

## When the Woods Begin to Sing

Several decades have passed since I first met Ulf Nilsen and was introduced to his captivating visual universe. The experience was so powerful that it resulted in collaboration on numerous exhibitions through the years. As an artist who thrives on formal and conceptual experimentation, there is always something new to discover in his work. Although he is most widely known as a painter, he is a true multidisciplinary artist who shifts effortlessly between painting, drawing, printmaking, and installations, typically in combination with one another, and often complemented by poetry.

With this exhibition, loosely translated from Norwegian as *The Root of Everything*, he enters a new phase in an artistic practice that continues to be centered around existential questions about one's place in the universe. As ever, these paintings evoke eternal questions about humanity, nature, and spirituality. We can enjoy a rich and complex visual language that is both immediately recognizable and full of surprises. It's like reading a favorite author whose language and voice is familiar while the content and narrative are new. References to literature and poetry, which have always been important for Nilsen, are still essential elements in his work. Picking up the thread where he left off, he sews everything together into a coherent narrative.

Looking back on Nilsen's artistic practice it's easy to see the logical progression between works. The most powerful symbolism appears repeatedly, and particularly in this case, the imagery is replete with references to the sky, the earth, and the ocean. We find ourselves in familiar terrain among these paintings that address themes about life and death, the passing of time, survival, and hope. As the exhibition title suggests, it's all about what lies beneath the surface. If there is humor in the act of painting a portrait of a fish head, the text that appears on the left side of *The Root of Everything, II* (2019) suggests something far more ambiguous and serious. In large block letters, which almost scintillate against the background painted in soft green, blue and pink hues, it reads: "A fish swims in the depths of everything. Because I fear that you will emerge naked 'fish' I cast a veil of pictures over you". These words, borrowed from the Italian poet and philosopher Lanza del Vasto, speak of an artist who strives to find the perfect balance between philosophical and poetic elements. There is a deep resonance to this statement that evokes a sense of vulnerability, while the soft colors of the water come across, as alluded to in the poem, as a safe, protective environment. It seems that this fish has eyes that not only see, but that somehow possess knowledge, reminiscent of the birds that appear in other paintings.

To provide deeper insight into Nilsen's most recent work, I would like to revisit one of his earlier exhibitions, *Sentimento del Tempo*, which took place at Henie Onstad Art Center in 2002. As an exhibition that conveyed the intricacies of a personal journey through time, wherein the ever-shifting balance between dream and reality was

powerfully expressed, the similarities to his current work are quite relevant. Nearly twenty years later, his works still convey the resonance of various events, both natural and man-made. He continues the seemingly never-ending process of constructing and deconstructing a vision of the world we live in. While the passing of time is an important leitmotif throughout his work, the actual passing of time, and the decades that separate his early works from his more recent works, adds additional layers of meaning to the existential themes throughout.

Although many poets have inspired Nilsen through the years, Italo Calvino is among the most important. The underlying ambiguity and an interest in existential, philosophical questions, aspects which define Calvino's voice as an author, continue to be key elements in Nilsen's imagery. In particular, Calvino's book *Invisible Cities* has been an important source of inspiration for Nilsen and provides valuable insight into his ongoing practice. When we relate Nilsen's work to Calvino, the multiple meanings of various recurring symbols emerge even more clearly. Briefly summarized, *Invisible Cities* is the story of Marco Polo who recounts to Kublai Khan about the many cities he has traveled during his voyages, which don't exist in reality - only in the narrator's imagination. All the descriptions are of Venice, described in infinite ways. Similarly, we can see strong recurring elements throughout Nilsen's work and realize that these are various descriptions of what is essentially the same - accounts of a life journey.

The chaos created by natural disaster, strongly visualized throughout Nilsen's work, also sets the tone in his new paintings. Massive tree trunks lie overturned, cut up, and cut into. Branches lie strewn about and entangled, and skinny, naked trees stand alone in barren landscapes, all suggesting that doomsday is imminent. And yet, amid all the destruction, almost miraculously, hope and beauty shine through. Throughout his compositions he often places visual elements together in unusual ways, leaving it up to the viewer to sort through the debris to find order in the chaos. Opposing factors create tension and balance throughout: darkness and light; strength and vulnerability; destruction and repair. This is the realm of the senses, where moods and meanings can change as quickly as the weather. He continues to capture the quiet vacuum that occurs after a tragedy, but now we seem to be one step closer to hope, reconciliation and healing. We have moved beyond the immediate silence that cuts through the aftermath of a storm to the moment of complete serenity when the woods begin to sing.

The first volume of Trygve Gulbrandsen's renowned trilogy, *Beyond Sing the Woods*, was an important source of inspiration for this exhibition, and is also used as the title for four of the paintings. Similar to how Claude Monet painted the same motif repeatedly, focusing on variations in light and shadow during different seasons and at various times of day, Nilsen has painted four versions of the same image. Each

painting is divided into three sections, where the upper and lower sections are painted as color fields. In two of the paintings a full moon appears in the upper color field. Barely visible against the blood red background in one painting, it practically lights up the entire canvas and sheds moonlight on the birds in the purple-colored night painting. In the most peaceful image in this series, painted in subtle hues of light green and peach, the pigeons have been transformed to doves. The color fields both frame and complement the main image of birds that balance on the branches of a fallen tree. Nilsen brings us deep into the forest where we can fully enjoy the purely formal aspects of these paintings: the contrast between various colors and the intricate play between figurative and abstract elements. He has let go of any constraints, allowing himself to really play with the paintbrush. The results are seen in fascinating nuances of light and color, such as a tree trunk that is camouflaged into the landscape. Trees are everywhere, and in one painting the rough texture of the canvas blends completely with the paint, which brilliantly evokes actual tree bark. Moonlight casts a beautiful veil over everything, reminiscent of the protective cape for the fish. Here, the birds' eyes are the absolute focal point of the painting. Painted with utmost precision and detail, they are so realistic that they almost come across as windows into their world.

Before delving into other works in the exhibition, it's worthwhile to consider the similarities to Trygve Gulbrandsen's *Beyond Sing the Woods*. Most interesting in relation to Nilsen's paintings isn't the plot itself, but the mood that Gulbrandsen evokes and his ability to convey the wonder and awe of the woods in the most poetic of terms. His descriptions of stones, rocks, branches and trees, and detailed accounts of shifts in the weather, from the eye of a storm to the subsequent clearing, are reminiscent of the enigmatic and unsettling mood that looms throughout Nilsen's paintings. They both transform the inexplicable into something beautiful and poetic, allowing ample room for reflection. They both lead us to the farthest reaches of nature where we can experience the aftermath of various events. Although it shouldn't be taken too literally, Gulbrandsen's prose has a visual counterpart in Nilsen's paintings: "Many had seen a warning in the colors of the sky this evening - it predicted blood and disaster, yes one person claimed to have seen a burning, bloody sword in the sky, and others did too". Above all, they share a gift for capturing what is simultaneously unsettling and awe-inspiringly beautiful.

Throughout Nilsen's paintings the serene beauty of nature is often offset by industrial and urban references, perhaps nowhere more visibly than in *Tree Stump in Lampedusa* (2020). This painting was inspired by the tragedy that took place October 3, 2013 when three hundred and sixty-six migrants from Eritrea died on a boat that sank off the coast of Lampedusa. Although this very specific reference isn't immediately apparent, the painting beautifully conveys a sense of the unbearable aftermath of such a tragedy. The gentle colors of the sky shine through a broken metal

fence where a small twig is inexplicably stuck in the fence. A carved tree stump appears to be a makeshift chair, and evokes a strange, overwhelming sense of human absence. Although the tree stump seems both weird and misplaced, it's easy to imagine someone taking the time to create a place of refuge in this barren, inhospitable setting where the asylum center was already completely full even before this human tragedy took place. The graffiti, consisting mostly of what appear to be Greek symbols and characters, further emphasizes the enigmatic undertone. Fragility, vulnerability, and loss cast a heavy veil over the painting while spirituality is subtly referenced through the symbol of a cross scratched into the wall. Surprisingly enough, all it took to provide a glimmer of hope was a small hole in the fence.

A wealth of symbols enriches the paintings, creating a coherent narrative from image to image. The paintings speak clearly together as a direct result of the many formal and thematic similarities, as well as the enigmatic symbolism throughout. From fish in the sea to birds in the forest, and trees in various states of growth and decay, from tree trunk to stump, branch, and twig. In *Departure* (2021) two trees stand in an empty landscape and serve to frame a field of abstraction where the sky is painted in black, iridescent green, and golden beige. Once again, the composition is clearly divided into three clear sections, further emphasizing the correlation between sky, earth, and water. In front lies a boat without oars, with the suggested contours of a smaller boat that is nestled within and protected by the bigger boat. These details stand in powerful contrast to the cobweb-like pattern in the blue-green water, which in turn plays against Nilsen's formal approach to the depiction of water in other works, such as *At the Bottom of Everything* (2019-20), an underwater motif where fish swim in a gorgeous sea of colors and light.

*Fragment of Time* (2019) brings me back to Gulbrandsen again, especially where he writes, "... one might think that huge trees grew out of the flat ground in minutes". In Nilsen's painting we see two small plants that seem to have grown from nothing, a pile of porcelain bowls to the left, and some massive steel beams in the middle that divide the composition in two. The abandoned steel beams counterbalance the fragile porcelain bowls and stand in stark contrast to the overall quiet and serenity of this painting. The result is a fascinating play between complementary and opposing factors. Just as in a dream, the completely inexplicable is combined with the quotidian and the absurd. In the middle of this barren landscape, perhaps an abandoned industrial wasteland, the light creates a beautiful pattern of pastel colors against the sand. The weeds that balance on the edge of a deep hole are compelling signs of nature's ability to survive.

*In the Eye of Time* (2021) is inspired by the earthquakes and tsunami that ravaged Indonesia in 2018, when hundreds of people died, and thousands were left homeless. Although the painting refers specifically to events that occurred in Indonesia, it also

has universal relevance. Again, the messages relate to abandonment, decay, and destruction. The image is dominated by an entangled mess of telephone wires that practically vibrate with tension, and telephone poles that seem just about to disappear into the earth. The wires also extend outside of the clearly demarcated circle in the middle, thereby emphasizing the wider impact of the natural disaster that has just occurred. The single red traffic light shines brightly in the debris, evoking the moment when everything vibrated and suddenly came to a standstill ... that moment when the telephone poles "bent like straws in the wind" as Gulbrandsen might have described it and when buildings were suddenly torn to the ground and the road split in two. If we were to continue along this ravaged road, we might arrive at a place like the ghost town in *Landscape with Drifting Clouds* (2020). Perhaps it's daybreak, on the next day after the dust has settled. As with the other paintings in this exhibition, people are completely absent, and I would like to imagine that they have fled from the catastrophe. Again, there is a glimmer of hope in the light that shines against a white surface, possibly a makeshift shelter made from tarpaulin.

The forces of nature take over completely in *When Night Becomes Day* (2020). Not only does this painting depict a natural disaster, but it also appears to have been physically exposed to rain, similar to how Edvard Munch exposed his paintings to the elements. In some areas, especially where the teal blue paint is darkest, it looks as if the painting has been drenched in water. There is a violent yet beautiful force to this enigmatic, dreamlike painting. Here Nilsen captures the all-encompassing power of nature, where earthquake, flood, tsunami, and avalanche seem to be taking place simultaneously. The perfect combination of abstract and figurative elements creates an exciting visual play across the entire canvas. He recreates the magic of a dream combined with vague memories from the past wherein the illogical plays against the logical, the absurd against the quotidian. Amid all the destruction, a fort stands steady and solid, beautifully lit by the early morning sun on the horizon. Again, light provides a glimmer of hope in the darkness and suggests the fort's possible function as a place of shelter and protection.

The final work in the exhibition, *Autumn Sonate's Partitur* (2021), brings everything together into a glorious crescendo. As with several other works in the exhibition the painting is divided into three distinct parts. In this case, a color field painted in sage green divides and unifies the verdant summer landscape at the top and the fallen birch with autumn leaves that lies at the bottom of the composition. Moving beyond the heaviness of themes connected to the passage of time, the mood is utterly serene and peaceful. Summer and autumn are depicted, not in opposition to one another, but in complete and perfect harmony, thereby conveying a message of acceptance, hope and spiritual insight. It's hard to imagine a more suitable endnote to an exhibition that conveys hope and insight amid all the destruction. Suddenly, everything makes sense, also in relation to Gulbrandsen's deep understanding of

nature: "When he turned his face west toward the sun and stared into the golden ray of light, seemingly endless against the dark black clouds, it was as if he caught a glimpse of heaven".