

First Responders: Time and Trauma in the Paintings of Hanneline Røgeberg

By Claire Barliant

An IED exploding in a Volkswagen van in a crowded square. The 30th round shot from a Glock at a sixteen-year-old girl. The bellow of thousands of protesters, their chants ricocheting off glass-walled skyscrapers, rising like a warning flare to sealed-in spectators watching from penthouse offices. In every instance the pattern is the same: first the blast, then the moment of stunned confusion, before the true nature of the impact starts to register.

Hanneline Røgeberg captures the passion and the heat of the interesting times in which we live. Her paintings hum not only with the immediacy of front-line reportage, but also with the measured consideration that comes with the advantage of hindsight, enabling her to distill the mood of a historical moment. In her newest body of work, the artist has quadrupled the scale of her canvases and broadened her subject matter. The four paintings address two staggering events that took place in 2011—the Norway attacks, and Occupy Wall Street. Both were motivated by a desire to expose cracks in the system, though with starkly opposite aims—the former to promote nihilistic hate, via a manifesto that envisioned a world in which women would be obsolete, and the latter to encourage a more egalitarian distribution of capital. Yet the conditions that enabled these events are the same. The terrorist attack and the protest spurred by the economic downturn bring to mind theorist Paul Virilio's most famous edicts: "The invention of the ship was also the invention of the shipwreck," meaning that any technological innovation, including the stock market, carries the seed of its own destruction; and "as speed increases, freedom decreases." In other words, when speed becomes the driving force of progress, time compresses to the instantaneous, forcing all choices to be made in real time, without benefit of reflection.

These works represent a significant leap for Røgeberg. For the past few years she has been taking an endgame approach to painting—she focused almost exclusively on reindeer and sheepskin pelts, drawn both to their amorphous, quasi-abstract forms (it was a way for her to make abstractions without committing to being an abstract painter), and the resonance of rendering hair with a brush. She is hardly finished with the pelt, however: it has infiltrated her new paintings, adding an element of chance to her process. The new paintings are two sets of pairs, different views of the same event. One of the canvases depicts the aftermath of the car bomb in Norway, showing the abyss that opened in the earth after the detonation, debris scattered everywhere. Strips of rebar dangle from the edges of the hole. The palette is somber,

rich in pewters and coppers. Overlaying the image are thick daubs of paint in earthy colors, a scrim that works in concert with the background, but is clearly not of it (though the blotches could be said to evoke exploding shrapnel). The other canvas shows the opposite side of the government district where the bomb went off, a generic urban setting. It is tinted an eerie rose hue, such as you might see if you shut your eyes tightly after staring at a brilliant white flash. A thick smear of paint, again in earthy shades, is wiped over the scene—the momentum of the gesture and its weirdness conjures a demon being exorcised, tearing off in a rage. The strange overlays in these works were made when Røgeberg painted the image of a pelt on top of one of the Norway scenes, then stuck the two canvases together, imprinting one with the image of the other. There is something violent about the removal of the top canvas, like ripping a bandage from a wound that is still red and raw.

She used the same method for the paintings that respond to Occupy Wall Street. In these works, the pelt is easier to distinguish, more viscous and resolved, though it also recalls a set of Rorschach inkblots. One of the backgrounds features a grid of posters arranged in Zuccotti Park in Manhattan's financial district, the original site of the occupation. The other is a view of Brooklyn Bridge as thousands of protestors streamed across. Røgeberg thought of Zuccotti as a frame for containment and refuge, not unlike democracy itself—when the confinement becomes oppressive, it needs to be blasted apart.

The antithesis, or the antidote, to this “blast,” is contemplation, meditation on the meaning of the event once it has passed. Røgeberg's paintings invert, permute, and superimpose—they borrow the photographic process but not the relentless speed of its capture. Instead, time stretches and expands in her paintings. The marks on the surfaces look like Braille, or topographical maps, or the cracks in old parchment. Even without knowledge of the precise subject matter of the paintings (and Røgeberg is understandably ambivalent about openly divulging her source material), they demand extended study, and seem to supply a code through which we might understand the unexpected, seemingly irrational acts attempting to dismantle the known world.