

An On-going Conversation: Carolina Jonsson and Anne-Gro Erikstad

(This text is based on a conversation that began Christmas 2013 and continued into the winter of 2014. Carolina Jonsson has worked on her series *Ecolonia* since 2011)

AGE: *I mostly know you as an artist working with film and photography, but painting has also been important to you. You have painted portraits, studies of faces, often in series.*

All the works you show in this exhibition are part of your Ecolonia series. Is there any continuity between the early portraits and the landscapes in Ecolonia, between painting and the medium of film?

CJ: One of the things that have interested me most about the face has been its symmetry, with small inconspicuous irregularities or differences between the two halves of the face, something that lends a certain tension to the face and a duality to the person behind. These small irregularities or accidental deviations can also be found in my portrayals of nature. One of the reasons I manipulate my films is to enhance the experience of nature rather than to merely present an image of what I see. The same applies to the faces I've worked with earlier.

AGE: *I have the impression that switching between the camera and painting/drawing was more important to you a number of years ago. It usually takes a few years to develop this kind of closeness or intimacy with techniques and methods, so what you do and how you do it become the same thing, in a way. Technology becomes an extension of your thinking, if you understand what I mean.*

CJ: With time I have discovered that the camera and the editing process give me the same possibilities to change and manipulate as drawing or painting. I'm more interested in time and composition than the qualities that emerge from the painting itself. From painting I have adopted the process of merging layers in film, and I feel that film gives me a more direct answer. Instead of chiseling out a landscape brushstroke by brushstroke, I can add and subtract from the photographic image. The keyboard has commands for copy, paste, delete and undo. Nowadays my editing work is more experimental, using filters and transparent layers, so the results are less predictable. While previously I exclusively documented and collected incidental everyday events that I subsequently abstracted – adding and taking away – I have recently begun to include staged elements in my pictures.

AGE: *You once described your work place as 'the Swedish countryside'. Moving (back) to a rural area in Sweden, closer to nature and the cultural landscape, has been a deliberate choice and an important part of the process you have gone through these past years. What does this environment mean for your work?*

CJ: The place where I live allows me to concentrate. Living in the city has entailed filtering out a lot of noise. At the Academy in Trondheim it was natural to shield myself within the walls of the school, and mostly find material for my work there – that is to say, people. I rarely need to visit new places to find new material. From where I stand, I see a wealth of detail, and often it can be an advantage to work with things that are already familiar, and to immerse myself even more in something that is clearly defined. I also find it valuable to be able to observe changes in the same landscape during its 365-day cycle.

AGE: *An interest in 'time', a time you have described as 'cyclical' or 'monotone', runs throughout your work, a type of time that is closely related to nature and the cycle of the landscape. Time often appears drawn out in the fragments you capture on film?*

CJ: Time also represents waiting. Waiting in the form of expectation and as a metaphor for change. When you wait, you create a world. The void, the gap between two scenes is also important. Similarly when something is omitted, as well as the difference between image and sound, etc. I can closely relate to the landscapes of Italian film-maker Antonioni – industrial landscapes – and the way in which he creates a sense of estrangement with the people in them. The Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky has also had an influence on my work. His ideas about sculpting in time. Tarkovsky believed that each cinematic scene depicts a specific form of time, and placed emphasis on the meticulous work of joining together scenes into a rhythmic unit.

AGE: *Your film fragments from Ecolonia incorporate clouds that move across the sky, the dust in the air or a sudden snowfall. I'm thinking of the final scene in Tarkovsky's film Nostalgia. The camera pulls back, the frame expands, and eventually the entire screen is surrounded by the ruins of a cathedral. Then it begins to snow ... it is a very religious image. Tarkovsky wrote that images have an awareness of the spiritual within matter. There are no cathedrals in your work, but is Ecolonia the world you mentioned earlier, a world created by waiting and thereby associated with a sense of spirituality?*

I'm interested in conveying something hidden, something 'more' in nature that is perceived beyond what our eyes see. A more abstract sensual description of nature as both beautiful and menacing. A kind of embodied experience of beauty,

intensity and mystery. *Ecolonia* can also be an exploration of our modern relationship with nature. The aesthetic experience is accentuated, and may be able to transcend the notion of nature as nothing other than an object to be dominated.

AGE: *'The sublime' is a term that has been used to describe your work. This may seem like a somewhat problematic term, but I read an excellent essay by Sven-Olov Wallenstein about Edmund Burke and the Sublime in the art journal Paletten (No. 4, 2013). I quote: 'The sublime seems like a disruption in thinking that must be thought, a caesura in feeling that must be felt, a pain that must be relished, an infraction by the invisible on the visible that nevertheless one struggles to see – (...)' The sublime in art has traditionally been associated with the male artistic genius, a kind of exalted soul. How do you personally relate to such a concept, and how can it be counteracted and given new meaning in light of the challenges in our own time?*

CJ: I think that many artists today, including myself, are exploring different ways in which relate to daily life. You come into contact with different surfaces and worlds, encounters in which you collect materials in the form of experience and knowledge, and that eventually become works of some kind. The initial intention is not necessarily to create a work of art, and the artist is even less important. It's about trying to understand the world around you, and in order to do that you have to return to the same thing again and again. The result is art that can be shown, but the aim is to explore or connect. Therefore I find it appealing to work with fragments that can be assembled in different ways. In this way, each exhibition becomes another attempt at expressing somewhat similar things, it is an on-going investigation. The time we live in demands constant novelty, news and innovation, and not contributing with something new may be a form of resistance.

AGE: *You have previously talked about the physical experience of beauty, intensity and mystery. The French film-maker and author Marguerite Duras spoke of a female or feminine rhetoric rooted in the body. She wanted to create a narrative that reflected her thinking and experience, a way of thinking through the organism, through the body, that could challenge the traditional patriarchal narrative she believed had exhausted itself. In her works, texts and films, the intensity and quality of experience is therefore more important than the event itself. Her final book, Writing, contains a passage about the last minutes in the life of an ordinary fly. She writes about the experience of being alone with a fly about to die; the living insect, its death struggle and surrender to the other time that is death. The fly's death is death itself, but also the drama of life and existence unfolding in relation to what is most intimate and immediate, those tiny things we usually don't devote so much attention to. For Duras, these things too were shrouded in time, and thereby connected with everything else. Using narrative, she was able to experience the loss of millions of lives during war; all the anonymous dead in the death of one fly.¹*

CJ: By citing Duras, you have really put your finger on what I meant by saying that the quality of the experience is more important than the event itself, the seemingly insignificant fly serving as a sort of experiential metaphor that arouses empathy. I want to take the image of the landscape, or the cliché, past our deep-rooted notion of what we think we ought to feel when encountering a landscape or a work of art.

The fact that *Ecolonia* includes several works called 'Hologram' is not just about the hologram as an illusion. I'd like to think that *Ecolonia* could act as one large hologram. Holography is based on the principle that all the information about an area lies along the area's edge. Ultimately, this could mean that everything is interconnected, and that every single tiny component, like the DNA, contains all the information about the other parts. To me this seems both liberating and comforting when looking at the world as a whole, that everything is tied together in time and space, and that there is knowledge of one thing in the other. As a small unit within a larger context you're swept along by the waves, not driven by them, but as one of them.

