

THE EXPANSE ABOVE AND BELOW – NEW WORKS BY MIE MØRKEBERG

BY SANNE KOFOD OLSEN

In the exhibition *Homeward Unbound* Mie Mørkeberg starts from earlier works that revolve around the familiar, the homely, and the unfamiliar, seen symbolically. Thus she connects the exhibition to earlier works where the subconscious and its presentation are at the center. *Homeward Unbound* is about the physical and psychological journey into the unknown.

“The works are a kind of fairy tale without an edifying moral lesson. They are not instrumental, as fairy tales in a moral sense have been, but rather revealing and self-referential. They dive into the human psyche, which is presented in a surreal, metaphorical and symbolic language, without, however, defining an actual sense construction. The fairy tale is a good starting point for working with the *unheimlich*, because through this image conditions can be suggested and both individual and collective psychological circumstances can be revealed in a recognizable form. And yet the content doesn't turn literal or familiarly homely.”¹

The *unheimlich* is a concept defined in early psychoanalysis, especially by Sigmund Freud. It is conventionally translated as *uncanny*, and meant to suggest the *disturbingly unfamiliar* or the *alien*.

Mie Mørkeberg's work with the *uncanny* is important and a recurring element in her image universe. It pits the homelike against the uncanny/unhomelike in a double fashion: as physical reality and as psychological reality.

In a text about surrealism American art historian Hal Foster clarifies what the *uncanny* is:

“[...] the uncanny for Freud involves the return of a familiar phenomenon (image or object, person or event) made strange by repression. This return of the repressed renders the subject anxious and the phenomenon ambiguous, and the anxious ambiguity produces the primary effects of the uncanny:

- (1) an indistinction between the real and the imagined [...];
- (2) a confusion between the animate and the inanimate, as exemplified in wax figures, dolls, mannequins, and automatons [...]; and

(3) a usurpation of the referent by the sign or of physical reality by psychic reality, [...].”²

In Mie Mørkeberg's art a distinctly psychological reality emerges on the expanse of the canvas. Subjects that are immediately recognizable are combined with alien figures and objects that seem to possess a threatening or ominous power. The recognizable and familiar – the holiday home, living room, tourist snapshot, etc. – is fractured by the unknown, directing your attention to a surreal scheme of things.

In a series of works on paper the unknown is represented by the black blotch. The visual entrance to the pictures is often immediate, for example in *The Lasso* where you are drawn in by a milk carton placed in the foreground of the picture, but the object is immediately fractured by a dominant black blotch. As the gaze wanders it encounters a standard issue kitchen sink, faucet and rag, but also a man whose face is covered by a dark area and who is trying to catch the monstrous blotch with a lasso. The familiar is thus combined with the grotesque. What we see as an underlying portrayal of the mundane is disturbed by the unknown and indefinable.

One Message repeats the coupling of familiar and unknown. In an exclusively appointed room with a view we see a shape, maybe a woman, writing a text message on her cell phone. A direct connection through the phone between the home and what's outside the home springs immediately to mind. But the outside, the other world, is once again emphasized by the black blotch covering most of the shape. She becomes the grotesque herself, the unknown or *uncanny*, right in her own home.

Placing the grotesque among the familiar is a characteristic of the grotesque in itself. The grotesque is by its very nature both familiar and off-putting. The grotesque invokes an element of shock and thus seems quite aggressive. It is a kind of disorientation, which is also the case for Mie Mørkeberg's pictures where the everyday setting is added to or fractured by the grotesque. The grotesque is in her pictures connected both to a person and to something outside the person. The depicted person becomes the grotesque him- or herself, and is thus not just something depicted outside the individual, yet always depersonalized, person. In Mørkeberg's pictures it depicts something simultaneously aggressive and alienating which does not seem tied to any particular person or story.

The abandoned home plays a role in a few of the other works on paper, and this is how *Homeward Unbound* achieves its other meaning. In these works it is apparently tourist snapshots that are invaded by alien elements so the *uncanny* exists in a double sense. Both as a physical and a psychological reality. It is once more the individual element that connects the experience to reality. *Sandman* shows a woman with her child in a baby sling (holding a cigarette in her hand). She is made grotesque by the invasive black expanse that covers her face, and forms a sharp contrast to the child, which is drawn in a completely different line. The threatening feeling of *uncanniness* is emphasized by the contorted Sandman lamp which hangs like a black expanse over a cradle – large and threatening, while the fairy tale character with the umbrella takes part in the proceedings. A nightmare. The layers of the subconscious seem to erupt to the surface and anxiety immediately rears its ugly head.

The abandoned home plays another role in Mie Mørkeberg's new paintings. The pictures are populated by creatures like the troll and the elephant and are a combination of pastoral scenarios, abandoned or drowned houses, and bizarre, grotesque or life-like figures. The works pick up the thread from an earlier series, which was set under water, and which in this manner connects the subconscious level to a direct reflection.³ In one picture we see the abandoned living room, symbolized by recliner and chandelier. Rats crawl on every surface as something resistant that you can neither vanquish nor get rid of. The animals become yet another apparition from the level of the subconscious.

In the paintings the surface of the water serves as an invisible metaphor for the expanse, the plane. The water's surface separates the face of things from what lies beneath. Sometimes the surface is visible, sometimes not at all. The plane seems to be a mental membrane between the layers of consciousness, which is constantly fractured and transcended, so the psychological and physical realities become inseparable. This seems to be one of Mørkeberg's points: the representation of a level of double reality, in constant exchange with itself. The home is the overall and familiar frame, which constitutes a stringent symbolism in relation to the interpretation of the homely. *Homeward Unbound* refers simultaneously to a place where we always are, once we've left childhood behind, but also to a place we will never reach, because a home will always form part of our consciousness.

Mie Mørkeberg's paintings are like dream sequences in their fragmented symbolism. Indecipherable and unliterary in their isolated language. The paintings should be viewed neither as part of a decodable symbolic context nor as allegories. They are fragmented like dreams and defined in a dreamlike sense, which is highly subjective. No attempt is made to tell a coherent story; the aim is to put the figurative element in a pictorial language.

Mie Mørkeberg's paintings approach the surreal and in their own way indicate the relevance of the subconscious. A kind of expressionism in a contemporary pictorial language.

NOTES

Note 1: Sanne Kofod Olsen; *U-hjemlig*, for the exhibition *Tales from the Uncertain*, Galleri Tom Christoffersen, Copenhagen 2006, which Mie Mørkeberg contributed to.

Note 2: Hal Foster; *Compulsive Beauty*, MIT PRESS 1993, Chap. 1, p. 7.

Note 3: The series is Mie Mørkeberg's final examination project from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts; shown at the exhibition *EXIT*, Gl. Strand, Copenhagen 2006.