

A Room with a View

We catch up with a favourite figurative painter of ours, Lena Johansson who just recently opened her second solo show with Andréhn-Schiptjenko in Stockholm. With a prior background in architecture, Lena tells us about having approached her new exhibition with a keen interest in examining the relationship between painting and room and space.



C-P: I'm personally a great fan of figurative painting and sometimes miss that in today's contemporary art amidst so much abstract art which sometimes strikes me as rather generic and bland. I feel compelled by your work and got very excited learning last year about your new show at Andréhn-Schiptjenko and seeing as well images of what appeared to be new work exhibited by the end of last year at Nordic Contemporary in Paris.

You're based and working out of Malmö. Tell me more about your background as an artist.

L.J: Figurative components are often accentuated in their capacity of bearing context within the realm of contemporary art whereas abstract components are more easily read together with architecture and space. I find that difference between the abstract and figurative interesting.

I graduated from Malmö Art Academy in 2007, having changed from the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, around when I met my husband and had children. Since then we stayed here and Malmö for me in many ways is a fantastic city. Prior to enrolling in art school I studied architecture at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm (KTH).



C-P: I like the themes represented in your body of work; notably how it draws on notions of fragility, decay, fleetingness and youth. Myself I'm very inspired by music and when looking at your work I have on occasion found myself ascribing musical lyrics to your works. While the gestures of your subjects are subtle and understated, your works have a quality of being very expressive and evocative. I keep coming back to images of two of your works in particular which are pinned with homoerotic undertones; "Duschen" (2011) and Flickor (Allra käraste Tova) (2011). They appear related and strike me as great examples of the characteristics of your work.

From where do you derive the inspiration for your paintings and what is your method of working like?

L.J: That's lovely that you associate my works to music. I often find myself listening to the same music over and over again. I've had music by Lana del Rey, Emmylou Harris, Modern Lovers, Jonathan Richman, Cat Power and Jens Lekman playing in my record player forever now! My paintings often derive from images from lifestyle media. It's significant that the images are commercial and accessible. I would for instance never use anyone's personal images from a social media account like on Facebook. I've always found it interesting to examine what comes out of the commercialized image when it passes through my hands as a painter; what sort of image emerges as a result? What happens when the sender changes and what narrative and mood is evoked when various images selected are juxtaposed together in a visual story?



Sometimes I think of it as someone trying to sell me something and my taking back what is mine. I collect images that resonate with me for whatever reason. The choice is intuitive and I work much from lust. A photograph is like any other thing. I feel free to interpret what I see. I don't project, and outline directly with colour when constructing a painted work. The best is when I can't recognize or have no prior relation whatsoever to the subjects on the images. The originals serve as projection space of sort. It's important that the paintings are delicately made. I feel for the paintings and speak to them as I work in the studio. In the past I've used painting to examine the notions of motif and identification. Painting makes for a language of its own but also constitutes movements on a surface. I'm very fascinated by painting in its capacity of communicating silently without words.

C-P: When we corresponded recently you were telling me about working away in your studio preparing the new show, pending between euphoria and sheer panic which I imagine is a relatable sentiment for any artist. What can you tell me about the new body of work that you will be presenting in the show?

L.J: I think the motifs have changed to some extent. I've pondered much about the relationship between figurative painting and space. I've studied the interplay between architecture and painting in the Renaissance and Baroque era. I'm very fond of the renaissance man, architect, poet, philosopher Leon Battista Alberti and his theoretical take on painting as a window into a different reality. In that light, many of the significant Baroque and Renaissance paintings are site-specific like Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper or Raphael's

frescoes in the Vatican. The room of a gallery is continuously changing and I'm interested in the gap between painting, reality and fiction.



C-P: I know you've worked with installations that have made part of your solo shows; for instance your first show at Andrehn-Schiptjenko featured a mini pool embedded in the exhibition floor of a special room unit built to exhibit your works and your last show at Bendixen Contemporary Art in Copenhagen presented a series of table installations of boxes carrying still life. I was meaning to ask if working with installation as an independent expression or working with other medias than painting is something you feel compelled to explore more in the future?

L.J: I'm incredibly interested in architectural theory and it'd be great to continue to explore figurative painting in relation to room and space.



C-P: Lastly, what's in store for you next in terms of projects and plans in 2015?

L.J: I hope to be brave and continue to paint, dream and be puzzled and I also hope to be able to execute an exhibition about utopias within architecture and city planning which I've worked on together with my colleague, a researcher and architect. September will see the release of a film, "Det borde finnas regler" for which I've done paintings. Moreover, I hope to get to use the word fantastic a lot during 2015!

Lena Johansson's new and second solo exhibition at Andréhn-Schiptjenko in Stockholm runs through April 18. www.andrehn-schiptjenko.com

All images accompanying the feature courtesy of Andréhn-Schiptjenko and the artist. Photo credit: Jean-Baptiste Beranger