

Take your time

Maaretta Jaukkuri

Thorbjørn Sørensen's latest series of watercolours puts the viewer in a special frame of mind. The first impression we gain is recognition of something we already seem to know: a bird, some weeds, a lump of earth, a plant we know we have seen but have not considered important enough to look up its name. Rather than quenching our interest, the anonymity and generic character of the subject seems, on the contrary, to compel us to immerse ourselves more deeply in the visual layers of the work. Why was this picture created, why does it occupy my mind so intensely? We start following the lines of the meticulously drawn and painted pictures. Our gaze becomes more and more focussed as we take in all the minute details. In this process, we seem to even forget what the picture was about; a strange kind of transformation takes place, turning the picture into abstract visual language. Lines, colours, forms; all the twists and turns slowly take the main role in this quiet but suddenly intensive visual drama.

What it seems to invoke in us, or convey to us, is the concentration that the artist has invested in his work. It transmits an atmosphere of having time to spend, it tells of the long hours it has taken to reach this level of precision; there is no hurry, the work unfolds from one infinitesimal detail to the next, all the intricate minutiae in nature are taken note of and rendered in the picture. All we have to do is give the work the time it requires to be seen. In accepting this proviso, a new vision of something we thought we knew, or at least have seen, opens up and fills us with the same kind of wonder that the artist has experienced in encountering this specific fragment of nature. Nature, for Sørensen, is no exotic place; it can be a specimen from the backyard of his studio in a former industrial complex in Oslo or something that he has happened to see somewhere and picked up to work on.

The sense of recognition evoked by these pictures also harks back to the beautiful watercolours or drawings of plants that appear in old botanical reference books. Carl von Linné's epoch-making achievement in the 18th century was to make plants and animals known as species, by classifying them in a modern system of taxonomy. The tradition of depicting plants and animals has a long history that still lives on as a cherished private interest. No longer having any scientific value, botanical illustration is usually considered an elegant pastime for people who love nature and have a lot of free time. In other words, it is not considered a "serious" subject for contemporary art.

If we expand our view of the contemporary times, we may find that what Sørensen is actually doing is transforming the traditional taxonomical field of recognised categories into an arena of multitudes. 'Multitude' is a key term in contemporary philosophy that is also seen as a way of understanding how politics can still work in our time despite the obvious crisis in party politics.

According to Michael Hardt, 'multitude' in philosophical terms is seen as a unity composed of singularities, or differences, which while remaining different also offer a form or a way of acting together. In nature and biology, we could perhaps imagine that while categories exist as multitudes within which taxonomical similarities are maintained, within these categories there are also singularities. Every plant and, every lump of earth is actually unique, and these

pictures portray them as such. This may stretch the concept of multitude a bit far from its original political, philosophical and economic content, but metaphorically it seems to perfectly capture what Sørensen is showing. Each lump of earth, each plant, each weed, is unique. His approach does not seem to have any clear ethical or moral message; no finger is pointing at us. Instead the artist seems to remind us of the wondrous world that awaits us if we only have the patience, interest and curiosity to look around us. If his approach has a message, it seems to be against the kind of 'scanning' that we often apply even when engaged in such a profoundly visual activity as looking at works of art.

Knowing Sørensen's other interests as manifested in his paintings and graphic works, he has never engaged totally in one stylistic approach, one line of thinking, or one way of interpreting how he experiences the world. He paints uncompromisingly abstract striped paintings, minutely realistic seascapes, smoke rings, and views of nature. Another cycle of works consists of human encounters depicting daily scenes of our contemporary life, often represented by groups of people and observed as if by an out-of-the-scene eye. His interest in a kind of minute realism as we see in his plant pictures has its precedents throughout the artist's career, albeit that its focus and modus has changed. The realism of these pictures is no longer the kind of exactitude that prevailed in his earlier works. Now, it is beyond anything that could be called photorealism as every subject is seen by the human eyes and rendered with all the technical brilliance that he now possesses.

Besides 'multitude' another highly relevant concept in today's world is 'acceleration', which likewise has philosophical and political meanings. Intensifying the speed of our work, filling our leisure time with more and more activities, acquiring more and more possessions, perhaps producing more and more pictures –, it all seems part of the way we think today. When we look at these pictures, they seem to insist that we slow down, and take the time to let the eye wander along the unique lines, forms and colours of these pictures. They seem to give us a meaningful respite in our daily toils and quietly remind us of the beauty and vulnerability of nature.