

Hanneline Røgeberg

## **Modern Subjects.**

By Glenn Ligon

### **Scars**

In March 1863, Gordon, a slave from a Louisiana plantation, made his way to a Union Army camp in Baton Rouge. A widely circulated carte de visite from the period shows him shirtless, his back covered with a branching pattern of keloid scars from numerous whippings. Tangible evidence of the horrors of black life in the antebellum South, Gordon's welts find their fictional counterparts in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, in which the main character, Sethe, has grotesque ridges on her back in the shape of a chokecherry tree, scars that influence the course of her life and the lives of generations to come.

On July 22, 2011, Anders Behring Breivik, a right-wing extremist angered by Norway's increasing embrace of multiculturalism, set off a van filled with explosives at the entrance of a government building in central Oslo. The blast killed eight and left hundreds wounded. He then made his way to the island of Utøya, location of a Norwegian Labour Party youth camp, where he shot and killed sixty-nine people with an assault rifle. Hanneline Røgeberg's "The Governing Crater," 2015, a medium-sized canvas based on a newspaper image, depicts the scene of the blast beneath a wash of grayish-blue paint, evocative of the smoky aftermath of the carnage. A cursory search on the Web produces thousands of photos of the bombsite, often described in captions as a "gash" or "gaping wound." Røgeberg's painting, however, doesn't depict a wound; covering the scene with an obscuring layer of paint, it depicts a scar.

When confronting the catastrophes of modern life, painting sometimes functions like a keloid: a growth spread over the site of the original trauma. Like Gordon's and Sethe's scars, "The Governing Crater" is evidence and metaphor, thwarting our desire for healing or closure, ceremonies and monuments, by presenting the trauma of that day as unfinished business.

### **Mastery**

What happens when an artist approaches a painting without plan or method, working against her skill, letting accident and incident overgrow the depicted image? "Loser's Dig," 2015, is one possible answer to this question. In this work, based on a photo of captured Gestapo officers made to unearth a mass grave of Norwegian prisoners of war in 1945, Røgeberg places a random layer of muddy-colored splotches over the scene, making it difficult to decipher. Ostensibly she has "ruined" the painting with these spots of paint, but what does it mean to ruin that which is already an image of ruin: a victor's photo of comrades' bodies in a ditch? To

use an image like this, as with images from the Holocaust, an artist must develop strategies for foregrounding the problematic nature of the source material. Gerhard Richter's photo-based paintings accomplish this by blurring images of bombed cities, fascist relatives, and murdered anarchists with the drag of a brush through still-wet paint, undoing the very picture he has created. Røgeberg takes a different tack: instead of subjecting her work to a precise, predetermined methodology, she lets randomness take over, not composing the paint that covers the image but rather letting it fall where it may. Consequently, "Loser's Dig" feels more unearthed than painted, as if exhumed from the very grave it depicts. Her unmastery of the scene is a moral stance, an acknowledgment that one cannot rise above the horror one depicts but must ultimately be down in the muck with it.

### **History/Painting**

Pinned to a wall in Røgeberg's studio are images of people with one arm raised. From top to bottom they are:

Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People."

World leaders marching in Paris in support of the magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

A group of men and boys giving a Black Power salute.

The star of a reality TV show with a performer dressed as Goofy at Disney World.

Hitler and Mussolini addressing troops from a balcony.

Tommie Smith's and John Carlos's black-gloved fists at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City.

Anders Behring Breivik making a fascist gesture during his trial.

Hitler at a rally in Nuremberg in 1934.

Taking its cue from this chain of recent and archival images, "Lede," 2015, a densely worked, largely abstract canvas based on Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People," 1831, updates our notion of what a history painting can be. Delacroix's canvas commemorates the overthrow of the French monarchy, an uprising he witnessed on the streets of Paris during the summer of 1830. In a letter to his brother, he wrote, "I have undertaken a modern subject, a barricade, and although I may not have fought for my country, at least I shall have painted for her." Røgeberg, too, has undertaken a modern subject: images. In an age when seemingly every image and every bit of knowledge is available in the Borgesian-like archive that is the World Wide Web, history painting now is the painting of histories, an atemporal mélange of past and present where Hitler is juxtaposed with Disney and Delacroix with the Black Power movement. Compressed into a single composition like a zipped data file, "Lede" mirrors the visual density of Delacroix's canvas with a density of marks, art-

historical genres, and possible trajectories, waiting for a viewer to unpack it. “Lede” is about the images we have in our heads and the images we cannot get out of them.

### **You are the weather.**

“The Weather for February and October, 2015, portrays Akershus Castle, a significant site in Norwegian history. Built on Oslo’s waterfront late in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and occupied at various times by Sweden, Denmark, and the Nazis, it has been used for a range of purposes including prison, execution site, and royal mausoleum. Røgeberg has a personal connection to the castle: German forces executed her grandfather there toward the end of World War II. While the vagaries of history have made it a charged site for Norwegians, Røgeberg undermines its importance as a subject, using it as a scaffold on which passages of painterly incident dissolve the masonry façade of the structure into drips, splashes, and lumps of paint. At the top of the canvas, the sky is rendered in ponderous strokes of yellow ochre that contrast with the immateriality of the castle below. What is most present in the painting is the weather, the very title of the work reinforcing the idea that when looking at the canvas we should be looking up.

Is this a history painting or a weather report?

The answer is both. Norway’s national character is bound up in the weather, which gives Røgeberg the opportunity to explore one by means of the other. Such a confluence of weather, history, and culture brings to mind the photographic and sculptural investigations of Roni Horn, but Røgeberg’s subject matter is the country of her birth, while Horn’s long engagement with Iceland as a subject is one of affinity, not birthright. This is not to say that Røgeberg is a “Norwegian” painter, but she prefers to paint what she knows: the weight of the Norwegian sky, the feeling of living with trauma, the history of art and the afterlife of images. In other words, she paints modern subjects.