

**SALON
DJURHUUS**

MUNKERUPHUS

CONVERSATION WITH A COLLECTOR

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Interpretation can make art worse

Leif is not too keen on academic texts as far as art is concerned. I ask him why, and he explains that he often feels art historians tend to over-interpret what art is really about. That they read something into it that is not really there. Really, he is also quite ambivalent himself when it comes to the interpretation of the works he owns, but if you have to interpret, at least you can emphasize that you do not know whether the artist thought the same, he explains.

For Leif, art is first and foremost an expression of a life lived concurrently with his own, and that is why he buys works of art. Because they touch upon the most essential elements of life, right here, right now. Because he recognizes something, or because it touches him or even challenges him. Death and war. Sex and love. Beauty and corruption. Money and power. Black vs. white, man vs. woman, poor vs. rich. All the tensions that control us as human beings and will always be a part of life for us. Take Sven Dalsgaard, for instance, says Leif, his conceptual art makes it quite clear: He has made 12 tables with his own 12 commandments. This is what the artist wants to boil all of life down to. Leif owns six of these tables: Money. Heaven. Is. I. Dick. Snatch. All the words are written in gold letters on a black background, simple and meticulous. Other parties own the remaining six tables with the titles: *Earth, Sun, God, Jesus, Love and Amen.*

He is deeply, deeply concentrated

Leif has a close personal relationship to many of his works, and he can return to them again and again. We are sitting in his living room where the walls are

adorned with art from floor to ceiling. Above the window, I recognize one of Raymond Pettibon's drawings of a baseball player waiting to hit the ball. He is ready at the bat, tense, with quivering thighs, and you sense that the ball is just about to come flying towards him. The pressure. The expectations. The fear. But he is also in complete control, says Leif leaning slightly forward. He screws up his eyes, and struggles a little bit with the words from sheer excitement when he needs to get his point across. It is easy to see that Pettibon overdoes it: The baseball player's thighs are grotesquely big, muscular and almost comical. But the fact that he manages to convey the concentration, so I feel it too, that is what is so fantastic, says Leif.

So he simply resigns from society

Leif's life is filled with legal clauses. Rules and laws that must be strictly adhered to. Part of what he likes about his job as a lawyer is the freedom to counsel, to point out what is good and what is bad – and the freedom to say no. Because some things are just not possible. You need to keep within the established framework.

In art, however, almost anything is allowed. And yet artists also relate to the laws and conventions of society. Some are morbidly critical; others use humour to make the critique more understandable. That is what Pettibon does, and that is what Jes Brinch does who is also opposed to the society and the art world that surrounds him. He made the work *Resigning from Society*, for instance, consisting of a formula you fill in, if you want to give up your citizenship, your right to vote, your social security number and your access to public utilities such as gas, water and sewage. By doing so, you also cancel your obligations to the bailiff's office, the police and the tax authorities. Of course, you cannot do really that, says Leif laughing, but it is a nice thought sometimes

Sex is a natural part of life

There are many things you are not allowed to do. Things that are frowned upon and things we just do not talk about. Leif is not a prude. You can tell from his art collection. We are looking at a painting by the American artist Chris Johanson, depicting a black and a white man having sex together. And when Leif displays such a painting out in the open, it is not just because it has been given the stamp of approval in various art books since he bought it. Works by Johanson are a significant part of the collection, because his naïve style highlights the oddity of human life today. He shows the modern world, as Leif also perceives it; a society that is

ever more antagonistic and polarized. People are self-absorbed and busy taking care of their own needs and defending their own beliefs. Johanson shows us the seamy side of life, just like many other artists represented in the collection. These works show us the battles we are forced to fight. It is the conditions of life pushed to extremes, Leif explains.

Awful to think about, but beautiful to look at

That something can be at once ugly and beautiful to look at, characterizes many of the works included in the collection. In the painting *Grey History* by the Romanian painter Adrian Ghenie, we see a band of uniformed soldiers on the edge of a cliff – and they are surrounded by nothing. It is a barren, disillusioned painting, grey on grey, just like the collective mood in the wake of the Eastern-European dictatorships.

Leif goes on to talk about Ghenie and the painting *The Collector*, which is one of the works he regrets the most not having bought. The gallery simply would not sell the work to him because he was not a “museum”. It is a painting of a corpulent man in a white jacket sitting in his library filled with works of art leaning against the walls. He explains how the rendition of this man makes him think of Hermann Göring. For Leif, this gives the painting a completely different meaning and adds a new dimension to it. In his opinion, the painting might as well have been titled *The Dictator* and meant to symbolize oppression and the Romanian past. And it is brilliantly painted, says Leif. Awful to think about, but beautiful to look at.

I was more reckless in my acquisitions 20 years ago, Because i was more reckless myself

There are many big names in Leif’s collection, but there are also many artists he would describe as overlooked. Jes Brinch. Peter Holst Henckel. Nonetheless, he is just as fond of them and he has always cultivated up-and-coming artists. He has, however, become more retrospective in recent years, he says, and more selective. More focussed on the artists he neglected to buy 20 years ago, Pettibon, Nuboyoshi Araki and others.

Nevertheless, he still follows his heart when he buys art. Even if abstract art is not in vogue at the moment, he has recently bought a work by the young artist Mette Winckelmann, who he has kept an eye on for years now. We go on to talk about Poul Gernes, who was never an obvious choice for the critical part of the art world, and yet Leif has bought several works by him through the years. An artist

who developed a style of his own and did not give a damn that all other artists were busy making 'critical' art. Leif is so fond of him, simply because he likes his work. Decorative, yes, but why is that so terrible? And then there is the signature. When you look at a work and instantly recognize that it is a Gernes. Just like Leif is able to tell, even just at a fleeting glance, that it is Pettibon who drew the baseball player, ready at the bat up there above the window.

Of course it gives you joy to own something

Leif enjoys contemplating art in museums, but there is greater joy in having a work of art in your own home where you can have a much closer and more personal relationship to it. To be able to move the artworks around and create new experiences in your own home, to lie there in your bed and look at T. M. Davy's dark, manly *Reclining Nude* from 2011 instead of some flat screen TV on the wall. To have art truly under your skin in everyday life.

And then there is the hunt, of course: To spot something exciting, something new and maybe even a little dangerous. You can compare it to the joy of rummaging through a flea market finding a little gem. To look for quality, to seek it out, track it down and enjoy it again and again at home.

We sit there in silence for a while, looking at the works around us. Kentridge's drawings of South Africa's controversial history, Metinides' photos of fatal accidents, Martinez' still life cactus painting and Chris Johanson's images of Man's inner monologues. Life and death. Money, power and desire. In the opening into the room behind us, a red door has been installed with a lengthwise leaf from Gernes' decoration of Borgen Publishers in Valby.

We speak briefly about the impossibility of knowing how many of the works in the collection that will come to survive and stand the test of time. One thing is for certain, Leif's belief in them all. God only knows how many will survive, he concludes, but they have certainly been alive for me.