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Today's columnist invites us into the process of creating eight paintings of Søren Kierkegaard to be exhibited in Paris.



Kierkegaard: The Icon and the Man

Just before New Year 2011-2012. Copenhagen is cold and clear, pink light washing down on Illum's department store, bathing the wall in an odd, at once treacly, sad and contemporary glow – an advertising banner with copy I don't read. I'm only thinking, Who was Søren Aabye Kierkegaard? I mean, he was a person after all, flesh and blood. If I were going to paint his face, it would be bathed in pink light: he would be walking the streets of Copenhagen today and different *lightings* would wash down on his face. But what did he look like? We don't really know. There are drawings and caricatures. Not one photo. And then there's his infinite writing and thinking.

Friday, 13 January 2012. I have to pick up something at Steno Pharmacy, Vesterbro. I faint there, for the first time. Wake up, don't want any help – lying on the floor of the pharmacy, I call my dad (he's a doctor). Drop the phone, faint for the second time. Get up. Move on. Down toward Amagertorv, I watch reality turn like a mill wheel from right to left. Sit down on a bench in front of Georg Jensen. Get up. Walk further up Købmagergade, thinking: I've got to get home. I walk down Skindergade. When I reach the northern entrance to Gråbrødretorv, I faint again. I can't stay on my feet. Throw up. Lying there. Manage to call 112. Some young people stay with me until the ambulance arrives. Forty-eight hours and numerous tests later, no diagnosis.

I woke up. Should I take it easy? All I felt like doing was painting Kierkegaard's face and empty moving boxes. Specifically, I painted large canvases of empty boxes alongside a series of five, later eight, faces of equal size based on the drawing of Kierkegaard. I wanted to *see reality*, *see* the moving box in my studio and paint it, *see* Kierkegaard's face and paint it – get close to a face, get some company in my studio, where I have been working alone since 1987.

A little while ago I googled Skindergade 38, where I collapsed, and saw that Kierkegaard lived there the last years of his life (but where didn't he live, where didn't he leave his footprints in inner Copenhagen!) From this exact spot, which since then became a place I pass by, my inspiration for the paintings about his face originates. Maybe I have just been painting, doing my own painting through his sensitive, quasi-fictive features: his cousin's fine drawing of young, attractive Kierkegaard, the face that has become the iconic image of Kierkegaard alongside the very different caricatures of him. Does Kierkegaard obsess you when your life is threatened?

It's a weird assignment, putting together Kierkegaard's face. Unless you set out a dogma for its execution: things that reoccur, things you relate to in the process. Things that restrict and free you simultaneously.

I start from the composition I used in my portrait of the Crown Prince. Format: 116 x 114 cm, oil on linen, close-up of a face cropped right at the hairline and below the chin: a basic, naked face, without Kierkegaard's high hair – the familiar, sometimes caricatured *hairdo* – without his *high collar and shirt* but with a bare neck. I want to turn his face to make it more *en face*, more directly a plane, and repeat the composition in a series painted in different colours on a monochrome ground. And see what happens.

A face is a collection of signs – like a text that has already been written that you have to rewrite. Every time you get into painting the plane of the forehead, you bump into an eye, a nose or a mouth. But since Kierkegaard isn't posing as a live model, you can paint different kinds of likenesses, as long as there is a "remnant" of the "icon" in each painting.

Here, the next problem appears: *interpretation vis-à-vis likeness*. Who are you to presume

you can reinterpret the face of the great Kierkegaard? The undertaking is transgressive, disrespectful even, but the possibility exists of considering a small drawing for over a year and a half, repeating: eyes, nose, mouth, ears, until they become like aspects of meaning. But I do *don't* want the aspects of his face to “express” – the mouth *smiling* in one place, *clenched* in another, the eyes *sad* or the gaze *hard* or *romantic*.

Søren Kierkegaard's face should be defined by the light that falls on it and by the connotations that a certain lighting can evoke.

I will try not to interpret but to submit the aspects of Kierkegaard's face in a manifest way.

The French essayist and structuralist Roland Barthes discusses “the empty sign” in his small book about Japan, *Empire of Signs*. In Japanese aesthetics, the empty sign is the white-painted Asian face: it should hold no meaning, reveal no explicit emotional expression – unlike a Western-aesthetics photo of a person, which reflects an *individual* – the character, attributes and emotions of the individual gathered into a *personality*.

What about the Kierkegaard drawing? His gaze in it seems oddly staring and inscrutable. I'll be painting 16 empty eyes.

From this point on, meaning comes pouring in: fragments of Kierkegaard's writing with which I'm familiar, fragments I've heard others say about SAK – all through the act of painting. The meaning should be attached to the oils, shapes and colours.

The eight colours imply different subject matters that in turn imply different changes in the representation of his face. I choose not to copy my reference but “mutate” it, while keeping a certain resemblance to the 1840 drawing. Intuitively, I paint his face broader in the yellow painting, *Street* – as if this colour expands the shape, which in turn may convey that Kierkegaard here is extremely *lighted*, expansive and free, walking about in the city, *flaneuring*.

The shape of his face is small in *Nude*, his eyebrows defined; they are almost left out in the other renditions. In *Love*, the mouth is sensually shaped but in grey lighting. The rest of the face is illuminated. And so on. In *Rebel*, the skin is patchy. In *Doubt*, the figuration is deconstructed – does that mean he is “the worse for wear”? It's hard to elude interpretation.

A paradox emerges: I'm trying to bring him to life, “humanize” him, but we know only this drawing, and compared with painting a drawing is *writing*. I strive to emphasize his character of “texture/raw skin organic,” but eyebrows are like graphic lines in the face, that is, drawing. Hence, no eyebrows, except in *Nude*. But the more I move away from my reference to render skin and “humanity” through painting, the less it looks like Kierkegaard. Precisely because Kierkegaard's “likeness” is captured in the nature of drawing.

I stick to my project, though, trying, through repetition, to pin down his inscrutable gaze while also painting freely. What can't be done in one face can be pushed to the next. No “hierarchy” is established in the series, which is executed in two stages:

2012, in the colours white, yellow, pink, blue, becoming *Nude, Street, Sex, Rebel*; and 2013, green, grey, whiter, black – respectively *Victim, Love, Doubt, Thought*.

The face is “the mirror of the soul,” the cliché goes. But the face itself is a mirror: we look at another face; it looks at us and confirms our existence. Moreover, the face in close-up becomes like a body, because its parts become unnaturally large: eyes, nose, mouth become strange and, to a greater extent perhaps, perception-carrying phenomena.

The Faces of Kierkegaard, thus, is an attempt to enlarge a face into being a content of perception. Its large format enables the painter to unite the divided. The reality I seek to evoke is a coloristic reality.

The Faces of Kierkegaard, accordingly, is not a series of portraits but an overall allegory, based on an icon, a drawing we believe looks like him.

The paintings are executed as free mutations on this icon with the aim of *bringing to life*, but not in order to go, “That’s what he looked like!” On the contrary, I was thinking about all the thoughts I made about his interior, while I was simply painting my painting of his exterior.

That was my project, a kind of forensic attempt, through painting, repetition and empiricism, to arrive at possible representations of a philosopher born 200 years ago on Nytorv.

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