Nordic Impressions

Contemporary Art from Åland, Denmark, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden

By Klaus Ottman
**Nordic Impressions:**

Contemporary Art from Åland, Denmark, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, which is on view at Scandinavia House through June 6, is the third iteration of a survey of Nordic art that had its origin in an initiative formed on the heels of the highly successful Nordic Cool festival held in 2013 at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The objective of the four-year collaboration between The Phillips Collection and the five Nordic Embassies in Washington has been to promote Nordic artistic talent and organize this first comprehensive survey of Nordic art in Washington. In its most comprehensive iteration, the exhibition, organized by The Phillips Collection in Washington, spans almost two hundred years, reflecting a diverse range of stylistic movements, and, notably, the work of many women artists crowns this important project.

Its first iteration, *Northern Exposure: Contemporary Nordic Arts Revealed*, was shown from May 5 through September 16, 2018, as part of the inauguration of the new Nordic Museum in the heart of the working waterfront of Seattle’s Ballard neighborhood. The new museum was designed by Seattle’s Mithun architects in collaboration with renowned Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa. There, the exhibition was augmented with works of Nordic contemporary artists not included in its later iterations, among them, Bjarne Melgaard, Grethe Wittrock and Caija Von Zeipel.

Nordic Impressions: Art from Åland, Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, 1821–2018, opened at The Phillips Collection in October 13, 2018, and closed on January 13, 2019. At the Phillips, the exhibition brought together a wide array of artistic expressions—paintings, drawings, photographs, installations, films and videos—that reflect the rich diversity and global character of Nordic art. Included are examples from the Golden Age, the Romantic era, the first modernist movement, and later modernist and abstract expressions as well as works created from the 1960s to the present. The exhibition was a complex, multi-faceted project, which embraced the great Nordic landscape painters of the 19th century and reached forward to the innovations of Nordic modern and contemporary artists.

The Danish artist and writer Per Kirkeby cautioned his fellow Nordic artists against claiming ownership to the label of “Nordicness:”

To write something about what is “Nordic” in art is a tall order indeed. I would prefer not to bother. The easiest thing is to discharge the clichés, the accumulated annoyances. The complacent, homespun “Nordicness” that is self-protective and lends legitimacy to what is only half done. Right down to the belief in peculiarly “Nordic” materials as constituting the space of our art. It accords well with the tendency to put craft before art. Art glass, textile art, and so on make what is negligible easier to approach. What is “Nordic” consists also in streams of predictable outpourings in articles and seminars. And then there is the entire bureaucratic notion of export. Occasionally underpinned by heady accounts of “Northern Light” spreading out across the landscape like some sour unwashed dishcloth. All of which is pretty unwholesome, and certainly fatal for any artist to claim ownership of.

The Modern Breakthrough movement of 1870 liberated Nordic art from the constraints of convention—in particular, from the traditions of the School of Paris—and spawned an unprecedented era of artistic innovation and nationalism. This is abundantly apparent in the diverse work of artists such as Anna Ancher, Fanny Brate, Franciska Clausen, Elin Danielsson-Gambogi, Nils Dardel, Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Vilhelm Hammershøi, Christian and Oda Krogh, Edvard Munch, Helene Schjerfbeck, Hugo Simberg and August Strindberg.
Mamma Andersson’s *Behind the Curtain*, 2014, oil on panel, as seen through Outi Pieski’s *Crossing Paths*. It is 48 x 65 5/8 in.

PHOTO: LEE STALSWORTH
These three birds by Nathalie Djurberg, entitled Birds, 1911, are in metal, foam fabric, adhesive and wood, mounted on painted MDF panels. Measurements: 14 x 19 x 16 in., 14½ x 8½ x 18 in., 15½ x 9¼ x 26 in.

I . . . with Finland becoming the first European nation to grant women the right to vote in 1906.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a second major breakthrough was sparked by work such as that of German artist Dieter Roth, who, in 1955, had moved from Switzerland to Copenhagen and began Super-8 film. From 1957 to 1964, Roth lived in Iceland, where he established a publishing company and created artists’ books and kinetic sculptures. In 1961, the Ekspertkorende Kunsthalle (Experimental Art School, also called the Eks- skolen or Ex School) was founded in Copenhagen by the artist Poul Gernes and the art historian Troels Andersen as an alternative to the 250-year-old Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Informed by Fluxus, which was introduced by Roth in Iceland and Joseph Beuys in Denmark, the Ex School led a new generation of artists—among them Poul Gernes, Sigurður Guðmundsson, and Per Kirkeby—to pursue performance and conceptual art; their work would have a lasting impact on subsequent generations. Both the modernist accomplishments of the turn of the century and the experimentation of the 1960s and ’70s inform much of today’s Nordic art.

The first survey of Nordic art in the United States was the Exhibition of Contemporary Scandinavian Art, which traveled, under the auspices of the American-Scandinavian Society (the earlier name of the American-Scandinavian Foundation) to New York, Buffalo, Toledo, Chicago and Boston between 1912 and 1913. It was not until 1982, however, with Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880–1910, Kirk Varnedoe’s groundbreaking exhibition, which was organized as part of Scandinavia Today, a national cultural festival organized by the American-Scandinavian Foundation at the Brooklyn Museum, that Nordic art was no longer viewed as peripheral to the mainstream modernist movements taking place in the rest of Europe. Varnedoe’s Northern Light was the first exhibition to present Scandinavia’s unique mixture of innovation and tradition, nationalism and openness, as an expansion of the idea of modernism and a new paradigm for viewing its development in Europe. At the time, Varnedoe wrote:

If we consider Scandinavian art in terms that escape the fragmentation of localities, and move it from the margins into the mainstream of our histories of art at the turn of the century, we will not only be rewarded by the rich story Nordic art represents in itself, but also challenged to expand and reform our broader understanding of the complexities of the modern tradition.

In 1982, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York also presented an exhibition of Nordic art, that was a part of the American-Scandinavian Foundation Scandinavia Today festival. Featuring the work of ten contemporary artists, Sleeping Beauty—Art Now: Scandinavia Today was curated by Pontus Hultén, who had been the highly influential director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. In the exhibition catalogue, Hultén wrote, “For somebody looking at the Scandinavians from the outside, it is, however, probably easier to see how they are alike. For us, it is more interesting, to contemplate how we are different.”

With the seminal 1998 exhibition Nuit Blanche, scènes nordiques: Les années 90 at the Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Nordic art finally began to take its place on the world stage. Organized by Laurence Bossé and Hans-Ulrich Obrist as part of Vision du nord, a global event celebrating Nordic culture, Nuit blanche presented the work of thirty young Nordic artists. Most of them—notably, the Finnish video artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila, the Danish-Icelandic artist Ólafur Elíasson, and the Icelandic artists Ragnar Kjartansson, and Katrín Sigurðardóttir—have since gained international acclaim. They have also inspired a younger generation of Nordic artists, among them the Swedish sculptor and animation artist Nathalie Djurberg, the Icelandic painter Eggert Pétursson, the Finnish Sámi artist Outi Pieski, the Danish painter Tal R, the Norwegian artist and
Opposite top: A video projection with sound, and lasting 18:21 min., entitled Ancient Baby is from 2017 by Tori Wrånes.

Opposite below: Pia Ariè’s Arctic Hysteria from 1996 is a 5:55-min. video from the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark.

Top: Ragnar Kjartansson’s Me and My Mother from 2015, is a 20:25-min. single channel video with sound and color. The mother is seen repeatedly spitting in her son’s face.

Bottom: The Bridge dated 2002/2015 is an 8-min. single-channel video projection, with sound by Eija-Liisa Ahtila.
A Self-Portrait in charcoal on paper by Henry Wuorila-Stenberg. It is from 2015 and measures \(27\frac{7}{16}\times29\frac{15}{16}\) in.

Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir/Shoplifter’s Nerve Endings I-V, is artificial hair, dyed in a rainbow of supernatural colors and arranged into sculptures on massive landscapes.

filmaker Marthe Thorshaug and the Norwegian performance and video artist Tøri Wrånes.

During my extensive travel in the Nordic countries in preparation for this exhibition, I encountered a great diversity of artistic expressions. Especially striking was the large percentage of 19th-century women-artists museums. As Vibeke Waallann Hansen, a curator at the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo, notes, “women in the Nordic countries were among the very first to vote,” with Finland becoming the first European nation to grant women the right to vote in 1906 and Norway and Sweden following in 1913 and 1915, respectively. Hansen quotes a letter by the early feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, who visited Scandinavia in 1795 and whose account of her travels through Sweden, Norway and Denmark was published the following year. Wollstonecraft describes an unprecedented climate of freedom. Among the texts disseminated freely was English philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill’s 1869 essay “The Subjection of Women,” which made an argument for the equality of men and women. The essay was translated by the Danish critic Georg Brandes, a strong supporter of women artists who was closely linked to the Skagen art colony in Skagen, Denmark. Many of the artists at Skagen were women, among them Anna Archer and Marie Krøyer. The Norwegian writer Camilla Collett, one of the many Nordic women artists and writers inspired by Mill’s essay, helped disseminate Mill’s ideas in her essay “Om Kvinden og hennes Stilling” (On Women and Their Position).

The rise of female artists in the latter half of the nineteenth century was not limited to the Nordic countries. The emergence of the women’s rights movement after 1850, together with the needs of a growing modern art market, led to increases in the number of female artists and their acceptance. According to Hansen, the number of artists working in the United Kingdom rose from 278 in 1841 to about 1,000 in 1871. In Denmark, more than 200 women artists were active during the nineteenth century, even though the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen did not accept female students until 1888. Despite these advances, as Hansen cautions, “many women artists felt more or less ostracized” upon their return...
Olafur Eliasson’s *The Island Series* from 1997 is made up of 56 C-prints of various islands from Long Island’s coast. It measures 92½ x 141¼ in.
from Paris where many women artists had moved to develop their art—with the Académie Julian being one of the most welcoming art schools.

One contemporary artist in particular embodies the enduring Nordic spirit: the Icelandic artist-musician Ragnar Kjartansson, a 21st-century man who seems most comfortable in the melancholic 19th-century world of Edvard Munch, the Norwegian painter of existentialist angst, and Robert Schumann, the romantic composer of achingly beautiful songs. Kjartansson's favorite musical chord is E-minor, “the ultimate sad, beautiful chord,” which, as he has said, “creates a kind of instant melancholia.”

To paraphrase Victor Hugo’s famous definition of melancholia, Kjartansson’s art excels in the happiness of being sad. Even in today’s global world, however, Nordic art retains a certain mystique and focus on themes that have held a special place in Nordic culture for centuries: light and darkness, inner life and exterior space, the coalescence of nature and folklore, women’s rights and social liberalism. But these are now paired with more current subjects such as climate change, sustainability and immigration. A recent poll in Sweden finds that young voters, aged 18 to 29, see climate change and the environment as the most important political issues.

As Nils Ohlsen, the director of old masters and modern art at the National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design writes in his essay for the catalog of the exhibition, 

. . . despite the tone of irony and alienation present since the 1980s, there has clearly been, from the romantic period to the present day, an intense connection to a cultural region with its own premises and traditions.

Klaus Ottmann, who curated this ASF exhibition, as well as its parent exhibition at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., is Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Academic Affairs at The Phillips Collection. He has curated more than 60 international exhibitions.