

UNNI ASKELAND FRIEZED

Blondie in the forest

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BLONDIE IN THE FOREST



Unni Askeland is the *enfant terrible* of contemporary, Norwegian art; shocking the politically correct establishment not merely with her works, but also with her – sometimes bohemian, sometimes glamorous – life style.

Unni Askeland was born in Bergen in 1962. After a year at the Art School in Kabelvåg in beautiful Lofoten (1983–84), Askeland started at the Academy of Western Norway, Bergen (1984–85). In 1987, she entered the National Academy of Fine Arts in Oslo, where she graduated in 1992.

At the Academy's Graduate Exhibition, Askeland showed *Waiting for Picasso*, a painting depicting herself in the company of artists such as Edvard Munch, Frida Kahlo, Lena Cronqvist and Francesco Clemente. Apart from the obvious lack of modesty; the picture could also be read as a manifesto of her artistic ideals. Staging her own *persona* in her own works and within the art historical tradition has ever since been a central element in Askeland's oeuvre, as seen in e.g. the *Munch Adoptions* project. Furthermore, the artist here demonstrated an awareness of her belonging to the expressionist tradition. Expressionist ideals, dealing with personal, often erotic, experience, are present in most of her works. The 1980's saw a revival of these ideals with the so-called Neo-Expressionist movement. For Askeland, visits to the New York studios of Brice Marden and Francesco Clemente were crucial to this development.

With the *Obituaries* project around 2000, the artist turned from figurative to abstract painting. The project dealt with death, and the paintings had the shape of coffins, painted in subtle blue and violet hues. After a few years of abstract expressionist paintings, the artist once again turned to figurative painting and to art historical ideals. *Munch Adoptions* (2004) was a series of paraphrases of Edvard Munch's famous "soul paintings" from the 1890's.

Meddling with the nation's master caused something of a scandal in the Norwegian milieu. However, Askeland's pictures were not copies, but reinterpretations of Munch's themes, such as love, sex and agony.

With the series *Desire and Destruction* and *Big Blonde*—the latter shown in New York in 2006 – Askeland depicted icons of the 20th century, paraphrasing well-known portraits. Among *femmes fatales* such as Marilyn Monroe, Mae West and Courtney Love one also found, once again, the artist herself. Both in theme and style, these projects were obvious references to the Pop Art of Andy Warhol, demonstrating the artist's affinity to the American tradition. The technique was photo-based serigraphy, the same medium she employs in her latest pictures.

The exhibition *A Lot of Water under the Bridge* (2008) featured images inspired by the famous movie *Casablanca*, among others love scenes with Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart. When a series from this was acquired by the National Museum of Art, Oslo, it stirred a new debate, not only about the artist, but also about the museum.

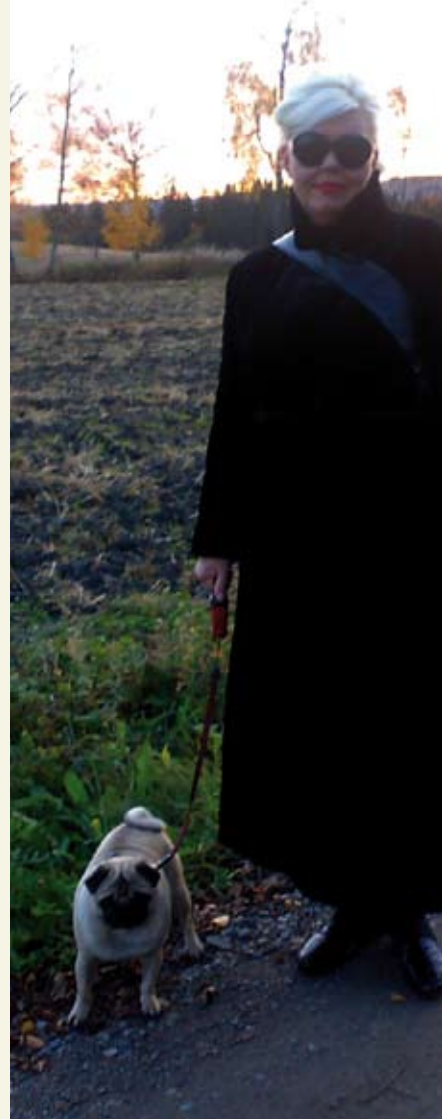
In her current exhibition, *Friezed*, Askeland has turned to landscape art. The series depicts the nature surrounding Kløfta outside of Oslo, where Askeland lives in her late 19th century house together with her artist husband Sverre Koren Bjertnæs, three of her four children, several cats and a lap-dog. Though the artist's person is no longer obviously present in these works, we know she is there somewhere, luring in the forest with her blonde hair and red lips.

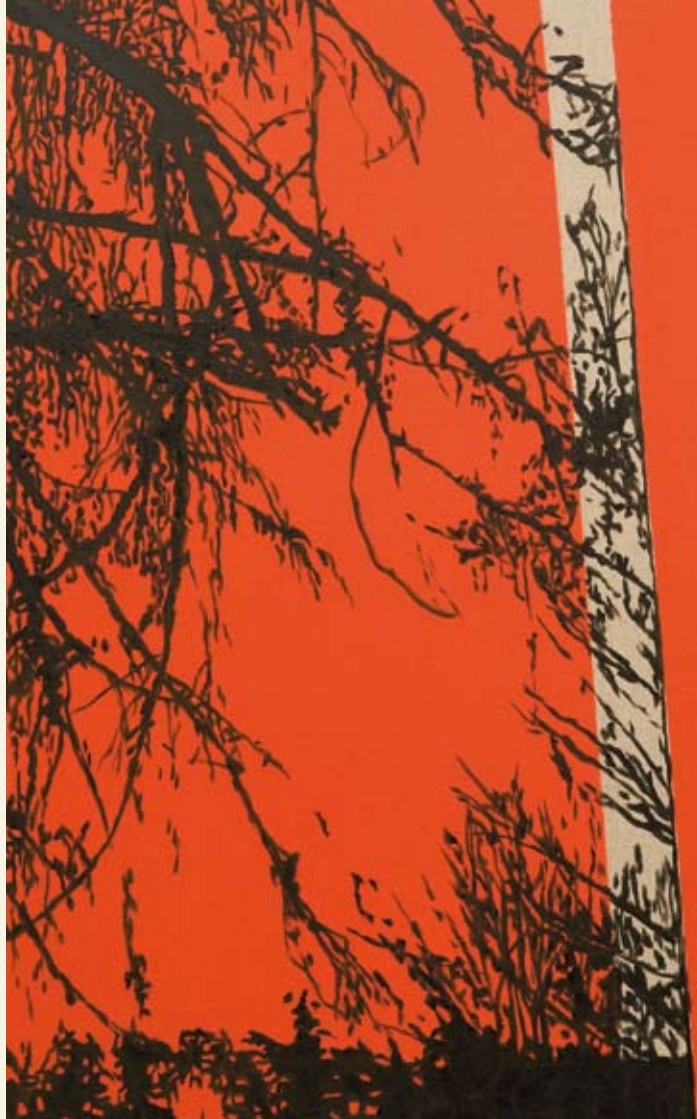
Knut Ljøgdø





















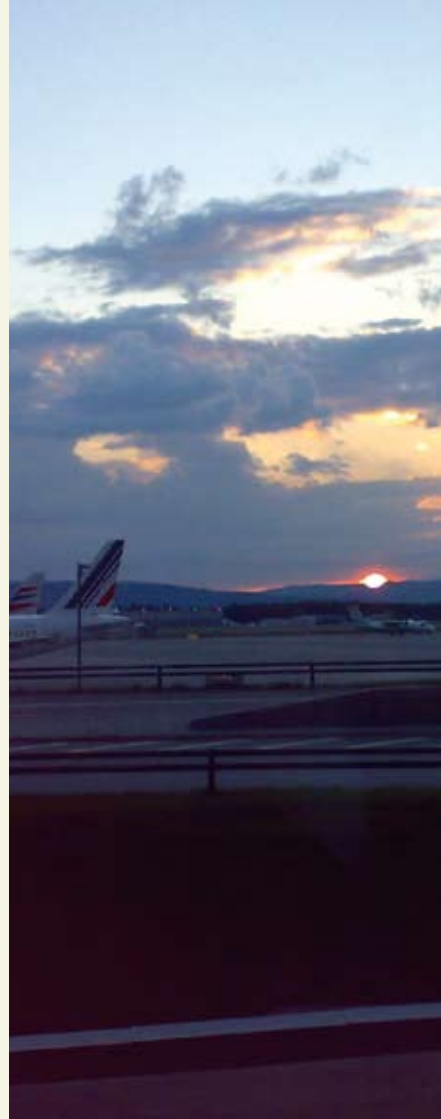


















FRIEZE

Thinking of pop art, the first thing that comes to my mind is celebrities, fame, Marilyn Monroe and the New York high life. I don't know why, but I guess the mythology surrounding Warhol and his factory completely erased the origin of the works and the fact that there were many others working with the same ideas. In one way pop art was a reaction to what itself has now become. One may describe it as a socialistic protest to high art and all its pretensions. It placed everyday objects in front, like the soup cans, brilloboxes and the cartoons, saying this can be art that everybody can relate to.

Today, the formal impact of pop art can be seen everywhere, from the cheapest design to art repeating these ideas nearly as copies; still finding this grip revealing. I guess Kløfta, where Unni and I live is as far away from jet set New York as you can get. It's a rural place, mostly known for being a sign by the road you pass on your way to Oslo and the place Paris Hilton's great-great grandfather Gus left to make a new future for his family in America. In this landscape of white trash Norway, Unni has made her latest paintings for her New York show at Heiberg Cummings Design/Turid Meeker.

Over the last years Unni's paintings have been moving towards something that can easily be connected to pop art. Although alluring, I see this connection to pop art to be mostly on the surface. Unni's works are always in an almost romantic way connected to her own life, deriving from her experiences of being an artist, woman, mom or even in the later years a Norwegian celebrity. Warhol liked to say he was in it for the fame and money, claiming business was the highest art.

But he also aimed at excluding his own subjectivity. Almost like saying: Hey! I'm just another observer. That has never been Unni's project as she with ease takes on different roles as both director, actor, player and still remains

true in the projections of herself and, like in this show, in the images of her own experiences. The personal focus and the use of self experience are in a major way disconnecting her from the pop art movement, and making her refreshing.

In our time being so used to all the strategies of art, we don't really see it as problematic to take other peoples pictures, project images or quote and still claim to show the artist as a subject. We shop imagery and meanings and we put it together because this is the only credible way to make sense. In one way it's all done. We just put it together in our own way, it's our assembly.

Unni's new paintings are all based on photos taken from her daily walks with our pug Maia. They are snap shots taken with a simple camera phone, emphasizing the unpretentious style. In this series of paintings Unni uses the form, the silhouettes as in pop art, more like abstractions than trying to achieve the realism in the photos. Some of these paintings, which all connect and form one single line, even miss the canvas, and continue into the next one. It's almost as if there isn't any attempt to grasp nature in all its form and colours, but instead insist on the viewer digging in to one's own memory bank to make sense of what we are actually seeing.

It's like Unni with these paintings are saying, you can't grasp nature anyway so I won't bother trying, I'll just give you my memory of nature and you can connect it with your own.

Sverre Bjertnes
Husband and artist

