

Body unfoldings: considering a few works by Maria Nordin

In order to be able to give a somewhat fair presentation of the work of this year's Beckers' Art Award recipient Maria Nordin, we must put to the front what is happening in the surfaces of the images, simply because that's where the most is going on; at the same time however we can't dwell on descriptions of chromatic shifts or contrasts between light and shadow without at the same time bringing attention to what we see as the manifestation of working with ideas, a work that moreover reaches farther than being only a historical commentary on painting or the sort of reflection over the image as such that avoids all (other) forms of narration. Thus we must allow ourselves the thought that we're dealing with a painter who has ideas and who in her artwork lets narrations cross close examinations of what it means to see and create images.

In Nordin's work the fundamental idea is about expressing relations in and between corporealities, to examine their coexistence, overlaps and spreads, but also to seek and express how these processes take place *within* a surface. And here begin all difficulties of describing it. This surface appears as *the only surface* in that it is the surface of both the image and the body, but without the difference between image and matter collapsing in chaos or negation. Instead it's the other way round entirely: nothing collapses – at least not fully –, everything plays out in various tensions, no matter if it's about the image's relation to its material surface or if it's about a wound, tear or the form of a sort of heavy, centrifugal unease in the image. And often this image takes the form of human skin, a skin that can however quickly lose its 'humanness' through the means of lines and colours elastically stretch and cover other things, such as clothing. Elsewhere, the skin forms a topological map of a terrain filled with precipices and crevices, rather than the portrait we initially may want to read the image as.

At the same time, Nordin's images are most often figuratively clear and might initially convince us that we see what we're seeing. For example in the water colour *Memories IV* (84 x 65 cm). We read into it a back clothed in a sports bra; the band of a pair of underpants or in any case a piece of lower-body garment; a face in half profile, cropped right below the eyes; the left arm falling over the stomach and the right one right by, sticking out with the hand pointing down. Apparently the figure's crossing the arms as part of a pose, and it looks a bit strained, as if the body was slightly contracting and wanted to hide in itself, subject to a gaze or a camera. The painting does seem modelled on the conventional sort of fashion photography to which the elementary moment is the hiding or rather the game of hiding – when it's about to burst, as she turns around or have yet to turn around.

Memories IV borrows this form and strips it of its light – the light that distinguishes between nudity and dress not in terms of clothing, primarily, but through an arrangement of relationships to skin surface, body pose and gesture – by getting the clothes to cease to cover. This is done mainly by way of a seduction-inhibiting t-shirt tan line stretching over the back and arms, an absence of garment that spreads to the sports bra by being part of the shifting shades between white and red that constitutes the skin tone. Everything is skin.

The pose captured in *Memories IV* is found in *The Gathering* (2011), a larger water colour (120 x 180 cm) showing a constellation of four female bodies in various poses, once again markedly separated from the background and mainly painted in pigment hues. In some parts one body covers another; in other they fold onto each other and form a shared, joint body. It is this difference between fold and boundary that makes the image: in one sense the bodies remain cut of their context, alone with only their body surface to lean on; in another they are bound into each other and share a common skin, which does not mean that they have no clothes. All the women gathered in *The Gathering* are dressed on a decreasing scale, and the one that is so to speak the most nude is she who reprises the pose from *Memories IV*. Here, however, the body has lost yet another piece of clothing and as a variation on the t-shirt tan line there's no longer a sports bra, just the marks from one, and instead of the abstract red part that in *Memories IV* marks the cropped neck and chin, we see a face with a look both guarded and defiant. It is one of the common body's three gazes. The fourth is, like in *Memories IV*, lost in the upper part of the painting.

It is tempting to read the lost gaze and the gaze of the painter, she who sees her body appear but leaves out her eyes lest she be fully drawn into the picture where the difference between its surface and the skin of the body run the risk of collapsing into one and the same. The critical impulse in *Memories IV* and *The Gathering* is indeed strong and we could say that they show the emptiness attached to stereotypical images of women, that the paintings reduce away the specific stories that carry these images and instead forces a mode of gesture that in the absence of a background are frozen signs without agency. So, we could read the paintings as a contemporary commentary on the perils of reducing a body to stereotypical images of bodies: the paradoxical collective loneliness for which belonging lies in us forgetting that we are bodies at the same time as we're theatricalising the body to such a degree that we only recognize one another in the kinship of our poses and gestures. But despite the possibility of reading such a commentary in Nordin's work, she doesn't project an *outside*, an autonomous position from which she'd be painting. The painter's body remains in the painting, and a critical distance to the collapse of identity is possible only as an activity within the surface of the image by means of the elasticity of colour, lines and skin, that is to say with the elasticity that allows four figures to gather into the one body. Therefore it's also hard to speak of a self-portrait.

To work as a painter within the one body where image and skin are each other's tangents and to maintain a critical outlook is to a large degree to try to uphold the tension between image and matter in the sensations one is working with and is putting together. In painting with water colours, one way is to work with negative spaces, but there's abundance of other possibilities, for instance letting water smudges and runnings appear as abstract fields in contrast to the picture's figuration, or letting the painting create traces and wear and tear. In the new work *Pink Noise Series*, an open series of seven paintings (150 x 69 cm), we get to see many examples of the latter. If the marked spaces of unpainted paper were earlier a dominant feature of Nordin's painting, she here works with full bleed that aim to concentrate the beholder's interest to what's going on *within* the surface of the image. The basic motif is pictures of faces, but they want to be seen as

something other than portraits, and the large format's magnification combined with a scarcity of distinct lines and the fact that the images are heavily cropped and how the faces are filling the whole paper, forces us to closely examine the skin beyond the face and discover it as a surface to be read, full of stories told by smudges, wear and imperfections.

Nonetheless it is hard to distance oneself from the genre and at a distance we immediately read a complete face, not least as all but one painting have pairs of eyes. These eyes and gazes do however take on an ambivalent position in the composition: on the one hand they are intense and are given a supporting and stabilizing role in the otherwise wavy and swelling 'skin landscape,' on the other they amble between no direction and a direction not easily captured and reminds us of the gaze a film camera can capture in a face in motion (it is easy to imagine them modelled on film stills). Neither do we really meet these gazes, and moving closer we see how the eyes are formed by dots of paint that in some cases flow outside the line forming the shape of the eye, in others forms a white of the eye with enough pink in them to blend with the hue of the skin, leaving the pupil and iris as a staring cavity or an anomaly in the picture.

Close by the skin turns into a topological description of a terrain which, to little surprise, becomes clearest in the painting lacking eyes and shows the side of a neck and an ear. Already at a distance it becomes clear that the skin is somehow deformed or patterned, perhaps a burn injury, and moving closer yet we see a wavy terrain in pink that here and there encircles areas where the paper is damaged and a yellowish tone breaks out. Time past appears, spots that recur in several of the paintings and together with other defects amplify the ambiguity of the pictures. Because even as Nordin shows the wear of the skin, the faces appearing are young and sort of calm, almost weighed down by their meatiness, something that's further amplified by the full bleed and the hard-to-capture gazes.

The feeling is that these paintings emerge from their surface, as if the paint burst out from within and splotches and deformations were signs of disease, a sort of vibrations that come forth and are visualized. Is something like that meant by *pink noise*? Pink noise is however an acoustics term describing a noise with an even distribution in all octaves, sounding very much like a rainfall and whose even flow has a both relaxing effect and one of shutting out and enclosing. The analogy becomes apparent: the surfaces of the paintings rest in themselves while at the same time they are constituted by these creases, flows and blotches that are the noise of water colour paintings. But as opposed to the acoustic pink noise, the paintings lack an even distribution of energy and their vibrations are more stirring than calming. Most worrying is watching the two black and white paintings of the series. In them, the grayscale further intensifies the insecurity. The back and forth between the reserve of the face and the hard-to-decipher blotches becomes acute and we wonder what it is that vibrates through the skin, paper, paint.

Maria Nordin's work also includes a third form of images, her animated water colours. A lot happens in the encounter with the apparatus of animation, among other things the materiality of the image which poses many questions of how painting's translation of skin and body interacts with the technology and the digital image. Here we will however concern ourselves with the forces at play in *In your hands*, a four-second looped animation.

In *In your hands*, two hands are seen cooperating to pry open a young woman's left eyelid and expose the eye while her facial muscles contract defensively. One hand rests against the forehead and tries to lift the upper eyelid by grabbing it just below the eyebrow. The other stabilizes the head with a grip of the side of the neck while the thumb tries to pull down the lower eyelid. For a tenth of a second it seems to be succeeding. The eye opens in the modulations of moving images, in the face's cascade of reluctant and overlapping movements before the opening rapidly shuts.

This also describes certain passages of Vito Acconci's *Pryings*, a video recording of a 1971 performance at New York University in which Acconci furiously approaches his counterpart Katy Dillon by trying to hold her still and bending open her eyelid. So we could view *In your hands* as a re-enactment of a sequence from *Pryings* and for a moment look at Nordin's film by way of *Pryings*.

As signalled by its title, *Pryings* walk the thin line between curiosity and sadism, between peeking in and bending open. However one views it, the performance resembles a repetitive illustration of a difference between male and female going back to another ascribed difference, that between activity and passivity. Her resistance goes no further than a fending gesture of self preservation, a gesture that occasionally gives way to the violence and that may not affirm it, but is enclosed by it. But there's also something else, a didactic dimension where Acconci wants her to peek out, to break free from herself, then also from him and the border zone where examination and abuse turn into one another. What Acconci wants to open her eyes to would in that case be the camera closely taking part of the performance. In meeting the camera would lie the hope of emancipation.

In *In your hands* there is of course no directing camera present, we're not looking into the picture of a three-dimensional room and in comparison to equivalent sequences from *Pryings* it's now a matter of a cropped image excluding many details (for example Acconci's almost ever-present half profile). Instead we see a series of dislocations between colours and lines making up the girl's head, the enclosing hands and parts of the upper arm leading to the hand gripping over her eyebrow. That is all; that is the body, the only body brought forth by the animation, the one body which just as in *Memories IV* and *The Gathering* is markedly separate from the white background. Just like in them, we perceive the different parts of the body and can follow most lines as relatively constant, but when they are complemented here by the cuts between the water-colour paintings the lines forming the inner of the body fade into an undulations between white and red, in colour overlaps of shifting hues of skin, and perhaps more effectively than in the paintings the one body appears as both a sort of cover of skin hues and a clearly readable figuration.

Here we can talk about a radical reduction and fragmentation of the narrative and space of *Pryings*. Still, the face being worked on expresses an effort and at the touch the lips part slightly, as if they wanted to make a sound. What it sounds like we don't know, and not just because nothing is heard. As the hands and the head have grown into each other what's happening happens as a common, abstracted movement in one and the same body, a fundamental ambiguity in the picture is established, according to which the violence might as well be a caress and the sound a sound of pleasure just as well as a sound of pain.

What's the meaning of this compared to the irreconcilable conflict enacted in *Pryings*? Remaining still is a play between forces, but where *Pryings* visualizes this play as a dialectics of violence and of gender difference getting its power from the difference between passivity and activity, the forces in *In your hands* appear as flows within and between the elements of the common body. It becomes a game of forces where the distribution of passivity and activity is very uncertain, and where the touch – violent or peaceable – is one body folding over itself. The emancipation at work is thus not pointing towards a camera in order to see itself in it, or to see that the world is ruled by cameras. The emancipation is about an activity through which the gaze and the speech (even though the painting is quiet) *becomes* – the widening of the eye and the mouth, the widening of two pigment-coloured blotches, vibrations oscillating between image and body in touch, giving birth to an image and letting it shift.