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## Dying on Stage

*Last Spring I saw an exhibition at NAU Gallery in Stockholm, "Dawn Naten." Artist Elisabeth Frieberg had, on an early summer morning, drawn fifty-three plywood sheets with a boat on Naten lake in Sörmland, Sweden. The fifty-three panels, warped and painted in different colors, were now placed on the gallery walls and floor, seemingly hovering, all in the same direction in the room. Lines were attached to some of them. A couple of boat seats. Frieberg had managed to recreate the event in the gallery space just as it felt that morning on Lake Naten. It was fantastic! Recently I saw another Frieberg exhibition at Galleri Thomas Wallner. Painting. More focus on individual pieces of work, but the installation felt at least as important here. It was punk, playful and curious. I call up Elisabeth and decide to meet with her in her studio in Nacka in Stockholm. The first thing I see are two meticulously painted color samples that remind me of the installation at NAU.*

I always work from nature in my art, says Elisabeth Frieberg. The color samples you see here are done from my sketches of nature around the city of Taos in New Mexico. I was there for a month in 2013 to experience the place where artist Agnes Martin lived. Frieberg points to a painting, *Untitled (God is happy) No 2* from an exhibit she had recently had at Konsthuset in Stockholm. The painting is done in several layers: The first, a painted surface, abstract expressionism. Clyfford Still? The next layer a checker pattern. Agnes Martin? Above that, dots, color surfaces. Van Gogh? Above that a quickly painted smiley face. God?

Almost all the color surfaces and lines in the painting are from those two color sample sheets. Those blue dots are mountains. The clearest blue is sky. It's not like I've painted a mountain, but content-wise it's a reference to the landscape around Taos.

*Completely unrelated references are often juxtaposed in the same painting.  
Unexpected encounters.*

There are a lot of traces. It's like a mind map for me. I think the more complex, the more exciting it becomes. The artist Giovana Sarti said something like, "There are a thousand fragments that are thrown up in the air, all of art history, contemporary, future." Everything is allowed to exist at the same time. It's at this time I feel very free. There's no hierarchy in this way of thinking. It opens up. I get motivated and it's fun to work. However, I have to be methodic with what I do to not go crazy.

*You don't shy away from showing your references – that's candid.*

I let myself go completely to all of them that I love or think are exciting.

*Did it feel good to paint that happy face?*

It was really fun, but also really difficult. There's so much work under it and then it's the last thing I do, a banal gesture. It still has to work together though. I want

to make an elegant, banal painting that I myself get a kick out of. The different parts have to work together. The happy face came about after I had seen a clip on YouTube of “God Paintings” by Dana Schutz. She had done paintings with motifs that for her represented God. That must be one of the most difficult things you can attempt to do, try to paint God. She had such fun references too, like Liberace. That’s how she envisioned God when she was little. Also the Russian avant-gardist girls like Olga Rozanova – unlikely references. Quite courageous to dare!

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*Then I’m thinking about the title you’ve used for your latest show, “Dying on Stage.”*

I saw an exhibit in *Modern Painters* called *Dying on Stage*, a great title. It referred to an essay I’d read two years earlier in *The Brooklyn Rail* about young painters in New York. It peaked my interest because these artists ruthlessly used their idols. I got in touch with the artist I thought was most interesting, Tatiana Berg, and asked if we could meet in New York. When we got together she mentioned that she’d been given the advice to do a course in improvisational stand-up, which she did. This was supposed to help her painting – so completely non-dry, wonderful and exciting!

*For most people you’re unknown. Who are you and where do you come from?*

I grew up in a place just before you get to Hyltingeö on Båven Lake outside the small community of Stjärnhov in Sörmland. I strongly associate it with the memory of when I was little. I spent a lot of time fishing from the old Jälund bridge. When I got older I became curious and wanted to see the city, so I moved to London right after high school and then later to Stockholm where I still live.

*Tell me about your family and house by Naten Lake, near where you grew up and carried out the event with the fifty-three plywood sheets.*

I come from an artist family where my father's mother, Beth Zeeh, his father, Ryno Frieberg, and his sister, Dagmar Änggård, were artists. Grandpa, 94, still paints even though he can't see – the same color scheme as before, except blurry. Grandma and grandpa wanted to settle down after having travelled a lot and found the big house with two large rooms to have as studios. Both were landscape painters. When grandma died, my parents took over the house. It was an old dilapidated mansion - mice lived behind the art books in the library.

*It sounds like you have a strong connection to your grandmother and grandfather.*

Yeah, I was never directly encouraged by them to become an artist, but I did get a paint box from grandpa when I was eight. I was in the advertising branch first, but I couldn't handle that environment. Art was the only alternative. It came out of a deep depression. I was forced to find something. I started up at Gerlesborg's School and focused on my studies. Model painting, warm and cool colors, the technical aspects.

*And then you studied at the Art Academy in Umeå, studied theory at Konstfack in Stockholm and worked as an assistant for among others artist Ann Edholm. Your work is very technically driven. Every detail is well executed.*

Yes, it's important for out of respect for the whole project.

*You've often worked with lines in your images, in different patterns, referencing Agnes Martin, an artist you often refer to. Do the colors of the lines also relate to anything?*

Absolutely. In the earlier ones I've weaved warm and cool colored lines to get them to vibrate.

*Some of your paintings you've turned backwards so that they reflect their color against the wall behind. How did that come about?*

I saw a sunset and noticed how the colors shifted. I wanted to refine the idea. The first painting was done with vinyl paint. The new painting I showed at Thomas Wallner was done in oil. There I used Agnes Martin's format, six by six feet. I interviewed some of her friends in Taos, and artist colleague Marcia Oliver told me that Martin was treated with electro-shock therapy. She suffered psychologically at times. Martin's paintings are very sheer, and I wanted to get at this lucidity. The reflection against the wall is very delicate. I named the work *Untitled (Electric Martin)* because it looked like the reflection was electric.

*And then we have these large triangles you've painted recently.*

Muff. I thought it was so cool that it's called muff in English too. I've been so annoyed at the triangle as a shape. It's ugly and is so very much associated with symbols. I just don't like it as a form. But all of a sudden I saw two paintings that change the way I see it. One was a Kenneth Noland piece at Pace Gallery that was just great, and then the other by Tatiana Berg, who I met. She did a fantastically playfully painted triangle. So, obviously you can make triangles! I've been interested in different forms of expression, how they're juxtaposed, and the triangle is so expressive. Also, my interest in equality has become more acute.

*And the spiral forms?*

I drew up this giant muff, 2.61 meters wide. It's also a symbol for women's empowerment. It's done in Taos colors, so it became an enormously large Agnes Martin – muff. I painted with warm umber, later I rubbed it out with a rag in a spiral motion. I thought, jeez, what am I doing! Then I started to methodically follow the motion with dots.

The way you show your work as a whole in the exhibition space – How do think about that? For example I'm thinking about how you had hung small paintings under large ones in your latest show. It clashed but worked!

The interest in hanging and installation came early with the fact that I enlarged my format. I have always liked to paint big. When you work with larger paintings, it's inevitable that sooner or later you start thinking about how they affect the space, and how the space affects the paintings. I started thinking about hanging at Thomas Wallner almost immediately when I was asked to show there. I prioritized playfulness and wanted to do something I hadn't seen before, and which was for me, a response to exhibitions I'd seen in recent years. I saw the walls as drawing sheets that I then filled with abstract painting in a figurative hanging. For example, I hung paintings in the form of a happy face. The smaller paintings I hung under the large ones in order to see if they could hold their weight despite the pressure from above. It was the small paintings, which created the main movement and rhythm in the room. Now afterwards, I can think that the hanging was like a song.

In 2008 you showed a series of paintings at Galleri Pictura in Lund that represented reflections on water. In the motifs you had worked with thin checker patterns. Was that the first time you used line patterns in your paintings?

Yes, it was. I saw a puddle of water in tractor tracks in the forest. It was such a nice form for a painting. I don't usually want to paint the whole picture because I think that it gets cropped. I just wonder what's outside. This puddle of water, I wanted to use that form, but I couldn't get it to work. At about the same time, I had seen an Agnes Martin documentary and started to use lines - Martin's method, for that matter, also Mondrian's method, from trees. Then suddenly it worked!

Interesting that you mention Mondrian and his obvious development with trees, how he experimented his way forward. In this same way, you investigate landscape painting.

This is what Martin did as well, even if she claimed that her lines didn't come from nature. Her images from Taos are ethereal. There's a lot of atmosphere in them, and if you've been there you can definitely feel that air in her paintings. How she herself described her work method is utterly fantastic. She described it as small, tiny images in her head that she enlarged. She calculated that it would be a six by six foot painting. I think it's that way for everyone – a little visual image in your head that you try to realize.

*Elisabeth Frieberg is showing new work at NAU Gallery in Stockholm until 20 december.*

