

## Sharp Whispers

*Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage.  
Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief<sup>1</sup>.*

Anne Carson

Tragedy is a matter of distance *and* proximity. It plays upon action and observation as well as projection. Tragedy is a tool to comprehend puzzling situations of grief, violence and anger, by offering through the tale of individual actions, a collective view onto potentiality. As a fact, tragedy brings us closer to our darkest feelings and emotions: by watching someone else experience the most difficult hours, we find company in our sorrow.

The enactment of sentiments, in this case often of extreme nature, implicates not only a display but an assertion of complexity: life can be so unexpectedly twisted that we struggle to make sense of it.

CHORUS: *Oh Madness!*

Through the reiteration of actors, we observe what it means to be human, to feel confused, to make mistakes and to go through loss. The spectacle activates catharsis which is often generative: as a sudden epiphany we establish a renewed sense of self in relationship to our surroundings. One of the first definitions of tragedy, introduced by the Sicilian rhetorician Gorgias around the latter half of the fifth century BCE<sup>2</sup>, describes tragedy as the acquisition of wisdom through deception, devised by a cognitive visual experience that creates a powerful emotion.

CHORUS: *Every joy disappoints. What's here doesn't please you, what's far off you crave.*

For Lacan, the concept of tragedy must be approached in relation to the notion of desire. *Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists<sup>3</sup>.* For Carson, as for Lacan, desire and tragedy are rooted in absence. *Pleasure and pain at once register upon the lover, in as much as the desirability of the love object derives, in part, from its lack. To whom is it lacking? To the lover<sup>4</sup>.* The phenomenology of desire is also directly linked to comedy. Tragedy and comedy as neighbouring lands, as connected joints of a body. Differentiated only by how tensions,

---

<sup>1</sup> Anne Carson, preface, *Tragedy: A Curious Art Form*, in *Grief Lessons— Four Plays by Euripides*, trans. Anne Carson (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006), p.7.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, The seminar, Book II, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, 1954-1955, (Paperback, 1991) p. 223.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*, (Princeton University Press 2014) p.30.

coincidences and ruptures are resolved. The initial response to an unexpected event determines which form any story might take and which role we will play in it.

CHORUS: *She's lost control again!*

Thinking about the theatrical dimension of artistic forms, Halvor Rønning (Bergen, Norway 1982) explores painting as a linguistic tool that is able to convey a critique of the ordinary, a lament against systemic and structural disproportion. Creating a parallel between the affective power of tragedy and representation, Rønning imagines painting as a dialectic exchange between oppositional forces—inner and outer, figuration and abstraction, personal and collective—conceived as positions in flux. As a dynamic back and forth, the opportunity of moving between styles and media offers a vantage point of observation.

Is distance a privileged act? Who gets to distance themselves from a place or situation?

CHORUS: *Your departure chills my heart like prophecy.  
When you're gone, there is no coming back.*

While the tragic hero realises a shocking truth—and the impossibility of its resolution—Rønning utilises painting towards revelation: *My works are not illustrations of grief, but they are shaped by the limitations and complications that come with a devastating experience*, the artist writes in the accompanying text to the exhibition *Knep og kunstgrep* (2021). Interested in the limits and potentialities of painting as a traditional art form, he investigates the cultural context of the medium from a social perspective. Taking as a starting point images of luxury objects and interiors withdrawn from advertising, design and fashion magazines, as well as pop signifiers—which the artist avidly collects—he deconstructs their use and collective meaning.

Flick through, observe, note, cut, organize, choose.

As a flirtatious dance between subject and object, the images dilute, transform and fragment into painterly abstractions. At times recognizable, at times lost in layered compositions, what crops up is a critical observation of the construction of capitalistic subjectivity through painting.

CHORUS: *Oh girl, how I pity the dark life you live!*

Inspired by multiple literary and philosophical sources, Rønning's paintings are the result of an anatomical and analytical process: images, as well as words are reduced, wounded or carved to be recomposed or dispersed by the artist into something new. Defined by a schizophrenic push and pull between appropriation and rejection, consumption and dismissal, the work exposes and dissects the mechanisms of desire as an economic, cultural, and political force. *All human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles, love and hate its motive energies*<sup>5</sup> continues Anne Carson in *Eros the Bittersweet: an essay* (2004).

---

<sup>5</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*, (Princeton University Press 2014) p.11.

Recurring across the artist's oeuvre, the ambiguous and dense figure of the pig is directly withdrawn from comic strips and cartoons. Often caught in the act of cutting himself (*von Natur aus Charakter* 2019), appearing and disappearing between vivid paint brushes (*Stiletto Heels, Kneeling Pig* 2018) or joyfully rode by a young boy (*Conventional, Conservative, Hard* 2020), it transcends cultures and signification. By introducing this character, sympathetic yet sad at glance, Rønnig extends his semiotic analysis onto the affective power of symbolism whilst widening the prospect of collective transformation.

Images and social status symbols return throughout the work, such as a rolex watch (*Datejust, Lemon, Cherries* 2018) a leather Chesterfield sitting chair (*Poltrona* 2019–ongoing), velvet drapes (*An answer to all tastes* 2020) and high heels, floating on paper or canvas or layered above a decorated interior cut out from design publications such as *Architectural Digest* or *Apartamento*. As if part of a poetic text, interruptions, ruptures and duplications create a rhythmic exchange between visual codes and registers. In balance between highlighting and concealing—we observe bourgeois paradigms impregnated by individualistic affirmation cut by wide or thin pastel-coloured strokes—fragmentation brings to the foreground details initially dismissed. Truth comes as a whisper, a sharp whisper. Characterized by a feeling of expressive urgency, the meaning of the whole changes through the deletion or revelation of new parts.

What suddenly emerges is not only the artist's personal relationship to the perpetual cycle of capitalism but an awareness of his own—our own—complicity with it.

The tight and complex net of systems that define our everyday life, dissolves into defined paintbrushes, layers of colors mix and crash into one another. What we once could recognize with clarity is now dispersed between patches of colour. At times a sign or a shape escapes this dissolution process, like a camera zooming onto a detail, they emerge from abstraction into figuration and back into abstraction. These solitary moments of awareness are a glimpse of consciousness before subsiding again to a cacophonous ensemble of inputs and references.

CHORUS: *Should we stay here and listen?*

As David Joselit poignantly questions in *Painting Beside Itself* (2009), *how does painting belong to a network*<sup>6</sup>? In the text Joselit highlights a tendency visible from the early 1990's in the practice of Martin Kippenberger, Michael Krebber, Merlin Carpenter and Jutta Koether, of a painting approach that is transitive, embodying the values and structures of specific networks of creation and distribution. These, for Joselit, swell the medium and circulate beyond a specific artistic form. As a breathing eye spreading beyond painting, Rønnig has organised a film program to be screened in conjunction to his solo exhibition, *Avgang*, at Hordaland Art Centre (HKS) in Bergen. The films, *Crisis and Critique* (2012) by Per-Oskar Leu, *Do Not Circulate*, (2021) by Tiffany Sia and *Alienation* (2021) by Nikhil Vettukattil, appear, transpire and subvert. They do not only extend the artist's inquiry into affective, collective and political representation, but also offer an instrument to manifest the associative network of actions and thoughts that

---

<sup>6</sup> OCTOBER 130, Fall 2009, *October Magazine*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology p.125

stand beside painting. Medium-specificity is painters' tragedy. By embracing an expanded gaze, enhancing fragmentation rather than unique truths whilst challenging typical distribution models, a dispersed yet forceful multitude appears. The exhibition, which Norwegian title signifies departure and resignation, operates as an extended canvas, a collective expression, considering the *act of departing as a fundamental tragic motive*<sup>7</sup>. We leave ourselves to find complexity. Through a hyperbolic dance of associations the distance becomes shapeless as the many bodies that compose it and what remains is tragedy's spectacle and its generative catharsis: out of the present the future is formed.

Text by Attilia Fattori Franchini

---

<sup>7</sup> Peter Szondi, *An essay on the Tragic*, (Stanford University Press, 2002) p.27