

# CON AMORE

LEIF DJURHUUS SAMLING



## IN VANITAS VERITAS

### MEETING THE COLLECTOR

BY SANNE FLYVBJERG, CURATOR WITH THE DJURHUUS COLLECTION

All collections reflect their collector, it is said, and I should hasten to say that even the first encounter with Leif Djurhuus testified to a man who is comfortable in the borderlands where contrasts meet. We first met in an office where case files lay side by side with works of art. A pile of paper on the windowsill stood next to the Polish artist Robert Kusmirowski's ship journeying to the realm of the dead; a small, dilapidated wooden boat manned by a skeleton. Behind the windowpanes real ships could be seen – albeit in a rather less morbid vein: The DFDS ferries at the Copenhagen Port; the Oslo ferry, to be accurate. There could be no doubt that art and life were intimately entwined in this man's existence.

Moving art around, touching it, having it as part of one's tangible reality in the office – these are not exactly things you are used to as an art historian. And indeed I have frequently found my notions about art falling short after my encounter with Leif – not just because of the sudden proximity. As art historians we work with defining art, putting it into words, pointing out certain trends across history and theory. But we are also used to encountering works that have been selected for our books and thereby rendered legitimate – officially stamped as art that has something. Leif explains that he has a particular fondness for emerging art, for the young artists who have not yet begun repeating themselves, but who explore and experiment and dare. Whether that particular artist amounts to very much will be seen in time. At any rate he is not that interested in labels, for art decides for itself when it is art, he says.

The next stop was his building in Valby, a Copenhagen suburb, and over the course of the following months we collected works from several storage facilities, placing them on shelves: Formalist paintings and stringent conceptual pieces are placed side by side with sculptures made of melted plastic, a tattooed computer, or a bloody skull hidden in an orange plastic bag from Esprit. And then there were all the boxes of various bits and pieces. On several occasions I had to ask whether what I was holding was art. The objects that were not art were placed in the basement with the also-growing collection of flea market finds and curios. Having completed this task, it only remained to sort and categorise the vast store of art to the best of our ability – which involved handling around a couple of thousand works.

#### THE FACT OF TRANSCIENCE

Some believe that art is characterised by serving no purpose. Some might think that the same thing applies to life: perhaps it is just one long



Dash Snow  
*Moments Like These Never Last*, 2005  
 C-print foto / c-print photo  
 51 x 51 cm

Enrique Metinides  
*Adela Legaretta Rivas is struck by a white Datsun on Avenida Chapultepec, Mexico City 29. april, 1979*  
 Farvefoto / colour photo  
 51 x 61 cm

meaningless march towards death. In connection with his exhibition *Genfærd (Ghosts)* at ARoS Christian Lemmerz stated that we might conceive of our powerlessness and ignorance in the face of death as the main reason why art is made at all. Leif Djurhuus' own fascination with death is also clearly evident in his collection, and to cap it all off he has already commissioned his tombstone from Lemmerz. He would prefer to get it in advance so that he could enjoy it before he leaves this mortal coil. Life and death are entwined.

Transience has been a subject of fascination within the arts for ages, also fuelling many of our vain manoeuvres in life. The concept of "vanitas" is most closely associated with a particular type of 17th century Northern European painting that shows arrangements of skulls, fruit, and hourglasses, and such paintings serve as an excellent springboard for delving into some of the issues addressed by this collection. "Vanitas" is Latin for vanity, and within the realm of painting it is closely associated with mortality, with the transience of human existence. Vanity is an inherent trait of our human senses and of the sheer surplus we experience in life, all the glossy images evoking desire. Yet all beauty fades, and even though the lush flower arrangements, lavish dishes and clusters of fruit are paraded on expensive dishes, the dead natural elements in the images testify to the decay of all things: Skulls and bones are paraded alongside tantalising luxury, and occasionally dead insects or overripe fruits will be found on the edge of the images.

Modern Western society is a society of surplus: We have a surplus of food, of clothes and jewellery, of materials, media, and advertising – and hence also a glut of garbage and decay. Many young artists incorporate this surplus in their art, giving it new and at times somewhat bizarre expression such as in the US artist's group Dearthdrop's hunting trophy: A stag's head with its antlers painted in neon hues, wearing plastic glasses that play techno music. Objects that by rights point in very different directions are combined, their oddity captured. In Taylor McKimens' painting *Cactus Tangle* precisely such an unsightly mess is gathered together in a modern still life featuring several cacti growing uncontrollably amongst debris such as cigarette butts, darts, and cassette tapes. In Jodie Carey the vanitas concept has been twisted in a sculpture where roses and bones have not been arranged on a table, but grow inside a pillar of tables placed on top of each other. Nowhere, however, is death rendered more explicit in this collection than in Enrique Metinides's photographs of fatal accidents, capturing traffic accidents and gas explosions in eerie frozen images that are aesthetically pleasing, yet repulsive. Similarly, Dash Snow's photographs from the American underground also confronts us with scenarios that most of us would prefer to avoid: the Ku Klux Klan alive and well, homeless people ambling aimlessly around the urban space, or the artist himself covered in blood after a fight. All of these signify life on the edge leading up to the final moment where things can go wrong and lives be lost.

#### ABSURD STORIES

The collection also holds many portraits of human beings exploring their own identity. The portraits manifest "something", some human trait, even if it takes the form of such grim nihilism as the one evident in one of Jes Brinch's paintings showing a figure with the top of his skull tipped back like a lid revealing that there is nothing inside. Man is entirely empty. It is sad, but certainly also humorous – in all its absurdity. Chris Johanson's tragic-comical figures move through urban spaces and landscapes in search of a higher meaning that quite simply is not there. They are all talking in an effort to convince themselves of the truth of what they say and do. "Christ IS real", says one woman with folded hands, as if needing to convince herself, while other figures in other images pray to Allah, perform yoga, have sex, or snort coke. Each individual has his or her own truth – but they are all joined by their common search for a truth. Like many other of the young American artists featured in the exhibition, Johanson spent his youth in underground scenes such as the skater and graffiti scenes where artistic communities arose as alternatives to social convention.

And then there are those artists who, in the wake of war and oppression, have become disillusioned by discovering that authorities do not necessarily tell the truth about a country's history. The Polish artist Robert Kusmirowski rummages through history to find replicas, travelling in time through art. He constructs bunkers, graveyards, and portraits that look old without being old, evoking vivid tales about a past that never existed. The films and drawings of the South African artist William Kentridge also address history, albeit in a very different way. His characters Soho Eckstein and Felix Teitlebaum personify South African society, and the artist uses his drawing technique – drawing and erasing repeatedly within the same work in order to present a cohesive sequence of events – to show how the country struggles with the dilemma of its Apartheid past; how it is forced to simultaneously remember and forget. A nation which, like so many others, has suffered under the human desire for power and glory. But the art shows how even the most voluptuous of bouquets will eventually wither, and that proud and arrogant acts turn out to have fatal consequences.

#### IMPRINTS OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE

The more I have become immersed in unpacking and cataloguing Leif Djurhuus' collection, the more I have realised that the act of collecting art is compounded of the love of art and the love of collecting. The cabinet of curiosities often constitutes a private microcosm that reflects the universal macrocosm. During the Renaissance collectors would gather the forms taken by the world, and in addition to natural treasures such as plants and rocks they would also collect pieces made by human hands, such as art. The Djurhuus Collection is not a cabinet of curiosities in this sense, but it does constitute a gathering of images of contemporary life as expressed in art and selected by the



Chris Johanson  
*Untitled, (I Like it Here)*, 2000  
Akryl på papir / acrylic on paper  
63 x 96 cm

William Kentridge  
*Soho Eating*, 1989  
Kul og pastel på papir / charcoal and pastel on paper  
110 x 118 cm

collector in a kind of subjective encyclopaedia. The works encompass countless references to art history: To Pop Art and its incorporation of images from adverts and comic books; to Abstract Expressionism with its broad brushstrokes, to Surrealism and its keen interest in the subconscious, but also further back to medieval painting as is evident in the works of e.g. Richard Colman and Kusmirowski. The quotes are many, some of them as overt as in TM Davy's *Kalup, Reclining Nude*, where a black transvestite reclines on a couch, mimicking countless depictions of Venus from throughout art history. Virtually everything is permitted within contemporary art, and this is borne out by this rich and varied collection.

Leif himself describes the collection as random, but nevertheless there appears to be obvious common denominators. The vast majority of works are about individuals trying to navigate a world where the credibility of grand narratives is under siege. Governments, religion, history, and identity are all mutable and replaceable entities, and this affects the artists. They do not lean on authorities, but explore the world on their own: The city, the body, sexuality, history, media, materials – and what it can all be used for. Even though many of the works may provoke, provocation is not an end in itself; it is also a way of confronting society, of responding to it. The works give rise to widely different stories and narratives – humorous, absurd, morbid, filthy, or erotic, beautiful or repulsive. They frame, as it were, what Leif Djurhuus himself sees as recognisable, if frequently exaggerated, imprints of contemporary existence.