

THE DOUBLE IMAGE

The artistic starting point of Marianne Mannsåker is painting. Two different roads lead from this basis: the first with paintings looked upon as sketches for woven images,¹⁾ the other that is *not* regarded as preliminary work, but as paintings and drawings that are claiming to live a full life in their own regard. These separate works constitute a less known part of Mannsåker's oeuvre. Dry pigments (pastels, charcoal, pencil) as well as water based ones (acrylics, gouache, watercolour), often on paper and in small size, make up another side of the artistic work running parallel to her more "official" tapestries.

Most important images are however woven. The play between colour, surface and line, the textures of the threads, various lustres and mattness, the particular figure or shape and its contrast against the ground, these give form to the primary concern of Mannsåker's often declared intention to "paint with thread".

Her world of images is hence primarily anchored in the use of spun and twisted pigments. To this preference could be added the proclivity for surfaces, and to conduct oneself towards colours. She is a pronounced colourist. The images are secretive and introvert. The long process of creation demands a sustained contemplation. The aspect of time is important, both the practically used as well as that in the image lived through and present. Even the most ascetically used colouring is minutely varied in terms of value and temperature, depending upon how the dim wool is juxtaposed against the fragile brilliance of the silk and the longer, drier fibres of the stronger linen. The finished work testifies to a persistent concentration upon solving the various difficulties of composition. At the same time Mannsåker is throughout the work pulled towards improvisation, that gestural engraving or handwriting that results in such an abundant surface that it perpetually seems to change itself and still be inscribed in the totality of the work.

The sizes have gradually become slightly larger than a mature human body, however seldom distant from such a reference. Some of the rectangular images invite to be "read" as text scrolls or scores, while the square ones are more gathering the composition.

Mannsåker's work has been connected with nature in general and the Norwegian mid eastern provinces in particular. Her project is however equally urban.

A more productive categorisation would be to consider three fundamental themes: the organic, the architectural and the calligraphic.

The idiom is abstract, with certain recognizable figurative elements, early on inspired both by Norway's own treasure of so called åklær, hooked rugs and tapestries, and by the conception of the Berbers concerning the central significance of the loom, semantically, culturally and metaphysically.²) This last insight was one of fundamental importance, and more of an existential kind than a mere aesthetic programme.

Mannsåker's work is characterized by a general ambiguity that results in the very opposite of waterproof sections between one theme and another. The same extensive ambivalence that distinguish the Berber notion of the border (thaslath) – simultaneously dividing and bringing together – makes it possible to view the tapestries of Mannsåker as borders of a certain width, borders that attempt to join earth and heaven. The border is responsible for the similarity in the different (formal likeness and substantial difference) and guarantees that time and space hang together even if the world consists of ever so different stuff.

Pertaining *the organic*: the forest, the field and other types of landscape are perpetually current (for instance in *Forest*, *Furrows*, *Rime frost* and *By the river*), but the inner parts of the human body offer an equally palpable and frequent store of elements to be used (the disconnected entrails in for example *Burnt*, that at the same time represents cosmic matter). Natural phenomena are often pointing beyond themselves (*Rain* is as much shimmering silvery water as a smooth worn wall).

The architectural: Mannsåker is in a figurative sense both city planner, archaeologist and traveller. The facades, the towers and the narrow lanes are integral building stones in her universe (among others *Long barn*, *Lost*, *Fall*, *Hiding places* and *Medina*). Other architectural parts are the stair (as in *Steps*), the ladder and the door (most clearly in the early *Iron door*).

Mannsåker is attracted by the wall as a motive; yet landscapes and buildings are two sides of the same: *Medina* is simultaneously a map over walled gardens with passages, a nomad's tent wall and the city walls of Marrakech. Both the house and the wall are possible to perceive as mental "rooms" or states, and literally remnants of bygone life, problems that Mannsåker associates with the return (as in *Homecoming*). Ever since The Odyssey the conditions of travelling and returning home linked to the pranks of memory has deposited configurations of weight: when

the subject after its roving expeditions returns back he or she is different, but also what you see again has meanwhile been transformed. A present that both turns against a wasted past and a devastated future, an origin that is object for excavation, a home, a block, a whole region that helter-skelter has been abandoned are some of the markers of vulnerability that Mannsåker is perpetually putting in motion.

Letters and other *calligraphic* entities: the irreversible movements of the hand over the paper here corresponds to retrieving the threads and putting them behind the warp, witnessing of a presence that is gone, but that has left a sensual trace of touch. In for instance *Lampblack* (a kind of letter) a secret alphabet is burning and turning to char whilst at the same time being a body cavity and labyrinth.

Poetry and music are for Mannsåker functioning as artistic seedbeds, where ideas are suddenly sprouting and perhaps root themselves. This broad base of interests, artistically, is only another way of saying that she returns from different ways to a loom that is more of a violin than an easel, a weave that is rather a delivered piece than notation, to threads on who's timbre she performs towards the fully tinted image that ultimately is Mannsåker's self-imposed punishment and reward.

Is the artist ridden by such incompatible urges as at the first instance wanting to communicate and be understood, and secondly an equally blatant hope not to be tracked down?3) Mannsåker is on the one hand careful with giving her works particular names, on the other aware of and affirming the inability of the artist to make herself heard. The titles are fastidiously chosen, linguistically elaborated, now clues, now ciphers. It is not only the personal solitude and monocular individuality that is impossible to exceed, a whole terrain on the border between interpretable and not interpretable is here opening up, a field where language is not sufficient or is lost, at most enigma or a question stimulating the viewer to co-creation.

The "baptism" of Mannsåker is as diligent as ever a writer's. Never does she decide on the nowadays classic alternative of the artist to call an image *Without title*. She insists on the visibility of the relation between the part (equals the title) and the whole (equals the work), builds an anteroom for the beholder to be thrown into, rather than to rest in, because a title is no heat cabin or armchair, but a suggestion of direction, a request pointing in a certain way, but then leaving the responsive to himself. The word has not more power than that, and does not want to have either. The title is an overture with an appeal.

It takes time to weave; this is pertinent. Mannsåker attempts to transform the woven image's for technical reasons protracted "delivery" to an artistic triumph card. She starts from pencil- or charcoal sketches and works herself up towards painted paper drafts in scale 1:1, from which she takes inspiration and in series of complex, precise and not the least local deviations and developments of the various parts of the draft transcend and leave behind, until the tapestry is finished. The draft has by now played out its role as a springboard and is destroyed. As residue it is nevertheless remaining, shining through the tapestry. The finished image is – to put it differently – a double exposure of various techniques and attitudes vis-a-vis material, pigment, genres and hierarchies.

A particular form of perception related to Mannsåker's occupation can be formulated in terms of the "split vision" that is necessary. While at work only a fraction of the tapestry is visible, since what has already been woven is rolled up, memory and oblivion are the artist's yeast and water, the finished tapestry "blindness" materialized (or the recollection of the fingers'), seen and unseen thread by thread grown together.

Regarding the artistic method of Mannsåker this could be described as a kind of wash, a twofold corrosive bath, so that the work is getting rid of less buoyant "pollutions", a result that can never be achieved without industrious sketching and painting. Drawing lines and making brush strokes are attempts to stroll in a landscape that might be revisited later on, to orient oneself in again and losing oneself in through further supplements of drawn or painted "siblings" or woven "inoculations", each among themselves similar but ultimately unique in the gradual deformation that the revision of the life course and its fulfilment signifies.

Mannsåker does not make whole series of finished images, but these can nevertheless be divided according to "family likeness" or be understood as new endeavours to solve problems concerning composition. *Iron door*, for instance, can via *Heart stone* and *Snow house* be seen as a model for the 15 years younger *Verdigris*. A scarred line runs from *State* to *Burnt*. A third has *Hourglass* (from 1980) as a catalyst for such diverse works as *Quiet*, *Breach* and *Snow letter*. Each tapestry is hence to be regarded as yet another island in an already existing archipelago, or – to use more forest-oriented connotations – as a gradually maturing spruce from whose cones a new forest might one day sprout.

If Mannsåker remains in accord with herself this comes from distance to oneself, from maintained contact with the emptiness and silence where body and soul paradoxically are activated. To see structures in chaos means to be able to look upon what was not visible originally, to give oneself the largest possible amount of respites to regret, to stand facing the technical perils of weaving being forced to clench with solutions that were enforced and would otherwise not have seen the daylight, to unforeseen leave for unknown destinations, to subsist on limitations and hindrance or – briefly put – the resistance.

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English version: Keith Robotham

NOTES:

1) For the sake of fluency I here use the Swedish "bildvävar" (Eng. Tapestries) instead of the word most used by Mannsåker herself, the Norwegian "tepper", as the term for her woven images. According to Mannsåker a teppe is however a simplification, closely resembling the painters canvas (Norwegian lerret).

2) Mannsåker's encounter with Berber culture goes back to an exhibition in 1980 (see Louisiana Revy 21, volume number 2, november 1980). Travels in Morocco has not diminished the empathy. See further for exemple H.Reinisch/W.Stanzer, Berber, Graz 1991 and E.Laoust, Mots et choses berbères, Paris 1920.

3) Paul Celan's poetry is of relevance for Mannsåker. In the poem Die abgewrackten Tabus (in the collection Fadensonnen) he formulates it accordingly: "/.../ auf / Bedeutungsjagd, auf / Bedeutungs- / flucht".