



Mark Frygell – interview

The artistic highlight of the early spring at the museum is Mark Frygell's standalone exhibition, *Floating Mythologies*. Frygell was born in 1985 and grew up and was educated in Umeå. However, he is currently based Stockholm, which is where we visited him on a November afternoon.

"It feels a little bit like coming home. Exhibiting at Västerbottens Museum is special, since I have visited exhibitions here since I was so young that I can't even remember them. It has always been a place where, as a child growing up in Umeå, I thought 'ah ok, this is what art looks like'. It feels a bit surreal that it's my turn to display art in the museum. Now another small child will be walking around and thinking 'ah ok, this is art'".

Mark Frygell welcomes us into his basement studio in central Stockholm's Vasastan. Ongoing and completed pieces complement work with sketches, chalks, brushes, tubes of paint and a considerable amount of paper plates that replace the traditional artist's palette. Frygell's works are large scale, use bold colours and powerful brush strokes. The figures in the paintings confidently and unashamedly take space. The whitewashed walls and harsh lighting in this somewhat crude studio environment feel well-suited to the candid expressions in the artworks. The format and expressions in the paintings could suggest a background in graffiti.

"Sure, many of my generation and those born in the 70s have a background in graffiti. But mine comes from tattooing. I wanted to be a tattoo artist, but I realised I needed to be better at drawing, so I started at art school in Umeå out in Umedalen". It was there that an interest in art emerged.

This interest eventually led to a place at the Umeå Academy of Fine Arts, a five-year stint about which Mark Frygell had mixed feelings.

"At the Academy, you are somehow supposed to learn how to make art 'for real'. I was quite insecure when I started and tried to conform to a kind of expectation of what art is. Later on, it became more about forgetting all the rules and regulations I learnt during my time at the Academy. When I created my degree project, I went back to what I had done before starting at the Umeå Academy of Fine Arts; before I tried to be a smart, serious artist, and tried to see what I could find in my earlier work.

"I had a giant blank canvas and I didn't know what to do with it. At the same time, I'd started to think about the more direct approach; doing without thinking, satiating my cravings. And then I just started painting, happily painting really. So then I continued sorting in this way and drawing in the same way. This is when I began to understand that there was a whole world of images that had been repressed.

Art programmes could save a lot of money if all art students were just given their own studios and a space to meet up once a week. Just let things flow. The Academy gave me a context where I could meet with older artists and people my own age who wanted to be artists.

At times, the Academy felt like a prison; you had to look at your art as though you had a plan with it – this piece must have that purpose in the world. Like you enter art with an idea that you can fiddle with something somewhere. But if I were to work with art in this way, it would be more like design. In a way, tattooing can be compared to design – you have an assignment together with someone, someone who tells you the why you are doing what you are doing".

Mark Frygell says that in addition to his painting, he tattoos together with other tattoo artists in a studio located in the Stockholm suburb of Björkhamnen. However, his paintings are not a question of design, where he tries to establish a direct contact with the piece.

"In this work, the physical work, you can lose yourself in a way where you leave the intellectual behind, and this can also take you to a place you'd never go if your intellect was with you. I pretty much always work 'in the moment'. There's no 'boss me' that stands there and points. I place my trust into, maybe not inspiration, but my mental ability to live in the moment. Part of the way I work involves structuring my day and structuring how I work when I'm in the studio".

He makes a sweeping gesture towards the studio.

"But you can see what it looks like here. Everything to do with painting is a bit chaotic and trashy. But I try to structure everything else around me so I can be as free as possible when I paint. This is something I've learnt, something that's come with age. Previously, my personal life was more chaotic and my painting and art more reserved. But no matter what type of artist you are, you need a lot more discipline than you think you need when you start. In a way, you are so free with your work that if you don't keep an eye on yourself, you just end up sitting at home and hanging out, or just sleeping for too long.

The structure in the studio involves things like watching films when I work, because this helps me stop thinking about what I am doing. It's like a gateway into being able to work. And after a while, I'll forget about the film. I can also listen to a talk as a form of entertainment that distracts me from what I am doing. Then when I've finally got going and got into the painting, everything around me just disappears.

The act of painting a painting must be something you just 'do'. But this is a huge challenge for anyone who wants to do something in this way. How can you improvise with quality or meaning? You end up in a tricky situation when you're trying to create substantial, meaningful artistic expressions without planning the exact outcome. So, I've chosen to keep all the intellectual energy, planning and power of thought separate from the actual creation.

Then when I've finished, I can look at a painting and think: 'Right, ok, this is what it was. I like this, I don't like this. This is something I can keep working with, this could be a new painting. This could be a new track I take'. 'Boss me' comes in once the physical work is complete".

However, Mark Frygell doesn't simply stand before a blank canvas and start adding oil paints straight from his imagination.

"I do a lot of prep work in sketches. Since I don't plan what the piece will be about, I need another way to find the theme. I draw a lot without thinking, like when I'm watching TV at home or out travelling. Then when I get to the studio, I go through the drawings, find those I can continue working with in one way or another, sketch some more, and work on the theme to then arrive at the painting".

There is something unusual with Mark Frygell's choice of sketchbook. He uses felt tip to draw in books intended for reading.

"They're books I'm reading. Really, it's for practical reasons, because you can carry books around, and since I like having a book on the go and to have my literary references with me. It also plays down the whole thing. I couldn't sell one of these drawings. I can't tear a page out of a book, for some reason that would be too much. It means I can shut out the rest of the world when I'm drawing in these books, compared to if I were to sketch on a drawing pad".

Mark Frygell explains how he found his way to art via comic books, punk rock and tattooing. He likes to use the term "grotesque" to characterise his own paintings and the art that influenced him. Dictionaries provide an array of synonyms: fantastic, bizarre, peculiar, odd, ridiculously over the top, burlesque, comical, ugly through twisted characteristics and clumsy forms, monstrous, absurd. And of course, some of these words are used to describe series, punk rock and tattoo art.

"I find the grotesque in folk art and medieval art, where culture was reproduced on a small scale, with powerfully exaggerated expressions; where the caricature is also part of the view on life. During the medieval period, painting was a popular expression. The figures in medieval art then recur in different contexts in our culture, like in cartoons and caricatures".

The 1920s German art movement, Die Neue Sachlichkeit, New Objectivity, is occasionally described as grotesque. Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, and George Grosz are three artists from this movement, all of whom "participated" in the 1937 Nazi exhibition of degenerate art, *Entartete Kunst*, in Munich. This exhibition presented works of art that had been seized because of their deviation from what Nazism considered good art. Mark Frygell does not contest the suggestion that his art would probably have been viewed as unsavoury and degenerate in the eyes of the Nazis.

"This is not a type of art I have grown up with, rather it's something that made a major impression in later years. Art history forms a large part of my interest in art. I go to all sorts of museums, and I particularly love small museums that exhibit unknown artists. It is a matter of finding forms for your own painting, and solutions; seeing how others have approached things in ways you haven't thought about. If you look at the art canon, their expressions are already part of us, as we grow up with them. However, if you find something else, something that hasn't been part of your conceptual world, and start to incorporate these ideas yourself, add those parts of the puzzle, then the complexity of what you do will expand.

My phone is full of pictures of art, and I regularly sit down and look through everything I have photographed. If I find something interesting in a drawing, then I copy the image or its interesting aspects. If it's something with how it's painted, that's so much more difficult, so I will zoom in and save the detail. It's like a scrapbook of different details.

I have worked a lot with figurative modernism. And the running figures, they're taken from an antique Greek vase. I've drawn lots of runners from different works of art and pieced the images together. This is what gives the paintings a type of collage look. I want to fill my work with as many small references that point in so many directions that it becomes its own reality".

Mark Frygell uses coloured chalk to draw directly on the canvas he will paint, and this acts as a step between the sketch and the painting.

"The chalk becomes a type of priming. And then I pretty much 'print out' the painting. I start at one edge and paint downwards, object after object. It always starts with the sketches that are rash and doodle-like. As I work through an image, I want to retain the same energy as in the original sketch. Much of my efforts revolves around how to work a painting so it keeps this energy while also having a bigger format and being more complicated image. And I always paint wet-on-wet, so it's also a matter of time; you have a certain amount of time to work with. This means there are so many canvases where I've not planned things sensibly. It's just badly done or grinds to a halt. Then I have to throw out the canvas. But when I actually do them right, things go quickly.

I paint on untreated canvas. I've eliminated Gesso primer, and the paints behave differently on the raw canvas. I feel the paints become autonomous, and you see splashes and drips, and the traces left after moving the painting.

I try to include a dynamic scale in each painting. There are areas that are drawn very quickly; thin and reduced. And there are others where the paint is caked on. These thick layers are a way of sculpting the image and creating an additional dimension. The image contains qualities that are linked to the materiality and that can only really be experienced when the painting is still in front of you. The material quality vanishes in the mental reconstruction of the image. Now, when you can look at everything on the internet, I want to add a level that can only be experienced in reality. There's so much online that makes you think 'wow, what a great painting', but then you see it in person and are disappointed because it was made for the internet. And I want my paintings to be made to be seen in real life".

Text and photo: Anders Björkman

