

The Impact of the Past on Our Lives Today

Jonna Pedersen's Existence Series

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In a sunny and inviting studio in Rødovre, an artist who has something to say is making bright, thoughtful art. Pushing color contrasts, Jonna Pedersen makes collages as preparatory sketches for her paintings. The collage-like style is evident in the canvases, which are divided into distinct areas with edges resembling torn paper. The artist draws inspiration from pop icons, familiar retro objects like rotary phones, transistor radios, shoes and clothes. Ornamentation, patterns, letters and numbers are other motifs in her works, which radiate humor and irony while triggering nostalgic reflection.

Pedersen's new series, *Existence*, is a natural continuation of her previous series, [*Fone*]. Looking at cultural change, [*Fone*] pointed out the loss of intimacy that might occur if we fail to stop to think about how we communicate with each other. Serving as a segue, phones also appear in several of Pedersen's new works. While the [*Fone*] series presented the development of telephone technology and its impact on us, the theme of the new series is personal development. In *Existence*, Pedersen sets out to investigate impacts of the past and childhood that have the potential to prompt more general reflection on the present age and our identity and existence in a constantly changing world.

As in the previous series, the artist bases her investigation on "reflective nostalgia," a concept coined in 2001 by the Russian-American cultural theorist Svetlana Boym (1959-2015). Not to be confused with "restorative nostalgia," which seeks to rediscover and recreate a lost past, reflective nostalgia denotes a longing for what is lost. That longing is harnessed to reflect on the present and learn from the past.

Beyond the literal meaning of the word, the title, *Existence*, philosophically implies the capacity to interact with the physical and mental world. The existential view of life was originated by the Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who believed that human existence is eternally incomplete and in constant motion. A person's task is to accept responsibility for their own existence. It is not enough to choose responsibly among the different options available to you. You also have to accept yourself as you are.

Pedersen's series features several invitations to accept and dare to be yourself. *Don't Stop Me Now* shows a black and white harlequin jumpsuit belonging to Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of the British rock band Queen and a fiercely eccentric and energetic showman. For a birthday party, Mercury asked his guests to dress up as their greatest idol. They came as goblins, transvestites, dwarves and transsexuals. Mercury went as himself. The painting includes the word fragment "mangf" and, at the bottom, a rainbow flag, the global symbol of the LGBTQ+ movement, representing diversity ("mangfoldighed" in Danish) and tolerance.

Another icon from the past who is proud to be herself is Madonna. *POW (Power of Women)* shows Madonna's iconic pink corset from the eighties as a symbol of courage, liberation and femininity. The power of women is also represented in *And Soleima (Suleima)*, which depicts the body and

dress of Betty Boop. Created in the 1930s, Betty Boop was the first leading lady of American cartoons. She was sexual by design: big eyes, narrow waist, short dress, prominent breasts and a squeaky, childlike voice. However, she was not a helpless victim like earlier female cartoon characters, who were only waiting to be saved by a big, powerful man. Her creators wanted to depict her as an independent, sexually liberated woman who could look after herself and defy ingrained prejudice. Incidentally, when she was a child, Jonna Pedersen was called Suleima, a common pet name for a girl.

Woman is also at the center of *Mujer – Inescapable*. The painting, with its Spanish title, represents a specific stage in a woman's life, the transition from childhood to adulthood. The Danish word for inescapable ("uomgængeligt"), which appears in the painting, refers to things in life that cannot be avoided or ignored, like growing up and getting older. In Danish, the word can also mean being difficult to be around, which may in some cases be quite apt for kids and teens during a time in life that is crucial to their future existence.

Kierkegaard's existential philosophy was foundational to all of modern existentialism, which builds on the idea that the individual and its existence are bound up with life experience. What was once a matter of human "being" became a matter of "being in the world." The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is also interesting to highlight in connection with Pedersen's art, *Existence* in particular. Heidegger rethought the concept of human existence in the modern, technological world. His magnum opus, *Being and Time* (1927), ranking among the most important works of modern philosophy, is intended as a tool to make us more aware of the fact that life should be viewed according to our existential possibilities. Heidegger devised a fundamental ontological analysis – the so-called learning about being. He started with the human being, because a human being (unlike animals and objects) has the capacity to reflect on its own being, its life, meaning and significance. He views human life as a whole, and our interaction with material things as essential to our self-understanding – as in the case of telephones changing our habits of communication and perhaps even our relationships with each other. Or shoes and clothes helping to define who we are or want to be.

In her work as an artist, Jonna Pedersen is likewise concerned with creating art about people and what it means to be human in a particular time. Time was also important to Heidegger, who wanted to emphasize that humans are temporal creatures who are conscious of their existence and transience, and that we should live life to the best of our ability and aspire to the dreams and goals we set in life. *Château, Citrøen et Cocker Spaniel – Do You Want to Marry Me?* is Pedersen's take on the classic suburban dream of a house, car and pooch. The artist believes this stage in life, when you decide to start a family and create a safe base to call home, is very telling of what it means to be human.

The tools for better understanding and contemplating existence that Heidegger aimed to disseminate through his writing are the same ones Pedersen wants to transmit through her art. Representing childhood through a paper doll of Danish Queen Margrethe II as a little princess, and the past through a rotary phone, *Hot dog St – Childhood Baggage* confronts us with familiar, characteristic and often "forgotten" objects from the past – objects that may trigger emotions or have associations for us individually, depending on our age and experience. The artist does not think of herself as nostalgic, though. She wants us to learn from life and be conscious of the

choices we make and how we live our lives. In addition, she often employs cartoon imagery. In the bottom right corner of the painting, Donald Duck is seen exiting with the baggage of childhood.

On a table in Pedersen's studio sits a collection of shoes and ankle boots. Artistically modified, they can no longer be used as regular footwear. They are displayed as readymades, sculpturally designed with individual personalities and charisma. Shoes make frequent appearances in the *Existence* series. They are also the central element of four slightly smaller paintings, *Liberty Shoes*, and the series of drawings on which they are based. The shoes can be seen as a symbol of staying grounded or of the adult individual searching for or finding their place in life. They can also refer to traveling through life or moving forward after an existential crisis.

Like shoes, clothes can say a lot about someone's personality or place in life. Alluding to childhood, the paper doll outfits represent human presence – or absence. Because the "whole" person is not depicted, and a specific person or facial expression cannot necessarily be decoded, the potential for interpretation is left open. Viewers themselves can "put on" the outfits like a mask or disguise, a facade to present or a statement to wrap yourself in, in different situations or phases of life.

The *Existence* series is complemented by three digital collages, *Faith*, *Hope* and *Love*. The medium is different, but the theme and expression are the same as in the paintings. In *Love*, Pedersen has pasted in a personal photo of her and her husband on their wedding day, as if to write a slice of her own existence into the exhibition.

Jonna Pedersen's works focus on times past, and on how our use of material objects has the potential to change us as people. All the while, it is hardly the artist's intention to be judgmental or didactic. It is often said that things were better in the old days, maybe because we think of what we grew up with as the original and "right" state of affairs. Times are different today. The cultural language is constantly changing and technology develops at a rapid pace. Whether we like it or not, we cannot stop the world from changing and we have to accept the way things are today. Perhaps encountering Jonna Pedersen's art can contribute to a better understanding of the times we live in, and remind us to stop sometimes and reflect on the world a bit more objectively.

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