

THE TREES, LIGHT GREEN: LANDSCAPE PAINTING – PAST AND PRESENT

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Albin Amelin

Anders Sunna

Ann Böttcher

Arnold Plageman

Brita af Klercker

Carl Fredrik Hill

Elisabeth Frieberg

Emma Hartman

Evert Lundquist

Gerhard Nordström

Helmer Osslund

Henrik Eriksson

Hugo Zuhr

Isak Hall

Jenny Carlsson

Julia Beck

Lars Lerin

Leif Engström

Lennart Rodhe

Sara-Vide Ericson

Nils Nilsson Skum

Sigrid Hjertén

Olle Norås

Sigrid Sandström

Paul Fägerskiöld

Vera Nilsson

Prins Eugen

The typical landscape painter of the past depicted a seemingly unspoilt nature. From the very beginning, nature provided the backdrop on which gods and heroes were represented. A genre developed out of this in which nothing but nature was transferred onto the canvas. The expression 'landscape' denoted this art form, and was originally used when referring to Dutch paintings depicting natural settings. Thus from nature, culture was derived. A distinction was made between human and nature, and painting helped fortify the division between the two. The landscape became a sort of canvas upon which the artistic play of humanity was set.

Today we are acutely aware that climate change leaves no landscape untouched. Human life and the subsequent impact we have on the world are a deeply rooted part of the environment. We can no longer distance ourselves from nature, depicting it from afar. What does this imply for the future of landscape painting as a genre? And above all else,

what can contemporary landscape painting mean for the environment it portrays? With this exhibition, Bonniers Konsthall sets out to grasp questions related to our historical and current relationship to nature via the artistic genre of landscape painting. Alongside historical work the exhibition shows a number of contemporary artists, all tackling the tradition of landscape painting in some way, and focusing their attention on nature and the environment. The exhibition offers us the chance to face our currently disappearing landscape, to see how it appears and how it is expressed. At times, the current climate catastrophe is obvious. At others times, not at all.

The historical artworks in the exhibition primarily belong to the period before the last turn of the century, a time marked by a new phase in the industrial age. Prior to the 1900s, it was impossible for humanity to pollute the air on a global level. Beginning in the early 20th century, however, the construction of massive industrial centres, as in the German Ruhr region, began. Acid rain became a symptom of high sulphur emissions.

In 1848, legislation was passed in Sweden which simplified the process for industries to procure capital. The goal was to expedite the process of industrialisation. The law stated that shareholders were freed from being held personally

responsible for the company's activities, and that the value of shares were only lost if the company were to go bankrupt. This resulted in the second industrial revolution of the century, and a drastic expansion of the Swedish forestry, iron and steel industries. During this time, in 1909, the Swedish parliament established the first national parks. The lines difference between which "nature" to enjoy and which to consume were starkly drawn.

Around the same time that industrialisation was quickly advancing in Sweden, oil paint first became available in tubes – in 1841 to be precise. These tubes would come to revolutionise painting. At the turn of the century, they were so easily available that it was no longer a great ordeal for artists leave the studio and work outdoors. This, along with increased access to transport such as trains, enabled both professional and amateur artists to easily move around with their painting supplies. In these ways, this period had a crucial impact on both the landscape and landscape painting.

The landscape still remains a motif in contemporary art. The problems with the environment serves as the subject of a painting at times, but not always. However, whenever depicting nature today, contemporary artists must surely be aware that the landscape is undergoing a historical

transformation. An underlying connection to the current climate catastrophe is inevitable, whether or not it is made visible in the work.

This exhibition primarily features our immediate environment. But as climate change is global, so too is the exhibition. Just like a fire that pays no heed to divisions between a national park and a cultivated forest, the climate could care less about regional boundaries and frontier lines. On the very same day this exhibition ends – on the 29th of March, 2020 – humanity will have most likely have consumed this year's resources. In other words, the natural resources our planet can produce in a single year will then be depleted. From that day on, we will be living off resources we essentially do not have. We take from future reserves that are diminishing by the minute. The planet itself, naturally, is anything but frail. It is rather we, pathetic latecomers, who arrived in the most recent microseconds of the planet's history, that have constructed a system wreaking havoc. Without us, Earth would repair itself in time. To keep existing we must reassess how our system is currently prioritised, with economic growth prevailing over all else that grows. At one point in time, laws were put in place to enable industrial expansion. Many now believe we have enough information to regulate in the opposite direction.

Landscape painting has a great deal to say about how we look at the world now and how we have looked upon it in the past. It tells the tale of human and arts relationship to what we refer to as nature. Perhaps this exhibition can offer a space for reflection on this relationship, and help us to see that, as Swedish poet Göran Sonnevi writes, ‘The lives of humans are impossible without the light green hue that opens’.

Image: Sara-Vide Ericson, *The Grave / The Marsh Report*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 160×220 cm.