

Great Dane

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Per Kirkeby

Tate Modern, until 6 September

Last chance to see this intriguing exhibition of paintings and sculptures by one of Denmark's most original artists. Per Kirkeby (born 1938) is little known in this country, though his work was included in the seminal 1981 survey *A New Spirit in Painting*, and there were shows at the Whitechapel in 1985 and the Tate in 1998. Back in the Eighties, I was fortunate to know someone who owned a Kirkeby painting, and that first sparked my interest. Now there's an opportunity to see a large exhibition of his work, laying out the principal areas of his achievement. It's an impressive experience.

In 1957, Kirkeby went to the University of Copenhagen to study natural history, and his early training as a geologist is fundamental to his subsequent work and obsessions as an artist. In particular it explains his interest in the history and structure of landscape, a relationship brought full circle by a major commission he executed in 2004 for a set of murals for Copenhagen's Geological Museum. In 1962 he began to be seriously interested in art, and continued his studies in natural history alongside a burgeoning involvement with painting and experimental art such as film and happenings. To begin with, Kirkeby's art drew sustenance from the revolutionary figures and movements that dominated the international art world of those years, such as Fluxus, Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik. He was nothing if not eclectic.

The Tate's exhibition starts with a room which offers a taste of mature Kirkeby, in the form of a couple of paintings from the 1980s, 'Retrospect 1' and 'The World's Northernmost House'. In both, the surface structuring, like loose linear fencing, part obtrudes on and part creates the imagery. The energetic gestural brushwork and emphatic colour combinations work together to produce a powerful and exciting effect. This is vintage Kirkeby, and has to be experienced rather than dissected. As he wrote in 1991: 'I am a painter and I have painted a painting. And really I don't want to say anything more about it. A picture is not decided by title or explanations — one has to put up with having to "look" at it.'

In that first room there is also a tiny bronze sculpture from 1972 and a couple of more figurative images from the 1960s. In the second room is a group of works on paper and collages and a wall of Kirkeby's own publications — his collected writings. From the start, he has been a prolific writer, publishing poetry, recollections and essays on artists he admires (such as El Greco, Van Gogh and Picasso). His artistic diversity — he has worked as an architect as well as a painter, sculptor and film-maker — make him hard to categorise and have led to the appellation of polymath, which is altogether more positive than 'someone who can't make up his mind'. However, the seriousness of intent is compelling and the sincerity of the work over-rides the urge to categorisation. The viewer is carried along on the surge of Kirkeby's visual invention and rewarded hugely by the experience.

A word of warning: it's a big show of more than 140 exhibits, so if you have only the normal capacity for looking at art, be prepared to skip. Room 3 is full of 1960s Pop-inflected work, replete with Tintin references and cowboy motifs. At this point, Kirkeby went in for groups of pictures, such as 'Architecture Series' or 'The Long-Barrelled Colt', with representational elements set among wayward patterns. There's also a lovely brushy, yet emblematic, abstract painting called 'The Chacs Lose their Bearings'. In Room 4 Kirkeby comes into his own with paintings that are essentially abstract: vigorous brushwork and

occasionally decipherable imagery, but it's mostly a language of painterly gesture, colour-falls and cataracts of marks, expertly and convincingly handled.

Room 5 contains paintings on blackboards and the first series of sculptures, dealing predominantly with arches and apertures. Room 6 presents more of the same but the imagery of the paintings has been simplified, and is at its most extreme in 'Branches to Plank', an effective green and brown poem in line and brush. In Room 7 are just four large paintings from 1983–4, the best of which is the biggest, 'Untitled' (1984), with its fat-bellied figure of orange dominating a dark and cavernous space. More beautiful perhaps is 'Twilight', less dense in imagery, with its lovely pinks, greens and deep blues. Kirkeby is a northern colourist — not a Matissean Mediterranean rainbow-dancer, but a cooler, darker, expressionistic colourist, full of subtlety and danger, offering a different richness of effect.

Room 9 is another key room, containing the group of 'Forest Variations', all of which are worth prolonged study, though the first is the most striking and extraordinary with its cathedral-like windows of darkness (gentian violet) above lilac trunks. Hereafter, Kirkeby develops an exuberance of palette on a vast scale, with magnificent paintings such as 'Flight into Egypt' and 'Portugalia'. When I mentioned Kirkeby to an artist friend, she described this show as 'gentle'. The staccato yet swirling rhythms of 'Portugalia' are anything but gentle, but as Kirkeby himself has noted, 'the light of ambivalence is a heavenly one'. If you don't manage to see it at the Tate, the exhibition will travel to the Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf (26 September 2009 to 10 January 2010). Per Kirkeby deserves our response.