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Per Kirkeby at Tate Modern

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Just who is being murdered in *The Murder in Finnerup Barn*? Painted in 1967, the picture hangs at the start of the Danish artist Per Kirkeby's retrospective at Tate Modern. It makes for an aptly enigmatic introduction to his elusive art. As any Dane knows, its title – *Mordet i Finnerup Lade*, in Danish – refers to the notoriously brutal murder of King Eric Klipping, by Marsk Stig and his men, in a barn in Jutland in the year 1286. But there is little sign of any of that in Kirkeby's abrupt screed of disparate images. There is admittedly some kind of barn or alpine hut, up to its eaves in drippily white painted snow, but the rest is a collage of incongruities – the outline of a flying eagle, an overscaled hiker dressed in eighteenth-century clothes, some join-the-dot minarets and a flurry of polka dots flying through the air like a meteor shower.

For Kirkeby, the real murder victim was the high-minded Danish academic art tradition, with its fondness for civically rousing depictions of ancient historical or classical themes. Presided over by the ghost of Bertel Thorvaldsen – a

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contemporary of Canova whose immense monumental sculptures occupy an entire museum of their own in Copenhagen – the Danish Art Academy was still a powerful albeit conservative force in Denmark in the 1960s. But Kirkeby preferred to forge links with Copenhagen's Experimental Art School and the international Fluxus movement, a loose association of artists dedicated to informal gesture and "anti-art". Diametrically opposed to history painting in the grand manner, *The Murder in Finnerup Barn* is like a poster designed for the Danish Tourist Board by a dyspeptic Pop Artist. It is a statement of intent – a gleeful parody of academic art, designed to demonstrate its incipient overthrow by a new generation of the avant-garde.

Born in 1938, Kirkeby spent much of his early career devising his own version of a deliberately trashy Pop Art style. His *Car Pictures*, a series of paintings from 1964-5, are painted in mixed media on cheap masonite board, a far cry from oil on canvas and doubtless intended to emphasise the artist's angry-young-man rejection of fine art. Cars or fragments of cars are suspended in schematic fragments of landscape which remain, despite their deliberate mangling, reminiscent of Danish fjords and forests. The young Kirkeby drew on imagery from broadcast media, as well as advertising. *The Long-Barrelled Colt* is a four-panelled painting evoking scenes from *Rawhide* or some other head'em up, mov'em out Western TV drama. Four cowboys on horseback confront a desert wilderness. A single rider heads into the depths of Monument Valley. But instead of sand and rock, their world is made of snow and ice. The vigorous handling of paint in such works, and their predominantly moody palette, indicate that Kirkeby never quite severed his links with the nordic past. Even in this quasi-televisual hinterland, the ghosts of Norwegian Romanticism lurk. If this is Pop Art, it speaks with a Scandinavian accent.

Kirkeby emerges from this show as a distinctly slippery fish, determined to evade the trawler nets of art critical category. His work is extremely uneven and his career is marked by abrupt contrasts, deftly mirrored in the hang of Tate Modern's exhibition. A succession of small and deliberately garish collages, pitting snippets of film-stills of Brigitte Bardot against swathes of bright stippled colour, is suddenly succeeded by a series of unexpectedly sullen, monumental canvases. By the second half of the 1970s, Kirkeby had returned to working in oil on canvas, painting a series of vast almost-landscapes in an idiom that evokes American Abstract Expressionism, French Tachisme and the post-war abstractions of Nicolas de Stael in equal measure. *Untitled* of 1979 is a whirling gestural murk within which the single figure of a nude, Thorvaldsen-like warrior can just be made out. *Horse (Pferd)*, of two years later, engulfs a white charger in a morass of hatched and roughly blocked paint. These works are followed by a series of dense little black bronzes, roughly modelled heads or fragments of anatomy. They have a distinctly apocalyptic feel to them, like the burned-out residue of human emotions or energies, but they also evoke the ghosts of such turn-of-the-century sculptors as Rodin and Medardo Rosso.

The trajectory of Kirkeby's career is the clearest indicator of his essential idiosyncrasy. He is revealed by this retrospective as a man determined, or destined, to live out the history of art backwards, beginning as a rebel and then gradually reattaching himself to the traditions that he had spurned in his youth. By the mid-1980s, he is painting enormous neo-Expressionist landscapes, misty expanses of imagined sea and shore, walls of colour that open into unexpected vistas and bursts of sudden radiance. By the end of that same decade he is painting large, upright, mosaic-like forest landscapes that recall the art of the Post-Impressionists, in particular the patched colours and cloisonne blocks of Gauguin's paintings of Martinique and Tahiti. By the mid-1990s, he has gone back another half century, to take on the spirit of the great French Romantic Delacroix, whose *Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople*, of 1840, was clearly the inspiration for Kirkeby's own *Siege of Constantinople* of 1995. This large, headily emotional canvas is one of the most ambitious and impressive pictures in the whole exhibition. Kirkeby

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adopts Delacroix's characteristically rich, bright, dry palette of colours and filters them through his own abstract vocabulary of form. The result is a gloomy reflection on war, the clash between East and West, a picture that suggests the collision of human energies and also resembles a map dripping with blood. Having begun his career by turning his back on the tradition of narrative history painting, here he re-embraces it.

Kirkeby has done much over the years to cultivate the reputation of a coolly reflective and highly intellectual artist – he has, for example, written numerous studies of the artists whom he admires, ranging from Van Gogh and Gauguin to Picasso and beyond – but the development of his art suggests that he is essentially a late Romantic, both deeply attached to the natural world and profoundly unsure of his place in it. “The world is chaotic, physical, incomprehensible – darkening fog,” he remarks in a brief statement reprinted in the catalogue to the exhibition. That would seem to be a reasonable encapsulation of the epistemology implicit in his painting.

Kirkeby is an uneven and often derivative artist, but his derivations suggest a dialogue with the past rather than a series of daylight robberies. The most poignant room of the show is given over to the work of his most recent years, all of it created in the aftermath of the stroke that Kirkeby suffered in 2000. The pictures are all landscapes, of a peculiarly Romantic kind. Some, such as *Plank-Rock* of 2000, suggest the immensities of geological time, the vastness of the Scandinavian glacier-world. Others are more like an insect's-eye-view of plant life, images of riotous plant life that go back, ultimately, to the wide-eyed visions of nature painted by German Romantics such as Philipp Otto Runge at the start of the nineteenth century. As Kirkeby grows older, the pattern of deliberate regression continues. At the heart of his latest work there lurks the old Romantic dream of being absorbed, once and for all, by the mysterious and majestic forces of nature.

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