutting horizontal lines through the window sections and spelling out the point of the place: "Grill." The golden windowpanes reveal nothing about the interior, but the place reeks with a blend of melancholy and homeliness reminiscent of an Edward Hopper cityscape. In Hopper, the human figure is (nearly) always central. The same is essentially true for Pedersen, but in a fundamentally different way, since she never directly confront us with people but shows us some of the traces we leave behind in the world. Precisely because she does not conjure the human form, she makes it all about us. Having no specific face or physique, the unseen person could be anyone of us.

PATTERN AND MODERNITY

Once Pedersen started moving away from expressive, gestural painting, she quickly arrived at planes as a favorite element in her work. In turn, it is only natural that she would prefer 20th-century, modern architecture, with its straight lines and tight sequences, over the more ornate architecture of the past. Still, a painting like *Eiffelbar, Wildersgade 58, Christianshavn* (2008) proves her ability to take a centuries-old building and make it her own. The slanted lines, which in her New York series underscore the soaring sensation, are put to a different use in *Eiffelbar*. We feel the age of the house in its repeated, yet individually different window frames. Opaquing the panes, Pedersen pulls them toward seriality, a pattern exquisitely repeated in the bar window facing the street, the facade tiles and the many little cobblestones that seem to flow toward the building, drawing in your eye.

This painting is one in a series of five that Pedersen executed for the Financial Services Union's (Finansforbundet) headquarters located in the Christianshavn section of Copenhagen. This was the first time she found her subject matter in Copenhagen. The assignment she gave herself was to raise the staff's awareness of their immediate surroundings, from the pharmacy on Christianshavns Torv to *Eiffelbar* in Wildersgade. She wanted to show the hidden-away, forgotten places that will soon be gone forever, replaced by new things.

The series did leave room for the straight lines of more modern architecture, as in *Christianshavns Apotek, Torvegade 47, Christianshavn* (2008). Again, Pedersen anonymizes the windowpanes, this time with suggestions of curtains, ceiling lights and interior spaces. She can pull this off because the subject is so stringent – "The Layer Cake House," as it is known, was built around 1930 in a modernist vocabulary inspired by German architecture of the day. The projecting corner above the ground floor produces precisely the kind of shifting lines that Pedersen employs so effectively, with the perspective tapering acutely down Torvegade.

MIRACLE ON JYLLINGEVEJ

In the five paintings for Finansforbundet, Pedersen turned her eye on her own city, though she still doubted if Copenhagen could ever truly inspire her. Those doubts were dramatically dispelled one day when she was bicycling down Jyllingevej and stumbled on a regular gold mine of potential subject matter, right in her own back yard – or at least her own neighborhood.

Everything that had been happening to Pedersen's artistic vision since she first fell madly in love with New York temporarily culminated on Jyllingevej. There, she had her pick of garages, coffee shops and architecture ranging in style from half-timbered farmhouses to stout burgher homes and untainted '70s yellow-brick tract houses. There was another crucial difference.

In her paintings of Jørgens Autohal, Barcelona, Berlin and Christianshavn, she achieved what she was aspiring to even before she first left for New York: a much more conscious approach to her subject. She now knew that she wanted to paint things that were on the verge of extinction, the kind of things and places we barely notice as we rush through life and the city every day. Precisely by foregoing human figures in these paintings, she makes us think about who might have been passing by a moment before the picture was taken or when, if ever, the grill bar, coffee shop or Chinese restaurant in the picture might reopen.

Consequently, Pedersen overlays her work with a larger temporal perspective. Thinking about what came before or might happen next leads to other questions. Obviously, Starmassage was not always located at Jyllingevej 72, Vanløse (2007). What other stores once occupied the premises? Who will take over the lease on the basement when Starmassage goes out of business, as indeed already seems to be the case? The city is in constant flux, and in peripheral areas like Brønshøj and Vanløse and their thoroughfares, Jyllingevej, Islevhusvej and Sallingevej that becomes abundantly clear.

Exuding negligence, Jyllingevej 72, Vanløse (2007) looks utterly abandoned were it not for the lone lamp burning in the corner room. The light is a stark contrast to the rest of the color scheme in a painting conveying the singular melancholy of semi-abandoned buildings. In her paintings of Jyllingevej and environs, Pedersen mixed a lot more black into her colors than she usually does, producing the uniquely dusty tones that seem to soak the locations in ground-in abjectness. Even the sky is a color between all seasons and weathers, freezing the buildings in a no man's land. But this abjectness, too, is counteracted by the light that stubbornly burns despite everything. There is always hope amid darkness, vibrant life behind the window glass. Who lives there we do not know, but the lamp starts us guessing, just like we do when we walk by a window in real life.

Other recent paintings feature a different kind of juxtaposition, like the tanning salon sharing a facade with an old-school smorgasbord-style sandwich shop at Sallingevej 49, Vanløse (2008). Like mirror images, the two storefronts spread open on either side of a shared tiled entrance. One door leads into the old world of cold cuts and neatly stacked white sandwich boxes, while the tanning salon's door leads to the dream of the perfect body, embodied by the female model on the poster in the window. Discreetly pointing out the difference between the two worlds and periods, Pedersen paints the sandwich shop's sign exactly as askew as it hangs in the real world, on Sallingevej, likewise noting the darker shade of the patched brick wall above the window.

Decay has set in. The sandwich shop's days are numbered. This air of transience is even more pronounced in Jyllingevej 8, Vanløse (2008), a corner address that is home to a funeral parlor. Again, the brickwork has been patched. Here, the entire corner section is in a different shade.

The second-floor tenants have put little potted plants in the window, echoed in the tentative window display so typical of funeral parlors. In this painting, the artist very directly points out that businesses aren't the only things that will vanish. So will we. And when we are gone, other people will walk the same streets we once walked. The feeling of vanitas and transience is further enhanced by the monochrome windowpanes that in light of the context come to resemble blank tombstones, while the only color contrast in the painting, the road sign, begs us not to stop here.

OPPOSITES ATTRACT

A similar opposition of gray tones and bright red is found in *Bellahøj Bad*, *Bellahøjvej 1-3*, *Brønshøj* (2008). The sides of the entrance glow brightly, seconded by a darker plane to the right, but the most striking contrast is with the verdigris siding wrapping around the entrance roof over the steps, while the endless gray of the sky, too, is excited by the red hues. Pedersen employs a few other moves in this painting as well. Being a skilled painter, she knows enough to step back from her subject, in this case a public pool. Accordingly, she has changed the letters atop the projecting roof to read "Bellahøj-Bad" instead of "Bellahøj-Hal," as was actually the case. The use of the past tense here is appropriate: the building has since been torn down. Indeed, you sense that a similar fate will soon befall other of Pedersen's subjects as well. The old open-air pool, popularly known as "Bellahøj Badet," has been replaced by the slick new *Bellahøj Svømmestadion*. But the old building has been sealed in and preserved in Pedersen's painting. We can walk up the steps, try the door, maybe even step inside, with the aid of memory – if we ever visited the old *Bellahøjbad*, that is.

Just as memories tend to shift and morph over time, certain elements in the painting that point in opposing directions. As a closer look reveals, the lines in the painting nearly run across each other, the staircase opens up more than would be the case architecturally and the bricks vanish towards a different horizon line than the gray foundation does. Such shifts of perspective happen all but automatically as Pedersen works on a painting, and she always welcomes them, because they help challenge our perception of the subject, and the painting.

Her selection of reality plays around with our perception of space and perspective, too, not least because of the architectural form jutting into the right hand side of the painting. Nothing would have been easier than simply leaving out this part of the building, but in choosing to include it, Pedersen blurs the painting's termination, letting us know that the subject continues beyond the picture plane.

ART AND LIFE

By such means, Pedersen obtains an expression balancing between familiarity and the artistic treatment of observed reality, unequivocally informing us that this is a painting, not a precise reproduced section of reality. Letting us experience a familiar subject, she invites us in, both into the painting and into art. Familiarity offers us free admission to the painting – we feel at home, welcome, on safe ground. The artist has listened to a wealth of anecdotes from people who have personal memories and stories about the places they recognize in her paintings. That includes a lot of people who do not usually look at art – or, if they do, certainly never voice opinions about it.

It means a lot to Pedersen that her paintings reach people, including outside the usual art circles. And it means a lot to art that she can do this. Only when we let art into our lives can it bring something essential to us. Only then can art truly speak to our hearts and minds, the way Pedersen wants it to. And chances are good she will get her wish many times over. Her

hard work in painting in recent years is paying off by taking her whole new places. Mastery of the details of everyday life, she succeeds in making them both interesting and visually manageable by simplifying, stylizing and applying the unique form of condensation that has become her hallmark. Consequently, she is able to show us the world anew, making us see reality with fresh eyes.

Once you see Pedersen's version of Jyllingevej, nothing will ever be the same again.

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