

Close to Painting

Susanna Pettersson - January 2005

Published in *Elina Brotherus : The New Painting*, Next Level, London 2005.

In her early works, Elina Brotherus drew the viewer into her own personal history, shared her feelings of loneliness and happiness, and showed her tears. The object of the pictures, the artist, was there, open and vulnerable for all to see.

The series of works *The New Painting* marks a turning point and a move away from autobiographical portrayals. The young woman looking straight at the lens has grown into an adult, who turns her back on the camera, and the viewer if she feels like it. The model is still the same, but the point of the act of expression has changed. The essential thing is no longer depicting the model's inner world, but something more universal, more generally applicable. The human figure has become a sign, whose place within the picture Brotherus investigates.

Of these various works, perhaps *L'Artiste et son modèle* specifically, is the most telling about this shift in direction. Even though the picture appears primarily to re-evaluate the traditional artist-model relationship by accentuating a man's nakedness and his being subordinate to the artist, it is also a key to Brotherus' way of looking at herself. Brotherus herself is a model, a major structural component of her own works. She says she feels an attachment to that familiar figure.

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Brotherus talks about the significance of painting, about painting sneaking into the different levels of the making of her work. When she is looking at her environment, making detailed notes of the colours she sees, and working in the darkroom, an awareness of the tradition of picture construction is subconsciously present. In museums such as the Musée d'Orsay, the Louvre and London's National Gallery she says she has studied paintings right down to the individual brushstroke. She does not paint herself, but muses on the work of painters that she envies perhaps.

In *The New Painting* series Brotherus has allowed paintings to seep into her works. Their shadows create a feeling of familiarity, bringing in flashes of something already seen. When looking at her works, I know what she is talking about, to what she is referring to in her photographs: nude Venuses, 17th-century genre pictures, Claude Lorrain's ideal landscapes, Paul Cézanne's bathers, Pierre Bonnard's bathrooms, and Mark Rothko's soft colours are almost audible, like subtle whispers.

Nevertheless, the precise starting points for the works frequently remain unspecified, though it is not even necessary to dig them out. It is already enough that Brotherus shows us that she has really seen and brought something extra to the tale. Even though her allusions, quotations and comments are conscious choices intended to be made visible, the works are not subordinate to these points of reference. Brotherus makes powerful works that inscribe themselves into the gaps in the history of western painting, bringing in extra light.

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The New Painting series contains apparently disparate works. Horizons, low horizons, very low horizons, landscapes, interiors, studies of light, shadow, mist and steam, nocturnal

views, perspectival pictures, pictures of bathers and of swimmers. All this is, nevertheless, united by the logic that arises out of the way their creator makes intuitively confident choices.

The series can be viewed as an imaginary journey, from mentally soothing horizons to mountain landscapes inspired by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774 – 1840), which the model, who has turned her face to the mountains, breathes in with her whole body (*Der Wanderer*). In the eyes of Friedrich: “Art occupies the role of mediator between nature and man.” In his paintings the model was an object of identification for the viewer, a portal through which the landscape opened up: just as in the painting *A Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (circa 1818), in which a man looks out onto a mountain landscape, dimly visible through mist.

In portraying the landscape Brotherus implements Friedrich’s idea that: “The original [landscape] is too great and too sublime for the majority to be able to grasp it. But the copy is the product of human hands and so lies closer to our human frailty.” The pictures convey Brotherus’ idea that the landscape has to be given time. The landscape is a feeling that can be internalised.

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In her works depicting bathers, Brotherus sets her models in an idyll reminiscent of Arcadia, the primal landscape of the Greek gods often idealised by western painting, where nymphs and centaurs gambol. This perhaps comes out best in *Les Baigneurs* in which the models bathe in a river meandering through a terrain: their pale bodies form a taut, powerful diagonal against a mistily soft background.

Even though in reality this is not the case, the Icelandic landscape is rapidly transformed into the birthplace of Mercury. It is precisely this universal quality that distinguishes Brotherus’ new works from her earlier ones. Now that the autobiographical element has gone, the work is open to several parallel interpretations.

With the same idealism, Brotherus’ bathers in Saturnia, Helsinki and Savo portray the beauty and easy timelessness of the simple life. There is safety beside that basic element of life, water. *Et in Arcadia ego*, I too lived in Arcadia.

At the same time Brotherus’ pastoral bather pictures are indebted to the theme of bathers as a whole. They accentuate the beauty of the human body, the colour of the water, from eye-catching to ominous blue, from innocent to demanding. This illusion is not shattered even if city lights are dimly visible in the background or if the model is wearing glasses.

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Elina Brotherus says she enjoys small, everyday things. She wants to see, and to discover beauty close up. Her subject matter does not have to be sublime in the traditional sense in order to affect us. Her latest pictures have been taken in her house in Avallon in France, which with its unfinished renovation providing a framework for intimate genre-like painting portrayals, and for model studies that prompt associations with 17th-century painting traditions. What is important is the looking, and the time reserved for that looking.

In *Le Printemps* the model is sitting in a simplified space and looking out of the window. The light falls on her like it does in Jan Vermeer’s paintings, in which the light accentuates the opposition between the outside world and the interior of the home. A woman’s place was emphatically in the home: first as a daughter, then as a bride, as a wife, as a mother, and finally as a widow. Enjoyment of the home was an unquestioned virtue that was customarily accentuated in genre paintings by shoes kicked off the wearer’s feet.

In Brotherus' picture time is condensed into an outwardly directed gaze. The eyes seek out the landscape, the light, and clouds moving and metamorphosing in the sky. Through the window spring can be seen. Brotherus speaks of waiting for spring, which implies a special feeling for those who grew up in Nordic countries. Spring means painfully bright light, tentative warmth, and finally greenness of the leaves on the trees. Soon it has passed, just like the 'good light' that Brotherus patiently awaits when she wants to capture a precise feeling in her work.

This genre-picture quality characterises several of the works in *The New Painting* series. *Femme à sa toilette* and *Femme dans la baignoire* refer to Bonnard's intimate bathroom studies. In *Le Matin* we can imagine the model having just stepped out of the bath, put on her night-dress and sat down on the chair, drying her hair. The model's absorption in what she is doing brings to mind Gerard Terborch's or Jan Steen's paintings, in which the model finds tranquillity in a single task - lace-making or writing a letter.

Nevertheless, what distinguishes Brotherus' work from these paintings is the way that in genre painting references were already pre-coded. The letter contained a romantic (or tragic) message, and virtuoso handiwork brought out the chasteness of the sitter. In contrast, drying one's hair is no more than a commonplace act. And this is exactly what Brotherus is aiming at. She reminds us that each moment contains a seed of linear beauty.

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Literature:

Caspar David Friedrich, "Observations on Viewing a Collection of Paintings Largely by Living or Recently Deceased Artists", *Art in Theory 1815-1900. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood with Jason Gaiger. Blackwell 1998, p. 48-54.

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