

Bodies Brought into Shape:

Comments on Jenny Lindblom's painting

Roland Barthes accredited a positively mythical cultural significance to Greta Garbo's face. According to the French philosopher in his volume of essays *The Mythology of Everyday Life* (1957), it had "the snowy thickness of a mask: it is not a painted face, but one set in plaster, protected by the surface of the colour, not by its lineaments." Here, Barthes was referring to Garbo's portrayal of Queen Christina. Swedish artist Jenny Lindblom reverses this vision of the unattainable Hollywood face that becomes a projection area for the dreams of the masses in its enlargement on the silver screen in her portrait of King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands. It was produced as a commissioned work for the evening paper *NRC Handelsblad* to mark the occasion of his coronation in April 2013. Willem-Alexander appears at the height of his media presence. His face is tanned. White rings shimmer around his closed eyes alone, in the areas covered by his sunglasses so that the UV-rays could not reach them. Here, the mask is not the enigmatic celluloid white but the imagined, suntanned face of a king who reveals everything, demonstrating his closeness to the people and normality in a positively obtrusive manner. In the age of YouTube he appears as a kind of tired anti-Garbo. In Lindblom's ironic, mystic-melancholy images a key role is played by the available, representative, artificially formed body. It is not uncovered/tanned but no more than a covering.

The white marks of t-shirts (so-called "farmer's tan"), watches, slipped shoulder straps and sunglasses on tanned skin: once frowned upon as a characteristic of the working class, they have been fetishized long since by the pornography, fashion and advertising industries. In Lindblom's series *All-Inclusive* (2011-) she constructs tourists' bodies that consist entirely of farmer's tan. They pose in front of the pyramids of Giza – so that they appear to be actually carrying the far-distant structures in mini-format under their arms or perched on their palms. Light and shade, flat surface and line, the relation between subject and object: everything in these images seems to be in a state of fragile balance, in order to produce an image that suggests one moment of debatable happiness. And this very same doubt is what characterizes Lindblom's work: doubt in poses, in conventions, and in painterly pathos.

In this context, she also stages the female body in the role of the object, although not without humour: e.g. in *Nigiro Eht* (2012) – where it is a sex toy reduced to breasts and vulva. Read backwards, the title is "The Origin", a reference to Gustave Courbet's famous painting *L'Origine du monde* (1866), which triggered a scandal with its portrayal of a recumbent, naked woman's hairy genitals. In *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (2011) a motionless, expressionless youthful model wearing sunglasses stands among a collection of ancient Greek vases. This is not only a reference to the common analogy between the vase and the female form but also to John Keats's poem of the same name, dated 1820, which begins: "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness..." and attributes a similar role to the woman as it does to the vase – still, mysterious and passive. As in Freud's writing, culture appears in Lindblom's paintings as the origin of suppressed drives and unease. The loving, intertwined towel swans from her series *Towel origami resort* (2011-) for example, are sad monuments to the banality and commercialization of emotions – lame promises for honeymoon tourists. But the archaic, aggressive and bestial breaks out from beneath the cultivated façade. The suntanned tourists resemble savages. In *Untitled (Limited Ambition)* (2010) Lindblom paints girls at their nightly "mooning" ritual: showing one's bare bottom bore a male connotation before the Femen activists – as an inebriated leisure pursuit and aggressive form of protest. However, this gesture is of no avail – it disappears into nothing, into the darkness like some

mysterious displacement activity. The beauty queen pose of the girl in Badbild / Bonnbränna (Limited Ambition) from 2010 disintegrates as well. The white outlines of a T-shirt are visible at her neckline and on her upper arms; her legs are pasty, destroying the illusion of cultivated femininity: the greatest subversion lies in this lack of ambitious self-representation rather than in aggression.

Oliver Koerner von Gustorf
BE Magazine 2013