

## MY MEETING WITH VILHELM HAMMERSHØI

*Ida Lorentzen*

My first meeting with the work of Vilhelm Hammershøi was in 1976, at Waldemarsudde in Stockholm. It was a meeting which changed my life. I had recently moved to Norway from the USA and enrolled in Oslo's Art Academy. There my professors, Ludvig Eikaas and Halfdan Ljøsne, had quickly seen the links between Hammershøi and myself, and arranged a special travel grant to Waldemarsudde just for me. I had never been to Sweden before, yet at this exhibition I had an overwhelming feeling of having come home. When I looked at Hammershøi's paintings I saw myself. Time stood still. Here were the foundations on which I could begin building my own personal universe.

It is the silence he creates with such simple means that fascinates me in Hammershøi. Elimination is essential to him because decoration is misleading. Their melancholy, too, draws me into his paintings until I forget where I am and time and place are obliterated. They have a certain elusive quality of what I can only call mystical detachment that for me is entirely magical.

As an aid, Hammershøi used black and white photographs of settings he had himself staged. And through a long painterly process he transferred onto the canvas his observation not only of the real world but also of the world of the photograph. The paintings are lifted to an existential level by their fusion of an unsentimental objectivity with a romantic silence. Some of his interiors are also lit in such a way as to give a further sense almost of ghostliness. «The Coin Collector» is the closest to me, not just because it hangs in Oslo, which is where I live, but because it tells me about waiting. Waiting becomes something dramatic. Waiting becomes a metaphor for living.

It is thirty years now since I first discovered Vilhelm Hammershøi. Now that our paintings hang side by side at Blaafarveværket, I look critically at my own work and can see the strength of his influence during my formative years. We have both subject matter in common and a feeling for *silence*: yet each belong to our own *zeitgeist*. Every age



Ida Lorentzen: A sweet voice whispers four times, «hello». 2000  
Oil on canvas, 130 x 160 cm. Private collection.

seeks its own truth – in art as in other things – and despite the parallels between us, my vision is not his, in his Strandgade apartment, a hundred years ago. We see space differently. For one thing, rooms today have more light than in Hammershøi's time; anyone unaware of this might almost be tempted to speculate that he worked with half-closed eyes, for the transition between the walls in his paintings is so soft, with the corners blurred. In today's light one sees corners more clearly, so that I can take interest in



Ida Lorentzen: Glasshytten, 2005.  
Oil on canvas, 130 x 180 cm. The Blaafarveværket Collection.

the tension inherent in the conjunction of two walls and the floor in a way that would not have been natural for him. For in the century between us that revolution in the history of art known as modernism has also taken place. Abstract art came to the fore, and painting – as with all visual arts – was stripped of everything not significant to the singular art medium. This meant that one focused particularly on the brush strokes and the picture plane. Art for art's sake changed painting from being a representation of life outside of the canvas to an abstract painting, which in many ways took on a life of its own.

Even though I am a representational artist, my compositions are built on abstract concepts related to the picture plane and edges of the canvas. The Renaissance's linear perspective has been replaced by a modern vision.

It is in my pastels of Nyfossum that I feel closest to Vilhelm Hammershøi: the pastels are on permanent display there. Built in the 1820s, Nyfossum was the director's residence for Blaafarveværket, which two decades later had become Norway's largest industrial enterprise. The vibrations from the house and that pioneering time moved me, inspiring me to make a series of interiors which I think of as portraits of a house.

These pastels are, as I see them, quite different from my works on display this year in Blaafarveværket's main exhibition space, Verket, which show a focus on the room detached from domestic context. The space is controlled and manipulated, so as to obtain a more



Ida Lorentzen: From Nyfossum, 2002-

physical awareness of the walls and floor. In simple terms, the Nyfossum pastels portray a house's interior, the other works seek to explore the feel of interior space.

Today there is greater emphasis on individual interpretation than in Hammershøi's time. It is now not only important what the artist meant, but also what the viewer reads into the art. My way of inviting the viewer into my rooms is to include as few narrative elements as possible, eliminating figures and honing down. Perhaps then the viewer becomes more alert to the significance of a corner, and will wonder further what is the importance of the intersection of one wall with another, the angle created, and the lighting. And the beauty of the wall with its many layers of paint, for me like layers of skin, may further inspire reflection.

This brings me to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and to what I myself cannot help reading into Hammershøi's painting of Saly's Statue of Fredrik V at Amalienborg Palace in Copenhagen. I often feel that there is a ghost in Hammershøi's paintings; that there is something behind the windows and doors. For me, Fredrik V is the ghost of Hamlet's father, riding high on horseback. There are no people on the street, no one is there to help Hamlet out of his madness: I can't can't help reading everything as related to *Hamlet*, my obsession these past few years.

To read unintended literary associations into a Hammershøi painting is one thing, however: what drew me into wanting to «paint fiction» myself in my Kronborg paintings,

is quite another. Of course it is natural for any visual artist powerfully affected by a literary text to want to express this response in her own medium; but in my case I don't think that is the whole story. At Nyfossum I had already stepped outside my own studio to live myself into a past that was not my own; and the Hamlet story – and the real Kronborg seen in the light of that story – with its tension between the imprisoning castle and the wide (yet dominated) world around, chime so well with my own life-long professional preoccupation with space and enclosure. The Kronborg of my paintings is Kronborg as Hamlet experienced it – closed and restricted: light enters the windows, but they offer no vision of escape. Claustrophobia, not least in a family situation, is a human condition I think many of us can identify with.

When I dwell in this way on the story of Hamlet and Kronborg, I can't help trying to relate it to Hammershøi's own life story. Why didn't he paint Kronborg's interior, he who was so interested in rooms? We know that he was there and painted, from an attic window, a view of the roof and a turret. And madness, or rather the fear of it, shadowed his world too. His mother-in-law, a manic-depressive, had to be institutionalised and there was a niece who killed herself. From one of his letters we get the impression that Hammershøi saw himself as having rescued his wife Ida from her own family. But if Hammershøi's intention was to rescue Ida from a kind of imprisonment, why do so many, looking at his paintings, experience Ida as trapped? His interiors are almost solely from Strandgaden. Is Strandgaden for Ida a place of protection? Doors open and close, but never show the world outside.

The aspect of an enclosed space with a world outside, that we sense but cannot see, has always fascinated me. I am also interested in the corner and its duality as I ask myself, am I pressed up in a corner or is this where I want to be? Shakespeare says it so well in *Hamlet*, «I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams». My new paintings from my husband Ulf's studio are painted white on white. The corner has a positive presence. In two of the paintings a door is seemingly about to open and light pours in while the others have a chair stricken, as it were, by unexpected light. I would like to take this as indicating that I am moving on to something, whatever it may be, new and exciting. But like Hamlet I am neither entirely clear what I see before me, nor what I want.

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