



For the love of nature

Soundless Poems and Sonic Objects

Life Structures: Solo Exhibition by Rikke Darling

By Artwriter Anton Larenz / 2014

The earth is in trouble, year by year mankind is becoming more aware of the threats and dangers caused by the ongoing climate change. According to most experts and also many politicians the reality of climate change has to be accepted as an undeniable fact. The catastrophes ranging from floods and hurricanes to coming food crises as consequence of global warming are obvious signs of an ecological system that is out of balance, caused by man-made impacts on the environment. Even the biggest consumers of fossile fuels, and until recently the most reluctant governments concerning efficient climate policies, - the United States of America and China -, have admitted that something needs to be done. Both governments have now agreed at the APEC summit in Beijing to take steps to reduce carbon emissions.

Artists are often called the notorious canaries in the coal mines, meaning that they are more sensitive of what is going on around them, with the power of premonition. Many committed artists have reacted with their artworks to changes in society and environment, drawing attention to problems that“

“I am nature.”

Jackson Pollock

” If honey bees become extinct,
human society will follow in four
years.”

Albert Einstein

“But humans are nature. We are all
made by the same ground material.”

Rikke Darling

are often not being acknowledged by the general public. So they play an important role in educating and informing society, by means of aesthetics. But artists are also working on individual and very subjective levels, expressing feelings, emotions and the longing for beauty.

Rikke Darling, an artist from Denmark, has come now to Indonesia for an artist residency, for collecting new impressions here in a tropical environment with a very rich nature. Formerly she had mostly painted with an abstract style, colorful poetic paintings with brilliant colors. She also did installation works and interior designs. Actually she started her artistic career from a fashion design background, where she developed her skills in drawing and designing creatively. A good eye for structures and forms and her sense of beauty go along with this. She has already travelled a lot, discovering and experiencing different kinds of nature for example in Iceland, Japan and China, and now in Indonesia. Nature is fascinating, she says, and her works are inspired by it.

Abstract painting is difficult to explain, maybe it is even impossible to understand it completely in a literal sense. Emotions/feelings are transformed into color and composition of space, shaping unpredictable forms. At the moment of painting the artist is not aware of what is finally going to happen on the canvas, there is a spontaneous element of expression that is special in abstract painting. Going with the flow, exploring the deepest possibilities of visualization. Although this approach is absolutely free, Rikke Darling always does a lot of research before she starts painting. The shapes in her works look very similar to organic cells, and she explains that she is indeed using a microscope for studying cell structures. Impressed by the darker aspects of organic and cellular life, she feels even attracted by the sight of growing cancer cells and finding beauty even there, comparing them to the image of roses. She says that the dark parts belong to life as well and they have to be accepted. This thinking is reflected in her use of color gradation and shades. Dark parts dissolve into lighter nuances of color until they finally become white, representing emptiness or the void.

Rikke Darling remarks that she is very oriented towards science. She is an avid reader of books on biology and chemistry, but also philosophy. Among the philosophers she has read she mentions the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, who is known for metaphor, irony and parables, his philosophy focussing on personal choice and commitment. Such philosophical ideas and means are also feasible in Rikke Darling's paintings, they are not just a beautiful surface, but convey important messages. She perceives her world view as holistic, including the visible and the non-visible. Paul Klee once famously remarked that painting makes the invisible visible. But it depends on the individual background and openness of a viewer how much is understood of the contained messages.

Telling about her experience of doing interior design work in three mental hospitals in Denmark, Rikke Darling feels confirmed by the patients who always felt comfortable by viewing at her work. In the case that a patient would feel uncomfortable, she would have replaced or removed that design immediately, she says. So this experiment was another test for her, assuring her that her paintings could really connect with viewers on an unconscious level. She mentioned that she had studied books on color psychology, so her approach was in a way scientifically prepared, but finally left to emotional reactions of the recipients. Generally she wants her work being understood as a representation of feelings. Her theoretical background is important, but only the entrance step and incentive for opening a much more uncontrolled and unpredictable realm. Her brush strokes are diligently executed, she is paying a lot of attention to details.

Before she came to Indonesia, she decided to try something differently. She wanted to be more narrative, talking about issues and that's why she concluded to add objects, in this case the figures of insects, to her abstract painting style that is still dominating in her visualization. There is also a change in the choice of color, a general tendency to a more monochromatic color composition. Some of these new paintings have still kept a fluorescent or (bio)-luminiscent character, according to the chosen story or object. The colors and shapes expose a poetic quality. There is flow and dynamics in her

spatial composition, enhanced by the graduation of color. herherpatial composition, enhanced by the graduation of color.

Once a critic compared Rikke Darling's work to a symphony. With the theme of insects buzzing sounds could be imagined while watching the painted story. Classical Chinese paintings often show insects, for example crickets which were even hold as a pet in a small cage because people liked to listen to their sounds, like singers singing a song. Chinese painting was often combined with poems in calligraphic writing, so they were called "soundless poems", because they were not read loud. By the poetic power of her paintings Rikke Darling evokes an impression of sound, she lets us feel the noise of swirling bees and buzzing beetles. The installation work she is preparing during her stay in Yogyakarta will combine audio-visual elements, figures of insects and poetry to open another perspective on her issues.

Views of Insects

The titles of the paintings indicate the moral meanings taken from her perceptions and her insights about life and insects. Generally humans don't want to be disturbed or live to close together with insects, they are seen as disgusting or even dangerous. Especially spiders are generally seen as hairy, scary and lethal. Of course, in some cases insects (like cockroaches for example, because they are agents in spreading cholera, dysentery, and many species of parasitic worms) can really be dangerous and damaging, as transmitter of diseases or because of their venoms. Peasants see insects mainly as pests that destroy their harvests. So mankind decided to make use of chemicals – highly poisonous insecticides (like the notorious DDT) and pesticides – then not only killing the insects but also damaging the health of humans who come into direct with it or through the residues of chemicals in our daily food.

The renowned American environmentalist Rachel Carson ("The Silent Spring" (1962) was one of the first scientists who warned the society about the dangers involved with the disappearance of insects.

She took up the struggle against the widespread usage of DDT. Insects, although they can cause tremendous damages to agriculture and human health, have their function in the ecological system. Bees are producers of honey and wax, and by pollination they are guaranteeing the growth of flowers and many kinds of trees. Billions of honeybees worldwide die now. Their recent disappearance has become threatening, a sign of dramatic changes in the natural environment.

Entomology, the science of insects

Entomologists, the experts on insects, have broadened their scope of research, opening new specializing branches of cultural entomology, the cultural usage of insects by humans. A very interesting field for the future will be the so-called entomophagy, the eating of insects. Insects could provide a resourceful possibility for facing the predicted food crisis, because certain certain species of insects are edible, containing a lot of protein and other important nutrients. Many people around the world have always used insects as additional food, for example grasshoppers or certain kinds of maggots. But especially in Western societies the bias on eating insects is strong, and, who knows, maybe in a time not so soon away that attitude might change. Research programs on insects as a source of food are already supported by the United Nations.

Tradition of Insect paintings

In the tradition of painting insects especially the Chinese have been inclined to see the beauty in these so often detested invertebrates. The frequent combination of birds, flowers and insects in Chinese paintings shows a deeper understanding of the inter-connectedness of natural life. Wu Bing, a painter living during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) painted insects (a dragonfly and a butterfly) on rice plants, demonstrating balance and harmony in nature by doing this. Qi Bai-shi celebrated the grasshopper by painting it.

Another example from Japan is the Picture Book of Selected Insects, a wood-printed book by the famous Kitagawa Utamaro. Albrecht Duerer could be

mentioned as a Western artist, with his famous painting of a stag beetle. Odilon Redon is very well known for his painting of spider (1), and for mentioning a more contemporary artist, of course, Louise Bourgeois with her giant spider. But these two modern artists refer to the monstrous or scary aspect of the spider, while the painting of the Renaissance artist Albrecht Durer (1471-1528) shows a detailed representation of nature, like many later drawings and paintings used by scientists for biology and zoology books.

There is an intersection between art and nature, also visible in the drawings and etchings by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel who acknowledged nature as an art form (*Art Forms in Nature*, 1904). By drawing nature he developed a deeper understanding of natural life, being guided by nature to produce art, but on the other hand also deriving his science from art. His aesthetical style of drawing organisms, cells and sea animals has been very influential in artist's circles, especially for the Art Deco.

Life structures

Rikke Darling's works could be positioned as standing in the tradition of the aforementioned examples. Starting from research and intense conceptualizing she seeks for the unknown mysteries in life, considering all life forms as basically the same, coming from the same ground material. Looking for the principle of balance in nature, or life generally, she explores the light and the dark sides of this organic process by acknowledging dangers, risks and abysses. She invites the viewer for a journey through inner and outer spaces. There is a demanding appeal in this: to observe the inner and outer worlds more diligently and to bring them into balance again. The macrocosm is reflected by the microcosm, structures outside relate to structures inside. Life forms consist of structures, and life itself is structuring. Life is a process, so is art. As she says: "It's all about life."



Narrating

Every single chosen species of insects represents a moral appeal or story, in this sense like the fables of the old Greek story-teller Aesop who used animals in his stories for telling people about right or wrong behavior. Rikke Darling tells about greed (grasshoppers eating grain), about militaristic and totalitarian tendencies (the red ants, fiery, ferocious looking, notorious for their living in colonies within hierarchies, with even a special caste of warrior ants: Go Marching In). Similar the story about the hard working bees producing honey, but they are reminding us of the tragedy of their possible disappearance. The beauty of swirling dragonflies is a seduction by a view of nature, the tomcat (or Roving Beetle) relates to their mutation from once not so venomous insects to some more poisonous invertebrate, caused by the impact of insecticides. After chemicals were used in the rice fields, the bites of tomcats have become more dangerous. The spider constructs a web, the spider as a creator, a natural architect. The painting is painted with blue-metallic color, evoking the coldness of a cave with small moulds reserved for laying eggs. And so on... All the paintings correspond color-wise with a basic incident and emotion that is connected to the story.

Rikke Darling has been a participant of the recent Biennale in Langkawi, Malaysia, where she had the chance to talk to many other artists from different countries. She got the impression that many of them share her concerns about the state of the planet. Something seems definitely to be wrong, she says, when so many other artists confirm her worries about the environment. So we cannot continue playing on for material reasons with the existence of the earth. For the love of nature, for the love of the whole earth let us try to change our minds and to find serious solutions.



Anton Larenz, art writer

- 1) Spiders are not exactly insects in the biological sense, but as arthropods they share the same category with insects.

Notes:

Carson, Rachel: *The Silent Spring*. 1962, Mariner Books, 2002

Durst, Patrick B., Johnson, Dennis V., Leslie, Robin N. and Shono, Kenichi (Edits.): *Forest insects as food: humans bite back*. Proceedings of a workshop on Asia-Pacific resources and their potential for development. 19-21 February 2008, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Haeckel, Ernst: *Art Forms In Nature*, 1904