

## THE SEA GIVES AND THE SEA TAKES

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Tradition has it, that fishermen in the Stockholm archipelago did not learn to swim. This was not so much a question of ignoring their personal safety as an acceptance of what life taught them: that to become one with the sea was no worse a threat than to end their days as a landlubber.

I am sometimes reminded of this seemingly uncomplicated philosophy of life when I look at Ann Frössén's paintings of raging seas – mighty landscapes that seem as timelessly existential as they are naturally embedded in the Romantic idea of nature being unfathomable and sublime. She is one of the few women painters who dares to enter this very male preserve.

Getting closer to water and the sea involves trying to stop something that is never still. Ann Frössén often returns to this paradox of catching the constant movements of the sea at close quarters on canvas. Viewed from the perspective of art history she is on solid ground with roots that reach down into a lengthy and wide-ranging northern European romantic tradition. Artists like Caspar David Friedrich, William Turner and Emil Nolde worshipped the watery element and raised the immeasurable seas to a symbol of eternity of almost religious dimensions.

My thoughts also turn to a fellow Swede, the author August Strindberg whose harrowed and feverish paintings of Stockholm's archipelago form a link to the tensions in Ann Frössén's paintings about a hundred years later.

But the question remains: How can Ann Frössén's roaring wave-crests and restlessly breaking seas be translated into words? How can one find a maritime language with the capacity to cover the nuances and gradations of her paintings and the experiences of life that she portrays? In one breath I seem to have captured the words and the concepts but, with the next breath, I am forced to watch them slip through my fingers, transform themselves and assume entirely new forms. Perhaps, like Joseph Conrad, one needs to go to sea in order to be able to approach a monsoon or trade-winds convincingly and with the necessary precision. No one has equalled this Polish-born, British nomad of the seas in his ability to describe what it feels like to meet a furious sea in the depths of Hades all alone.

One thing is incontestable: Ann Frössén's intimate struggle with the water bears witness of a courage and desire to penetrate the very foundation of life. She portrays a chaotic interior and, for this reason, it does not seem relevant to classify her work as marine- or landscape painting. She does not share the marine painters' striving to document minutely the movements of the water and the play of light upon it. Consequently she never makes use of preliminary sketches or photographs, instead the motifs are created directly on the canvas.

Ann Frössén describes the method as an urge to defend the unique image and a resistance to duplicate what has already been done or seen. There are no echoes of post-modernist pretensions about art as palimpsest or the recycling of earlier images in the way she relates to her work. There is nothing here but a naked formulation of a state of crisis.

Childhood experiences played an important role in her becoming an artist and it is no secret that the paintings of thundering seas and foaming swells also fill a therapeutic need. Raised in an upper class home in the wealthy Stockholm suburb of Djursholm she speaks of tensions in the family, of an icy coldness and a feeling of alienation. Painting involved very significant risks on the psychological level. "It was like throwing oneself into freezing deep water."

When she was small she was terrified of suddenly being thrown headfirst down the

stairs. In the early 1990s the motif of the stairs with hard, angular and narrow steps is recurring in her paintings. The step from stairs to wave-crests is not long and, at about the same time, she approached the most threatening image of all: the precipice and the ocean.

A certain familiarity with the study of water during the 1980s had been acquired by painting abstract visions of violent, looming skies in an expressionist spirit. This was followed by works that were more true to reality and by dramatic paintings of waterfalls in strongly contrasting tones of white and dark green. At this time she was much concerned with a spiritual enquiry that took her to Catholic circles in communist Warsaw and to a convent in Naples. The paintings from this period are characterized by an ecstatic and elevated vitality in which one can trace ideas about salvation and redemption.

Even if the religious quest has become less apparent in recent years; or, more correctly, has been amalgamated into the work, her latest paintings with their flashing, radiant white crests of waves seem to give a foretaste of an explanatory light.

Ann Frössén paints herself into the present – a time that has done away with ideologies, that has torn down the statues of ancient heroes and has thrown overboard the values of our ancestors. We live in a world without boundaries in which everything seems possible but this entails a freedom and openness that can be difficult to deal with. In her painting it is as though she wants to pull away Veronica's sudarium and expose a state of turbulence, dissolution and chaos.

What was initially a psychic impression on canvas has assumed a somewhat different content with reflections on global threats and the problematic state of the world's water resources.

Ann Frössén talks in dystopian terms of the fact that the world's water, like its oil, will soon be reduced to a financially or politically tradable commodity. She warns us of the risk ahead that poisoning the seas will be a weapon of warfare. In conjunction with her exhibitions in Poland and in the Baltic states, we are reminded of the irresponsible way that we treat the Baltic Sea – the chemical factories that let untreated water flow into the sea and numerous shipwrecks that contaminate the sea-bed.

The palette in these paintings consists of subdued colours with a fundamental tone that is at home among gale-warnings and grey solemnity. Above this fundamental tone, the expression ranges from an aggressive mustard yellow and olive green to nuances of blue, turquoise and pink.

In her use of white she does not copy those many other painters who reduce it to a non-colour. In Ann Frössén's work the brilliant titanium-white has many meanings, from sharp, nasty and threatening to tender and sensuous. But it is no accident that white is the colour of weddings and of funerals or, for that matter, of innocence and arsenic.

Each painting consists of more than 50 layers of paint – from the inky dark ground to the final washes of transparent pink or grey. The oil based medium was exchanged for acrylic paints some years ago due to environmental reasons. The watersoluble acrylics allow a greater directness and flexibility which suits an intuitive way of painting well.

Anyone familiar with Ann Frössén's work will also have noticed that the paintings have become gradually larger. Several of her latest canvases measure two by three metres and are executed in both vertical and horizontal formats. The foam of the waves sometimes seems about to burst the picture plane and in some paintings one often senses an almost volcanic pressure. This desire to physically occupy a space can be seen as a natural development of Ann Frössén's background as a set-designer.

The canvases with their breaking waves and their splashing swells do not just give one an architectonic experience but are also reminiscent of watching a scene in a film. The eye sweeps across the room whose walls are entirely filled with paintings. In recent years large video projections of swirling masses of water have also been incorporated into her exhibitions, leading us directly into the unrestrained eye of the storm with seas that shut out what is irrelevant.

But being surrounded in this manner does not entail a merely painterly and sonic embrace. There is also something creepy and unpleasant in the room evoking the moods in films by Alfred Hitchcock and Ingmar Bergman. Both directors use a psychological language that Ann Frössén relates to her own life and to the dark character of her art.

As a little girl, she would sit unobserved in the darkness of the staircase at the family home and watch the Hitchcock films being shown on TV – the set newly purchased in connection with the introduction of TV-broadcasting in Sweden in 1956. Ann Frössén remembers images that swept past: slippery steps, rain and thunderstorms and, not least, the destructive confusion that arises when people fundamentally misunderstand each other. This was an atmosphere that she could recognize from her own experience. The grey scale and the ominous sweeps of the camera in these films are something that can be noticed as a subdued basic cord into her own art.

In Ann Frössén's painting the surface movements of the waves are shown with no chance of immediate escape; not even the merest tongue of land in sight. The dangers of life are portrayed and with neither lifeline or safety net we face the precipitous and menacing chasms. There is no room for sunny beaches. On the contrary, we are led into fear and a sense of abandonment. Only thus, she seems to be saying, do we attain knowledge of self.

Owing perhaps to a lack of imagination we look for a focus somewhere in the middle of the paintings, a place on which to fix our attention. But the very visible break between two waves is often to be found in a sunlit, diagonal movement towards the upper corner of the painting. We are constantly presented with new pictorial solutions and perspectives in what seems to be the same thundering sea.

Some canvases seem almost ethereal, with classically elegant details like fine, embroidered lace. But after viewing them for a while, everlarger breaches become apparent in these strange seascapes. Steep, rocky formations, wild tree-tops and tender creeping plants covered in hoar-frost or dried salt appear like mirages in the painting *Everywhere*.

At times, as in her painting *The Branch*, the incoming waves transport a solitary branch that is aimlessly tossed on the tops of the waves: forwards, backwards and to the side. In other paintings Ann Frössén has drawn the contours of an outstretched hand or a partially hidden eye. The extended fingers act equally as a confident sign of victory and an anxiety-laden cry for help. Yet other works seem to have been caught by the frost or to be cast in thick layers of ice.

Working on such a large scale necessitates special techniques and in the studio Ann Frössén normally uses a ladder. Otherwise it is impossible to reach the entire span of waves. During the final phase she descends the ladder to view the painting from a distance. It is time for the laborious task of "sorting things" – a meticulous revision whereby various waves and chasms are forced to change direction and new washes are added to conceal the old ones.

In this extensive reworking she makes full use of opposites. Out of order she creates chaos, but equally, turns chaos into order. To the eye these additions may seem accidental – a colour accent here or there – but every brushstroke is carefully thought out. No crest of a wave, no point must remain lifeless.

Over the years her paintings have been shown in environments that have a connection with water and the sea. The exhibition *Mare Animae*, for example, toured a succession of maritime museums in Sweden, the Baltic States, Poland, Denmark and Germany – museums that one does not usually associate with painting or art in general. But this has been a conscious choice and she speaks of the adventure of meeting a new, broad public: people who are interested in the sea or generally curious but who are not always familiar with contemporary art.

TV and radio producers like to accompany a poem or a meditative mood with a

seascape or a bubbling mountain brook. But in recent times water has also come to be associated with catastrophes of almost apocalyptic dimensions, such as the sinking of the Estonia in the Baltic with the loss of over 800 lives or the Tsunami disaster that struck much of Asia during Christmas 2004.

For Ann Frössén oceans and seas – sometimes even a waterfall – contain all these dimensions. Despite the subdued and serious mode of expression, she paints in order to generate vital energy and inspiration. “If I can survive close to deep waters then I know that other people can do it too.”

Confronted with all these paintings of sea and yet more sea, another question spontaneously arises: what happens beyond the canvas? Maybe a battle at sea, with people in peril on a capsized raft just as the ropes that hold it together part company with a terrifying roar? This knowledge is secret and can possibly be ignored. In other words, the paintings do not distinguish themselves very much from life in general. When something actually happens in our surroundings we are often not there but find ourselves a little to the side, like spectators somewhere on the horizon; a thought that may seem frustrating.

But something remarkable happens when one is faced with these paintings of fusion and transformation. In the seascape we feel ourselves to be part of a larger life cycle and community; a section of nature, though certainly an unpredictable one. Yet it seems as though we cannot help being possessed by the magnificence and the simplicity.

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