

## **A Ship of Fools and a Prairie of Idiots:**

### Abstract Heroism and Figurative Folly in the Paintings of Vemund Thoe

I asked Vemund Thoe how he reconciles his more figurative with his abstract works but as he started to answer, getting as far as saying that he does not really see any difference between them, we were interrupted by a Scottish oil worker named Ruairí (pronounced like “brewery”, as he repeatedly stated). Our planned one beer turned to two and two to four as our new friend opined on various subjects from the falling price of oil and it’s affect on his profession (for the first time since joining the industry he was recently asked by his superiors that if he stayed in a hotel, could he please keep the price below 2500kr per night, maybe just a room instead of the usual suite?), to the restoration of Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s famous library at Glasgow School of Art, destroyed by fire in the spring of 2014. As he went on I began to think as one does while listening to a person who talks constantly without inviting a response, in wholly abstract terms.

I liked Ruairí, even though he clearly needed to be liked far more than Vemund and I needed to like him. He was knowledgeable about a wide variety of subjects and loved to talk about all his childhood friends with whom he grew up on the Isle of Sky. It seemed most had ended up with successful careers in the arts and I detected a tinge of regret as he described their respective ascendancies in comparison to his own very successful though less intellectually stimulating career.

We rolled cigarettes and listened as he talked about the wild landscape of his native Western Isles, and my mind drifted to the sublime Wild Western landscapes of Thoe’s *Come to Where The Flavor Is*, a framed collection 1970’s vintage Marlboro advertisements, carefully removed from Playboy magazines of the same period. In these idealized scenes, ruggedly beautiful cowboys do cowboy stuff while smoking all the while. These idiots of the prairie are very familiar and have of course already been appropriated in recent art history. Not in Thoe’s way though, as he forces us to look at their meaning through the lens of the paintings that surround them. I begin with *Ship of Fools*, this exhibition’s namesake and perhaps the most aesthetically incongruous of the works on display; it figuratively depicts a moment in recent history that I will not reveal. A heavily armed police SWAT team are desperate to get somewhere fast and have commandeered a small rubber boat. Weighed down by their weaponry, the vessel begins to sink long before reaching its destination, leaving its warrior occupants pathetically helpless and far from the lakeshore. Another image that makes a similar point is *F - 104*. The outline of a Lockheed F -104 Starfighter disintegrates against a heavily worked red background. The German Luftwaffe was the primary user of this aircraft, nicknamed the *Widowmaker*, and operated 916 of them between 1960 and 1985. Of these 292 crashed killing 116 pilots, all in peacetime operations. A documented history of political corruption and graft is blamed for this travesty but one still wonders what was going through the heads of the pilots of these death traps as they climbed aboard knowing that their statistical chances of survival were so pathetically low.

Cowboys of the sky, Germans really dig that wild-west shit, you should check out their re-enactments online; I’m sure Marlboro would have loved the surviving pilots to smoke as they flew, and this gung ho masculine recklessness is touchingly romanticised in

Thoe's oeuvre. Ruairí (like "brewery" without the "b" remember?), would understand, he stayed out in the open, clinging to oil rigs in gale force winds and climbing sheer rock faces for fun in his spare time, constantly reliving and professionalising childhood shenanigans. Yet still he yearns to see with an artist's eye, to conceptualise what he does and live its ideal rather than experience the real.

And what of the other eighteen paintings in this exhibition, where the background comes to the fore and whatever tragically misguided heroism there was has dissipated into broad swathes of dark colour and abstract form. I tell Thoe that I think I recognise some English Terraced housing in one of them and he replies that he promised somebody, the identity of whom he cannot reveal, that he would never tell anyone what or where the alleged subject actually is. This cheekily obstructionist policy on the part of the artist rings very true alongside our shared interest in cold war military aircraft and the associated cloak and dagger activities of that era. The diptych *Tree-Grove/SR71*, refers to the famous SR71 Blackbird spy plane, the fastest aircraft ever built, so fast in fact that we can't even see it.

The cold war arms race was the greatest creative industrial endeavour in history yet its real purpose was never activated and its promise of mutual destruction never fulfilled. These and other flying marvels of engineering have ended up in museums or covering vast swathes of the Nevada desert. In his epic 1997 novel, *Underworld*, Don DeLillo describes one of these aircraft graveyards as a place where the fictional artist Klara Sax has been commissioned to direct a project to paint these relics in a myriad of garish colours. Rows and rows of hundreds of bombers that never served their purpose, spread out across the vast landscape, "She wanted us to see a single mass, not a collection of objects."

The greater folly of the entire cold war, indeed the pathetic folly of heroic human endeavour in general, is shown in microcosm in this exhibition of paintings by Vemund Thoe. He too is painting a single mass rather than a collection of objects, but amongst this mass we catch glimpses of recognition and realisation. Ruairí ("brewery") put it succinctly at one point in the evening, when describing the drop in the price of oil as being unethical as well as illogical, as the price of something that is running out should always go up rather than down. Oil prices can be seen as a contemporary type of weapon for our era that is abstract rather than figurative. But like in the exhibition you see before you, there is really no difference between the two.

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