

Exuberance

Finn Janning

Jonna Pedersen, smiling, asks me into her sky-lit studio in Valby, Copenhagen. Two soon-to-be-finished canvases are stapled to the walls. “I’m not crazy about futzing with an easel,” Jonna says. “Hanging them on the wall, I can work on several paintings at the same time.”

The space is small, full of signs of brisk activity and works in progress. The floor is paint-spattered and littered with buckets and brushes. On the walls are colorful outline where paintings used to be. “I’m a painter with a capital P,” Jonna says.

Jonna Pedersen is self-taught. Ever since childhood, she has always spent her time doing something creative. Even so, she ended up getting a conventional college education at Odense University. Later, she worked six years in advertising and communication. “After six years in that industry, I was burned out because I wasn’t working with something I am passionate about. I needed to get in touch with what it was I wanted to do. There was no joy left.”

It’s all about being part of life rather than remaining a passive observer. In rough terms, you might say this means saying yes to that in life which is creative and gives joy and no to what weighs us down. The stress that affected Jonna was intimately tied to her living according to outward goals and ideals, such as money and titles, that command respect in business. “I think, sadly, a lot of people aren’t doing what they burn for, in part because they don’t allow time for immersion and contemplation. They aren’t in touch with what gives them joy and good energy. This is something I’m very aware of in my art. Today, I love my work and I can feel that I’m filled with positive energy, exactly because I like what I do,” Jonna Pedersen says.

Jonna Pedersen showed real guts in making over her life and getting in touch with what she genuinely loves to do – likewise, it is important that the person looking at her paintings becomes a participant, who truly partakes. “Looking is a skill that takes time to acquire. I would like it if people learned to take the time to really see a painting. Getting a feeling for it. This doesn’t mean that I should be telling anyone what it means, because I often learn a lot from what people looking at my paintings say. A dialogue emerges around the work,” Jonna says.

In today’s open network society, no discipline is on the outside. But working on the inside, art can be a breath of fresh air. It can make life easier, more beautiful or just bigger. Art is a force among many others that interact in life. “Art can address both the mind and the heart,” Jonna says. “It can speak of feelings in new ways. When I get inspired, it is often because of something accidental happens. When one of my friends told me about ‘Urban Tribe,’ for instance, I knew that was something I wanted to work with. So I searched the web for ‘Urban Tribe’ and discovered that it was a sociologist’s term for friends taking over the family’s role. It’s your friends you drink your beer with, they help you move, etc. We belong to different tribes of friends,” Jonna tells me emphatically.

Jonna uses the term “Urban Tribe” as a thematic outlining *what* can be done, without inhibiting or anticipating *how* it will unfold. It is a kind of self-constructed challenge or “obstruction,” like the ones the Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier posed to his idol Jørgen Leth in his remake of Leth’s short film “The Perfect Human.” The resistance serves as constructive creation of renewed interest and engagement. Or as Jonna Pedersen puts it, “The challenges help me take my thoughts further. For instance, I recently showed two pictures at Charlottenborg that incorporated fabric because I wanted to challenge myself. I like trying new things and I had never worked with fabrics before. It’s inspiring.”

This resistance, whether self-made or given, becomes a creative engine bringing about the work. Beyond working with a theme or other kinds of resistance, Jonna does not plan her paintings strategically or in any significant detail. “I don’t plan my pictures like that. It varies a lot how I work. Sometimes I’ll paint several paintings in a day, but then I’m completely exhausted afterwards. That’s why I try to stay in shape, because painting is physically

demanding. Other pictures I have around for months before they suddenly come together, like what happened when I heard the term 'Urban Tribe.'"

Without trying to define what makes good art, one could say it should be ahead of the artist. The painting, or the painting process itself, can't be anticipated rationally: it happens, it comes to be. "I can always feel when a painting is finished. Often, some time has to pass after I finish a painting before I can really start talking about it."

Curiosity in many ways is the impetus in Jonna Pedersen's art. She is exuberant about her joy in painting, her joy in looking at art and having a dialogue with different partakers. Jonna seems less interested in lingering on psychological concerns than dealing with what's going on, with active, living people. Meeting the world, and what that meeting might constitute. In other words, the quality of the works does not rest on the depth of everything that is left unsaid or on the works' immediate transparency.

In the spring of 2005, Jonna Pedersen showed in the juried exhibition at Charlottenborg in Copenhagen. One of her two works in the show was on cow-patterned fabric. "I couldn't paint over it," she says, "so I had to see if I could use the pattern for something, make something out of it." She safety-pinned a dishrag on the fabric and next to it she pasted a small printout from an ultrasound scan. Cows, cows, cows, cows, in extended repetition, plus a dishrag and a scan. Recognizable textures on a variety of levels. The fabric is one substance, biological reproduction another, the cow is something else. Different materials come together and create something else, like a quilt. Moreover, the repeating cows underscore that the world is made of similar stuff, on a different level and scale of beauty. A life is both dishrag and creation. The fact that the rag is pinned, not pasted, on may testify to the importance of sustaining or acknowledging the pain we are all stuck with. Still, the ultrasound printout and the minimal green brushstroke touch on this most clearly. Hope, life, something to rejoice in. Life in many ways is simple and banal, but it always contains more than we generally choose to linger on in eternal elaboration. "I like simple things because they have something," Jonna Pedersen says. They have the potential for something else to emerge.

One way of approaching or understanding Jonna's paintings is to see them as a challenge or, perhaps more accurately, as an incentive to take it slow. "I'm idealistic about my work in many ways," she says. "I want to make the world a better place, and one way of doing that is getting people to stop and see. Getting people to immerse and feel themselves. More things keep moving faster all the time. It stressed people out or makes them superficial. I would like people to learn how to see."

In July, Jonna Pedersen is exhibiting in Berlin and later in the year she is visiting New York to make contacts. "It's all about networks. In Denmark, people tend to focus on degrees and titles, but abroad the focus is more on what you do. 'Show me what you do.'" Quality instead of measurable quantity. For Jonna Pedersen, quality in life and art is a requirement for remaining an exuberant person.

"I'm happy every day I start painting. There is nothing I would rather do."