



Gunnel Wåhlstrand, *Mother Profile*, 2009. Ink-wash on paper. 186 x 136 cm. (73 1/4 x 53 1/2 in.) Photographer: Björn Larsson

ARTS

The Astonishing Clarity of Artist Gunnel Wåhlstrand

BY SIMON CHILVERS

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From a distance, the ink wash paintings made by Swedish artist Gunnel Wåhlstrand could conceivably be photographs. Even as you step closer and let them pull you in—perhaps with a wondrous slash of dancing light on water, or an incredible hairdo—the idea of them being entirely handmade seems almost

implausible. From a portrait of the artist's mother, captured in a lilac dress and strands of delicate stones around her neck, to an elegantly spare Swedish coastline, Wåhlstrand's intense, evocative work simultaneously moves, transports, haunts, and mystifies.



Gunnel Wåhlstrand, *Mother in Colour*, 2024. Ink-wash on paper. 132.7 x 91.5 cm. (52 1/4 x 36 in.) Framed: 155 x 111 cm (61 x 43 3/4 in.) Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger

From her studio on an island in Stockholm, Wåhlstrand unpicks her various artistic motivations and inspirations: the suicide of her father when she was one year old; the great musical influence of award-winning composer Wendy Carlos, who created soundtracks for Stanley Kubrick. So too does she reveal the very particular working processes that combine to form her deeply personal practice.

Each painting takes between four to six months. Wåhlstrand never tells anyone, including her gallery, what she is working on. "It's always been like that. I like to have it as a secret—it makes it more special to enter the room," she explains. Sometimes her nine-year-old daughter, Turid, will wait for her by

the studio door (Turid wants to be a painter too)—or, if invited in, will sit on the floor and draw.

Wåhlstrand likes to talk to her paintings and play the same four or so albums repeatedly. Lately, she's been listening to American composer and accordionist Pauline Oliveros, whose minimal music reminds Wåhlstrand of breathing. It's when she thinks a painting might be ready—and only then—that Jenna Hultén, her partner of 27 years and a musician herself, is allowed to enter Wåhlstrand's studio to tell her whether the piece is done or not.



Gunnel Wählstrand
Photo: Mikael Olsson

In addition to Carlos, Wählstrand calls out Edvard Munch, Gerhard Richter, and Ola Billgren as inspirations, though it was the look of a series of ink paintings—Jesus Serene (1994) by Marlene Dumas—that Wählstrand says led her to experiment with the medium. She began by painting people from her parents' old school photo album. "I didn't dare paint them, so I painted the other people in the album, until I realized I was working around something more important: the photos of my father, and the ones he took of my mother and the time they had together."

Wählstrand's painting method is high-risk: once the ink touches the paper, it cannot be altered. That sense of danger shows up in the work. "I tried to paint in ink that you could remove with water, but it wasn't the same—everything just felt dead," she says. "I think I need to feel that I am performing, in a way."

Over the course of her 20-plus-year career—she received her MFA from the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm in 2003—Wählstrand has remained somewhat under the radar internationally, despite reportedly being one of the most expensive artists working in Sweden. But that could soon change: this weekend, she'll unveil three new works at New York's Independent art fair with her gallery, Andréhn-Schiptjenko, and a large show of her work, organized in collaboration with Prince Eugene's Waldemarsudde in Stockholm, opens next month at the Turku Art Museum in Finland.

"What struck me most in Wählstrand's work is the profound sense of timelessness they carry. There is something eternal in them," says Selina Kiiskinen, a curator at Turku. "Light, darkness, and all the shades in between are essential to Wählstrand's work. One could say the tonal progression provides a guiding thread for the show's hang—leading viewers from bright midsummer light to the lengthening shadows of autumn, from dim interiors to a shoreline where light shimmers on water."



Gunnel Wåhlstrand, *Nyårsdagen (New Year's Day)*, 2005. Ink-wash on paper. 157x209 cm. Photo: Björn Larsson

David Neuman, co-founder and director of Stockholm's influential gallery Magasin III, vividly recalls seeing Wåhlstrand's graduation exhibit. "I was kind of overwhelmed," he says. "There were six works hanging on the wall by paper clips—they weren't framed—and I just saw this quality." He bought three paintings immediately; he wanted them all but didn't think it was in the young artist's best interest. "I went back the next day to see if they were as good as I remembered," he says. "They were." Magasin III subsequently held pivotal Wåhlstrand shows in 2006 and 2017, and it has 12 of her works in its permanent collection.

"I immediately felt that her paintings had a sound, in some way; that they could be the starting point of a musical work," notes Swedish composer Britta Byström, who actually wrote the 2020 chamber piece *Ink-Wash on Paper* in response to Wåhlstrand's work. (It was performed earlier this year in Stockholm, as the paintings it was inspired by hung nearby.)



Gunnel Wåhlstrand, *Den sista ön* (*The Last Island*), 2012. Ink-wash on paper. Framed: 157 x 218 cm. (61 3/4 x 85 7/8 in.) Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger

Born in 1974 in Uppsala, a city just north of Stockholm, Wåhlstrand grew up with artistic influence from both sides of her family. Her mother's grandmother was an artist, and her father's mother—who appears in two of her excellent interior paintings, *New Year's Day* (2005) and *Looking At Paintings* (2008)—had a strong interest in art. Her father's father, who took some of the photographs that Wåhlstrand subsequently reimagined, was also known to be interested in art.

"Everything started with my father's death. I tried to make him visible," Wåhlstrand says, referring to a 10-year period when she attempted to see the world, including her mother, through his gaze. (Some of the images she used to paint her mother were taken by her father.) "During my foundation year, I made pastel drawings of myself and him at the same age. I took them home and put them on my walls." Later, a painting of her father, *ID* (2011), that she showed in an exhibition almost made her mother faint. "After that, I wanted to be close to his world still—I wanted to be in his landscapes—but I removed him from the pictures," she says.



Gunnel Wåhlstrand, *Towards An Outer Island*, 2025. Ink-wash on paper mounted on hand-painted watercolor paper. Dark-stained walnut frame with Optium Museum Acrylic. Image size: 123 x 175 cm. (48 3/8 x 68 7/8 in.) Framed: 140 cm x 191 cm. (55 1/8 x 75 1/4 in.) Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger

The paintings of Wåhlstrand's mother are some of her finest. A new painting of her—the first Wåhlstrand made after her death six years ago—was created for a recent Stockholm show. The astonishingly beautiful *Mother In Colour* (2024) is based on a photograph taken from the same roll of film as *Mother Blue* (2008–09). “Everything was circling around her when we were making that exhibition. I wanted her in every corner of it. I wanted to go back and see how it was to paint her again, to spend time with her and to be close to the skin,” Wåhlstrand says.

Some of the interiors and portraits in Wåhlstrand's back catalogue evoke a Vilhelm Hammershøi stillness—a narrative hanging in the air. The same is true of her landscapes, which, in all their atmospheric, tonal beauty, often have the sense that someone has just walked out of them or is about to walk in. (Two new landscapes, *The Lonely Rowan* and *Towards An Outer Island*, find her on Sweden's west coast, where she would holiday as a child and now does so with her own family.)



Gunnel Wåhlstrand, *ID*, 2011. Ink-wash on paper. 121 x 93 cm. (47 5/8 x 36 5/8 in.)

Wåhlstrand loves to paint eyes—specifically, the shine in them; it reminds her of the glitter on the water. In fact, her newest painting, of her daughter's eye, is a sensational yet intimate work—the smallest she has made, and which she hand-carried to New York from Stockholm. *Painting Turid's Eye* (2025), she says, was the most scared she's been so far when starting a work: "Similar to the feelings I had when I painted my mother for the first time." Hultén was surprised, and Turid herself was pleased.

"It's so odd how all sorts of alarm bells go off as soon as you entertain the idea of

doing a painting of your child. I googled Lucian Freud's portrait of his daughter, and that gave me some courage," Wåhlstrand says. Despite her nervousness about the task, Wåhlstrand admits that it's also all she wants to do: "To immerse myself in her face and learn it by heart."

She began with the eye before moving to Turid's wispy bangs. "I enjoy painting strands of hair—either as a clear line or as a pause in the dark areas, an inverted line, sometimes both. It's all about preserving the light, understanding the shapes, and doing retakes until the image of her exists within me, too."

Gunnel Wåhlstrand is at Independent from May 8–11.

Gunnel Wåhlstrand is at Finland's Turku Art Museum from June 6–September 14.



Gunnel Wählstrand, *Turid's Eye (Turids Öga)*, 2025. Ink-wash on paper. Painted birch frame with Optium Museum Acrylic. Image size: 38 x 53 cm. (15 x 20 7/8 in.) Frame: 42 x 57 x 4 cm. (16 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 1 5/8 in.) Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger

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