

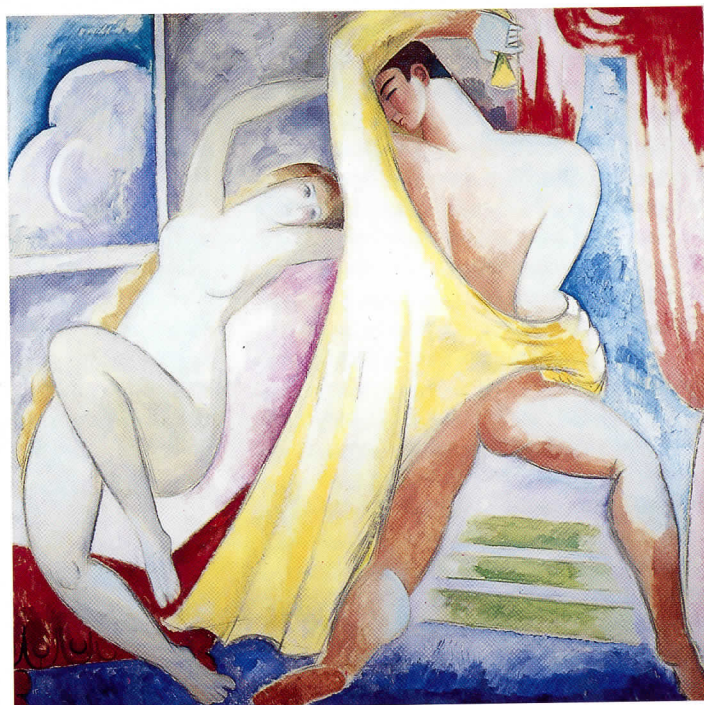
Stockholm

Dominique Billier

Constructivism Redefined

One thinks of Scandinavia as a land shrouded in mist, cut off from the international art scene by the long Nordic nights. Nothing could be further from the truth. If Stockholm was isolated in the past, the present, outward-looking mood of the city has turned it into an important centre for both art and the art market.

Over the past five years the number of art galleries has grown considerably and they are now scattered throughout the city, although the best-known are to be found in the Östermalm district, except for the Ahlner gallery in the old city and the Nordenhake gallery located in the School of Fine Arts. Sweden's art life has been given a fillip by the annual Stockholm Art Fair, organized by Leif Ståhle, the Göteborg fair, GIART, which was staged for the first time this autumn, and by the national art fair, Vårsalong or Spring Salon, which is held at the Liljevalchs Konsthall in Stockholm.



Isaac Grünewald:
The Temptation of Joseph, 1916,
oil on canvas,
77 ½ × 77 ½ in / 194 × 194 cm,
Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm

The fear of isolation and of obscurity prompted nineteenth-century Scandinavian artists to cross the Baltic to Paris or Rome. Between 1907 and 1911, the majority of students in Henri Matisse's art academy in Paris were Scandinavian. After the end of World War Two, Sweden embraced modern art enthusiastically, and its artists rushed to Paris looking for new ideas and inspiration. Perhaps a similar fear of being forgotten underpins the lively curiosity about art today in Scandinavia's art capital, Stockholm.

On the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of the painter **Isaac Grünewald** (1889-1946), the Liljevalchs Konsthall organized a retrospective of his work. Its title, *Det Sjugande Trädet* or *The Singing Tree*, is taken from a painting of 1915 and sums up the preoccupations of the artist. Returning to Stockholm in 1909, after studying in Paris with Matisse, he and a number of other Swedish painters—to be known as "1909 års män" or "Men of the year 1909"—introduced a new concept of space and, above all, a new palette of colours in their painting. Intoxicated by music and by modern poetry, Grünewald executed décors and costumes for the theatre and the opera.

Ann Westin, a former collaborator of Gustaf Engwall and Hans Mörner at the Galerie Blanche, opened a new



gallery last spring. Following the successful exchange schemes with France already initiated by the Galerie Blanche (among them shows by members of the Ecole de Paris), Ann Westin showed contemporary Swedish artists living in Paris. Next to the constructivist paintings of Torsten Ridell and Gert Marcus and the sculptures of Liss Eriksson were three surrealist-like collage and aquatint works by **Ragnar von Holten**. One of these, *La Vouivre* (1986), alludes to the fantastic creature of Norse mythology.

Stockholm's Moderna Museet presented an installation by the German sculptor and video artist, **Klaus vom Bruch**. Called *Surface to Surface*, the installation took its title from military vocabulary and consisted of five radars and a video linking the museum with Lapland. Located in five sites around the town of Kiruna, they transmitted images a thousand kilometres south to the museum in central Stockholm. In this way Vom Bruch put military technology to an unexpected use and showed how thought can be as fast as, if not faster than, a missile. The fact that the museum building was once used by the army added a touch of historical irony to the installation.

The Moderna Museet recently received a donation of twenty-three paintings and sculptures collected by one of Sweden's leading intellectuals, Gerard Bonnier (1917-87). The bequest included works by Marc Chagall, Alberto Giacometti, Yves Klein, Jean Dubuffet, Pablo Picasso and a number of Scandinavian painters. An

Isaac Grünewald:
Fancy Dress: Amazon, 1925,
Indian ink and watercolour,
Liljevalchs Konsthall, Stockholm

enlightened connoisseur, Bonnier brought a vibrant curiosity and a thoroughly international perspective to his calling and typified the best of Swedish attitudes to the world abroad.

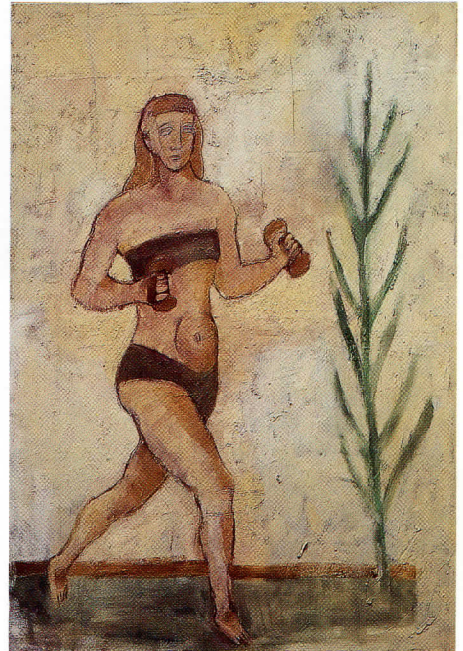
This open-mindedness was greatly encouraged by the curator Pontus Hulten who set out in the early 1960s to make Stockholm an international art centre. In 1961 he organized the exhibition *Four Americans* (Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Alfred Leslie and Richard Stanekiewicz), which established close links between Sweden and the United States. Traces of these early links could be seen in an exhibition at the Heland Weterling gallery of Rauschenberg's latest works, and in the Donald Baechler show at the Lars Bohman gallery.

Like other parts of the world, Scandinavia possesses a diversity of artistic currents. The Nordenhake gallery recently showed the work of the young Swedish artist Ulf Rollof, who has been working with rubber since travelling to Mexico in 1985. This supple, near-transparent material, which the sculptor thinks of as a trap for spirits, or an "angel trap," ensnares spectators allured by the works' encrusted, mulberry-like surface. Haunted by memories of the terrible

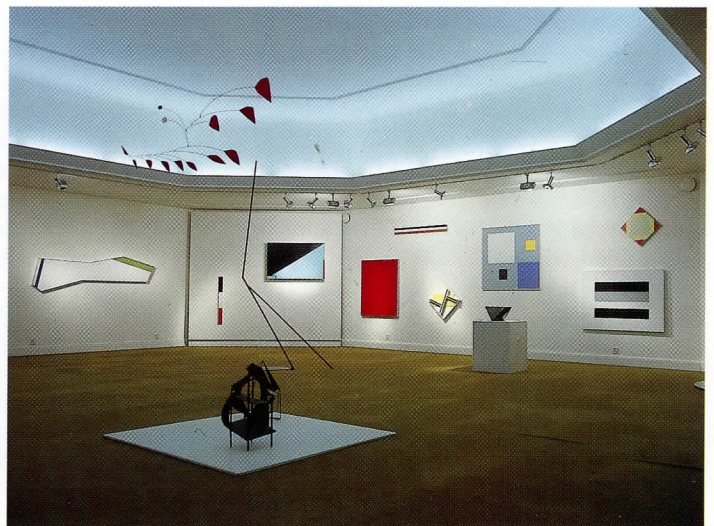
earthquake that struck Mexico City in September 1985, Rollof has also developed the material's protective qualities. In his installations shown in Mexico or in Malmö's Konsthall in 1988 and 1989, Rollof has developed a powerful language of urgency and protectiveness.

Preoccupied by quite different concerns, **Marianne Andersson** (born 1956) prefers a figurative language. Concentrating on a central motif, she recently created a sequence of paintings of young women in bikinis which was shown in the new Arton A gallery. Her graphic style and the modelling of these figures is reminiscent of the female silhouettes found in Roman frescoes. An uncertain space surrounds the motif and complements the women's often comic female attributes. Andersson's painting seems to express a return to the notion of femininity that is linked to memories of cultural references. Her work has also been shown recently at the Casa di Masaccio in Florence along with that of the Swedish artists Lars Nilsson, Truls Melin and Kari Mjåtveit.

Though characterized by its variety, Stockholm's art scene has been particularly shaped by two traditions, landscape painting and constructivist art. It is interesting to note that several

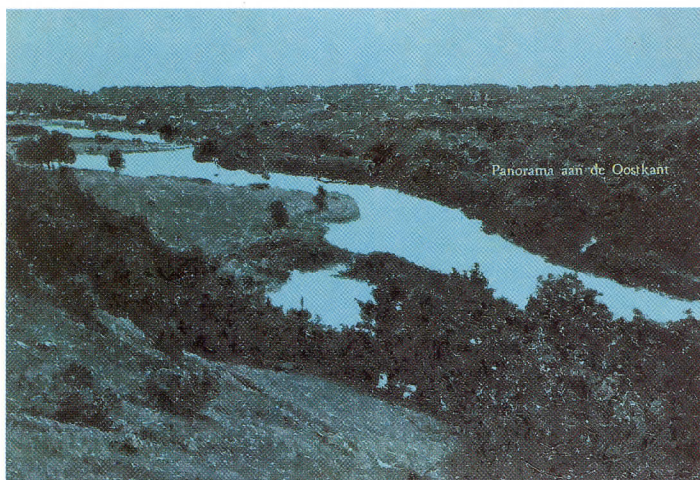


Ulf Rollof:
Untitled, 1985-88,
tempera, paper, latex, leather, wood and
mulberries,
80 × 60 in / 200 × 150 cm,
Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm



Marianne Andersson:
Girl in Bikini I, 1989,
oil on canvas,
72 ¾ × 50 ½ in / 182 × 126 cm,
Galerie Arton A, Stockholm

Various artists:
General view of the Galerie Kunstruktiv Tendens,
Stockholm



galleries—Aronowitsch, Konstruktiv Tendens, Blanche and now Ann Westin—were founded with the constructivist style very much in mind. Perched on top of Humlegården, the Aronowitsch gallery began to show work by the leading representative of Scandinavian constructivism, Olle Baertling, in 1956 and continues to support kindred spirits like Lars Englund. Now directed by Monica Thunwall, the Konstruktiv Tendens gallery was created by Baertling in partnership with Axel Knipschild in the early 1970s. Thunwall continues to specialize in the idiom and shows different generations of constructivist artists.

The aesthetics of constructivism have played an important role in Sweden since World War Two. Why they should be so persistent and widespread even today is difficult to determine. In 1947, when Sweden opened up to modern art, constructivism was strongly represented in the person of Olle Baertling (1911-81) who felt that art should be emptied of all references to things outside it, to the point where a composition that was concerned with surface should even dispense with the canvas. A number of artists reflected his teachings—Karl Gustaf Nilson and Karl Erik Falk among them—and went on to concentrate on colours and on achieving balance in a sculpture's resting points. By contrast, the artist **Gert Marcus**, who was showing at Konstruktiv Tendens this autumn,

revealed new ways of producing forms by colour. His basic principle lies in the notion of disjunction, in making works that cannot be viewed simultaneously, that is, from several viewpoints at once.

Tucked away at one end of Djurgården island, Thielska Galleriet showed recent works by the painter **Pierre Olofsson** (born 1921) in the midst of a beautiful collection of Swedish art works from the late nineteenth century. A member of the group "1947 års män" ("Men of the year 1947"), Olofsson concentrates on the movement of circles and colours on canvas.

However strong the influence of constructivism is in contemporary Swedish art, landscape painting has become almost a part of the national character. The late nineteenth-century Swedish painter Richard Bergh wrote, "Our art must be our culture." It is difficult for young artists in Sweden to avoid the proud tradition of landscape painting, although they seem to be torn between a real attraction to nature and a desire to break free. The artist **Ola Billgren**, whose painting *Panorama of the Oostkant* was bought by Stockholm's Moderna Museet at a sale in New York early this year, detects in landscape "a fictional place and a way of working. I am not really interested in the landscape itself."

Jan Håfström (born 1937), whose show at Lars Bohman gallery was warmly greeted by Swedish critics, seems to have found a way of resolving

this dilemma in a group of new landscape paintings. Next to works stretched between methodically-patterned, square wooden boxes and the carelessly crumbled cloth inside, Håfström returns to an ancient dialogue between man and nature. He creates an ambiguous space where the conflict between nature and culture should disappear, but which hesitates in a melancholy way between memory and oblivion.

The painter **Max Book**, born in 1953, shares a similar desire to abolish the opposition between nature and culture; in fact he says that he "longs to suppress the notion of nature." But his large-format paintings leave one with a sense of landscape behind their more or less geometrical forms and rough planes of colour. Backed by the Engström gallery, Book represents an aesthetic current where landscape tradition dominates, despite the painter's creative opposition to its conventions.

Ola Billgren:
Panorama of the Oostkant, 1988,
oil on canvas,
62 ¾ × 91 ½ in / 157 × 229 cm,
Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Max Book:
Avenue South, 1988,
oil and acrylic on canvas,
40 × 46 in / 100 × 115 cm,
Private Collection