



U-jzdowski

11/08/2023—14/01/2024

exhibition

Odd Nerdrum

**Painter
of the North**

Odd Nerdrum

Painter of the North

U-jazdowski

11/08/2023—14/01/2024

exhibition

Odd Nerdrum

Painter of the North

Curator

Jon Eirik Lundberg

Collaboration

Bengt Tornvall

Exhibition coordinator

Sara Szostak

Odd Nerdrum (b. 1944) holds a unique position on the international art scene, with his classical universe inspired by masters as Caravaggio and Rembrandt. He has become one of the most accomplished Norwegian painters since Edvard Munch (1864–1944). Like other influential artists, he has never been afraid of being controversial. In the early 1960s, aged just 19, Nerdrum left the art academy in Oslo after only a few months, saying “They had nothing to teach me.”

“I saw my own yearnings expressed and felt as if reborn through Caravaggio’s dramatic, denuded view of humanity,” Nerdrum recalls.

Towards the end of the 1970s, Nerdrum felt that his independent studies were completed. He had mastered the techniques of the old masters and created impressive, large, complicated compositions. His work was granted a place in the permanent collections many museums in Europe.

Odd Nerdrum is strongly opposed to the modernism emanating from the philosophy of Emmanuel Kant; instead, he is concerned with what he understands as ‘painting proper’. He holds the view that classical art is, unlike the progressive point of view, eternal. He is thus not only comparing himself with the greatest artists in known history, but also with possible masters in the future. In his own words: “It is no excuse to have been born in a bad period. I must be compared to the best from all ages.”

To Nerdrum, painting as the essential form of art has been ruined by modernity and the new articulations of postmodernism. These days, “everything could be presented as art.” This development has also influenced teachings in the art academies. Odd Nerdrum’s answer

“By the time they finally notice me, I will long be gone.”

“Civilisation is our hopeless defence against death.”

“They say children are vulnerable... But we are more fragile, we are old children.”

to this development is that it is time to make painting great again, which means reintroducing a classical quality concept. It should be possible once more to say, “I’ve made something wonderful, and I’m proud of it.”

After years of rejection and criticism from the art world, Nerdrum adopted the slander thrown at him and designated his work “kitsch art”. It is no coincidence that Aristotle is the thinker who has most influenced the “kitsch philosophy”. To Nerdrum, kitsch is about universal and eternal human issues, about the pathetic, regardless of form; about what we call ‘human’. Kitsch is founded on the sensuous and the timeless. Kitsch appeals to the vulnerability of every individual human being. Nerdrum conceives his craft as a means of mediation. Mimesis, or representation, is of value, not only because one finds joy and insight in recognising a motif, but because one can recreate action in a painting. All human feelings take form in action. Stories that utilise familiar scenes and archetypal situations are, according to Aristotle, of the greatest value, because they are expressions of the universal. It is about earnestness and pathos and about human yearning. The kitsch painter is not protected by the values of his own day; he must be measured against the best that have existed throughout history. The kitsch artist commits himself to the eternal, to subjects such as love, death and sunrises.

In Odd Nerdrum’s existential world, both his personal and his artistic, the nature of man is essentially gloomy and unchanging. The fateful, windswept landscapes and their inhabitants, seemingly situated in an early barbaric and predatory era, seems to say something about us as well.

“Everything we see is unknown.”

“Expectations deceive us.”

“Almost everything that I have created is based on anxiety. Anxiety... my best employer.”

Both his classical approach and concept of ‘kitsch’ belong, in a final analysis, to his art as much as the colours and canvases do. They shape narratives. What is never talked about, and what we want to present in this exhibition, is that these paintings are highly contemporary, bordering on conceptual. In his own symbolic language, Nerdrum comments not only on human eternity, but also on the present. Not as a debater or polemic, and certainly not as an activist, but as a conscious and observing mind taking a stand towards the shifting currents of power and ideas. A painting like *No Witness* can be seen as a sober and laconic comment on situations depicted in the news on an almost daily basis – even in Scandinavian countries. The theme in *Crossing the Border*, a woman fleeing with her child, is a currently lived reality for millions of people in Poland and the rest of Europe. Are primitive and predatory practices still present in the societies of our time? It would be hard not to agree.

The humans in Nerdrum’s works are refugees, left with uncertainty, dislocated in time and space, and so are we. What is it that constitutes us, that shapes who and what we are? In a retrospective line from early to later works, eternity and destruction is blended in metaphorical comments on a contemporary world observed from beyond.

Text

Jon Eirik Lundberg
Bengt Tornvall



The Back
2016 (1979)
224.5 × 174 cm
oil on canvas



Crossing the Border
2014
204 × 256 cm
oil on canvas



No Witness
2011/2012
204 × 334 cm
oil on canvas



Sole Morte

2017
226 × 205.5 cm
oil on canvas



Ascending

2023
203.5 x 316.5 cm
oil on canvas



Limbo

2005

207 × 275 cm

oil on canvas



White Brick
ca 2002
61 × 64 cm
oil on canvas
private collection
courtesy of Claes Kinell



Sanatorium Bath
2023
153.5 × 115.5 cm
oil on canvas



Odd Nerdrum

A defining moment in Odd Nerdrum's life was seeing Rembrandt's painting *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Stockholm. This consolidated his artistic route, bringing him into opposition with the understanding of art among his contemporaries. "To make a long story short, I would paint myself into isolation," he later acknowledged. But isolation from contemporaries was swapped for the company of classical masters. Other influences on his work are Masaccio, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Titian, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Goya, Chardin and Millet, as well as the less apparent Henry Fuseli, Caspar David Friedrich, Ferdinand Hodler, Edvard Munch, Käthe Kollwitz, Salvador Dalí, Chadm Soutine and Lars Hertervig.

Text

Jon Eirik Lundberg
Bengt Tornvall

Proofreading

Nick Faulkner

Editorial coordination

Sabina Winkler-Sokołowska

Graphic design

Norbert Strukow

on the cover

Limbo (fragment)

Print

Efekt, Warsaw

ISBN

978-83-67203-20-3

Published by

Ujazdowski Castle

Centre for Contemporary Art

Exhibition has been financed by



Ministry of Culture and National Heritage
Republic of Poland

Co-financed by

OCA

Office for
Contemporary
Art Norway

Honorary patronage



Ambasada Norwegii

Partners



Media partners

IPL

AKTIVIST

GoOut

GBIEG

naszemiasto.

TRÓJKA
KULTURA

Trójka
PODSŁUCHANO

Ujazdowski Castle
Centre for Contemporary Art

Jazdów 2, Warsaw, Poland
www.u-jazdowski.pl

Ujazdowski Castle
Centre for Contemporary Art

Jazdów 2, Warsaw, Poland
www.u-jazdowski.pl