

# Kunstkritikk

## The Tantric Rebirth of Venus

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March 10, 2015



Astrid Svangren, *amongst all sorts of colours ...*, 2016, installation view, Tranen. Photo: Malle Madsen.

The invitation for Astrid Svangren's exhibition at Tranen is like the inside of a seashell on one side, all shimmering purples and blues, while the other features an updated version of Botticelli's famous *Birth of Venus* from 1484. In this scene, Venus, the Roman goddess of beauty, love and fertility, is squatting beside the sea, flowers strewn about her, her hair floating in the breeze, holding seaweed and transparent fabrics in her hand. This is how Tranen ushers in an entirely new season under the common heading "Sensibility". No more post-Internet or screen aesthetics; bring on materiality, beauty, flowers and sea metaphors.

And Astrid Svangren has pulled no punches. The entire room has been taken over by an undulating, sensuous materiality where foils and films slide from ceiling to floor as pastel-coloured and transparent fabrics crush, crumple and fold in and out of

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each other on the floor. On the walls are plexiglass paintings covered in thick dollops of paints in shades of purple, glitter, gold and squashed lavender seeds. This wealth of substances, both organic and synthetic, on floors, walls and ceilings seem to slip in and out of each other, making it difficult to delineate one work from another: the whole room comes vibrantly alive like a single organism. In the centre of the room is a wooden structure, somewhat reminiscent of an architectural version of a dream catcher – one side is a plexiglass painting with blue paint in various nuances; the other features long, braided hair, seashells and dried flowers.

At the same time the entire installation comes close to being a platitude, a clichéd idea of femininity; the pastel-coloured imagery is cultivated and celebrated to such a degree that it makes you wonder. Is all this simply a saccharine manifestation of soft, gentle femininity? Or are there any critical aspects lurking within the frothy, flouncing pastel fripperies?



Astrid Svangren, *amongst all sorts of colours ...*, 2016, installation view, Tranen. Photo: Malle Madsen.

When I first saw Svangren's work – at the solo show *Vad jeg Mins...* at Moderna Museet in 2009 – I rejected the imagery as far too “girly” for my tastes with all its flowing fabrics growing out of the canvases. But I have to admit that my sensibilities have been seriously affected by Svangren's work at Tranen.

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Several texts about Svangren point out that she is first of all a painter. Paintings that leave the canvas behind and grow out into the space they occupy are not a new genre, but Svangren not only lets painting take on (female) corporeal form in the space; she entirely abandons all the stiffness centred on the canvas-with-oil approach, replacing it with an completely different, sensuous, crumpled-up sphere.

These days many artists employ approaches that draw attention to a wider materiality, for example when Tove Storch makes transparent, thin silk look like a solid sculptural presence in the room, or when Aurora Passero hangs braided coloured fabrics from the ceiling. But Svangren takes things a step further. At first glance, Svangren's "paintings" may look like a random mess, or even as garbage and debris scrunched up and thrown onto the floor. The impression is reinforced by her choice of materials, often aluminum foil, cling film and food wrapping paper.



Astrid Svangren, *amongst all sorts of colours ...* (detail), 2016. Tranen. Photo: Maria Kjær Themsén.

Svangren's most interesting device is, however, the way in which she replaces the stiff canvas with transparent acrylic glass with blobs of paint smeared onto them. These in turn dissolve into organically shaped entities made out of plastic film hanging down from the ceiling, also with pigments applied to them. Here the fixed, static format of painting loses its contours, becoming thin membranes that fold in on and touch themselves. In this sense, something stiff and unyielding has been

replaced by vulva-like formations, which are in turn mimed by the many seashells and the ocean metaphor about liquid matter that informs the entire exhibition.

As I watch this, I am reminded of the work by the Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray. According to Irigaray, our perception of the world and our language are both based on the same metaphor, the male phallus. This means that our culture has no language for the female experience and female desire. Irigaray created her own alternative to phallogocentrism by employing the metaphor of the *labia* – two lips, always touching – as a trope to describe woman's physical, bodily language and her autoerotism. In Svangren's universe we find a corresponding rejection of stiff, straight, linear structure – everything folds together organically in an interweaving mesh of crumpled-up fabric and transparent membranes, every surface touching another surface. And where the sea and the sea shell act as metaphors for the female organism and female fluidity.

Hence, the very act of insisting with such complete consistency on a feminine, sensuous landscape is quite a subversive statement on a Western art scene where the landscape is still dominated by straight lines, perfect angles, white cubes and references to theory. Our gaze still rejects pinks, purples and gold as girly and, hence, non-valuable. Just like things that have been curled up and thrown onto the floor belong in a dustbin, not in a museum.

On the back of the leaflet published for this exhibition, Svangren is quoted as saying: "What happens if I speak to all the senses available to the spectators and stimulate them in several directions simultaneously?"

That has a downright Tantric ring to it, and I feel that this is where Svangren's subversive approach takes hold: not in our heads, but in our senses, in the body. There is something essentially, deeply erotic about this exhibition and its plethora of folds, membranes, fluidity and long braided hair.



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