

Variations On A Sidetrack

By Mads Damsbo

The main characters in Lærke Lauta's films and paintings are all in search of themselves. Along sparkling lakes, among gloomy mountains or deep in the silent depths of the forest, the artist allows her subjects to journey towards the longed-for encounter with the self. Despite the immediate realism of the pictures, the characters have departed from the rational sphere of reality, and now find themselves on the edge of the possibility-rich universe of dreams. Here, far from the call of worried mothers, and surrounded by the scent of the dew-fresh forest floor and the chirping of birds, is where the artist allows the encounter to happen; the seeker finds her alter ego, often in the form of the doppelgänger who appears for the observer in a dramatic climax, fixed by canvas or film through the immobilising power of repetition.

But by then it is already too late. For Lauta, the threat of annihilation always lies in wait behind the nearest tree, and self-knowledge often bears the mark of death. Like Orpheus, who could not restrain his own curiosity and had to glance back at the gods on his way out of the underworld, Lauta's main characters suffer from a fateful longing for insight. Just as in the greek myth, they each find themselves on a dangerous track, in which recognition of the self means both the loss of innocence and the possibility of obliteration rather than redemption. Here, the sight of the gods has merely been replaced with that of the modern self, as an image of the liberating excess of finality.

The artist, however, does not allow her main characters to go quite that far. In contrast to the greek hero, they manage to shield their eyes at the last moment and thereby avert the catastrophe, but also the insight. At no point do we stand face to face with death in the works of Lauta, who allows her subjects to go right out to the edge. And this is the enchanting hub of the works. In a series of variations on the sidetracks, we encounter the main characters of the works stuck in the climactic moment between seeking and knowing, redemption and dissolution; a moment that finally becomes so urgent for the observer that it overrides the works' sequential nature and assumes the classic and metaphorical character of an actual voyage of discovery.

This presentation of Lærke Lauta's production demonstrates first and foremost the artist's versatile and experimental use of the media of film and painting. Under the influence of the former, Lauta's paintings reveal a filmic quality in which each individual picture visually suggests a larger story. Conversely, in her films the artist makes effective use of the special narrative technique of painting, in which all layers of the story are placed side by side on various symbolic levels. The most eye-catching examples of this overlap between genres may be observed in short films such as *Travellers On A Mountain path* (2006) and *She Met Herself* (2006). The figures here are frozen in photographic moments elevated above and out of time and traditional narrative rhythm of film. Emphasized by the movement in their surroundings, both the travellers, the woman in the violet jacket and her alter ego are frozen in the eternal now of the painting, in the midst of the film's continuing movement.

But film and painting also overlap on other levels in the works. Common to both film and painting is a marked contrast between figure and space. In *Travellers On A Mountain Path*, this contrast is formed by the figures' everyday clothing and the romantic expression of nature. As in the majority of Lauta's works, nature enters the scene as a co-creator, not just of the situation's atmosphere, but also of the story as a whole. Nature is in other words part of the action, adding a disturbing sense of drama to the more prosaic figures. So it is in the enigmatic work entitled *Travellers* (2004). Here, the apparently

friendly natural surroundings, with a blue sky and brown forest floor, create a fairytale-like and otherworldly atmosphere around the riders, who are hunched sleeping - or dead? - on their wandering horses. In both works, the everyday clothing of the figures creates a story of contemporary character which links the dream to the sphere of reality.

In dialogue with the Neo-romantic ideas of the self and its subjective reflection in the invented world of fiction, both the child and the woman emerge as central figures in the works of Lærke Lauta. From the early works, in which the child occupy a prominent position, we can observe a development in recent years in which the young and the adult woman begin to take up a growing amount of space. In both cases, however, it is the relationships with other people, and particularly the family, together with the philosophical relationship with the world, that define the message of the works.

While nature, in recent years, has occupied a regular place in the work of many artists, both as a fictional and as an actual space for the projection of the subject into the world, the child figure is not as common. Burdened by the psychoanalytical idea of the child as a therapeutic image of the adult's own soul-searching process, it is hard not to place the child in a direct, biographical connection with the artist herself. However, there is another, more literary approach to the child figure which precedes that of psychoanalysis, and which - despite its many indistinct aspects, particularly in relation to the child as the image of innocence and purity - seems more appropriate in this context.

Two points at which the child figure occupies a central space in Lauta's work should be mentioned here. The first occurs in somewhat sinister film work *Sunday (2003)*. Here, a family is shown at a birthday celebration in an idyllic garden by the water. A strange wind disrupts the event, however, and in the remainder of the film the family's children encounter various extreme situations. Most disturbing of these is the scene in which two small girls on tricycles collide and, screaming, continue to run into each other. The film comprehends the child's double character as at one and the same time a creature which is dependent and innocent, and independent and aggressive.

Similarly, the child's double nature is thematised by the boy with the gun in *An only Child Plays Alone (2007)*. In a terse movement across the film screen, the boy mimes the ubiquitous computer game figures, in which superheroes mechanically mow down their enemies with rapid jerks on the trigger. However, in this case the boy in the film is a victim of his own bullets, and comes thereby to play the role of both victim and executioner.

In the Victorian world of the nineteenth century, the child was an essential mental symbol in our understanding of innocence, and the child figure was utilised in a wide range of stories as a metaphor and literary image for correct moral action and thinking. But the child figure also grew up, and it is the classic transition phase from child to adult, with a nod to the classic moral tales such as *Alice in Wonderland*, which informs Lauta's interest in the child.

The voyage of discovery is not merely a common theme for the main characters in Lauta's films; the artist herself, through her works, also seems to undergo a similar journey through the strange universe of symbolism. Via a number of references to historical pictures, the artist reveals her inspiration in the images of former times for the landscape and relationship with nature, and in the dreaming transition between sight and image, reality and imagination, as expressed in the poetic ideals of Romanticism and Symbolism, respectively.

While in *Travellers On A Mountain*, Lauta draws on the dark tones of Romanticism with its portentous images of nature, the artist constructs a different kind of soft background for the tense encounter in *Woman Surrounded By Men (2006)*. The background to the scene

is L.A. Ring's famous moss-clad landscape from Roskilde Fjord, which, together with the woman's red jacket, completes the symbolic expression of the surroundings. Through these concrete references to art history, Lauterbach reinforces the experience of suspended time; the natural world of the past melts in its encounter with the tower blocks and the contemporary urban utopia in *An Only Child Plays Alone*, to create a third space - that of dreams and the imagination - on the threshold between past and future.

Thus led out on the eerie fringe of associations, Lauterbach leaves the observer to meditate on the self and the reflection in the depths of the world. While the main characters in the films are fixed in the time pocket between the here and now and eternity, the artist lets the viewer continue the excursion along the seductive possibility-rich path of and offshoot tangent.