

Galleri Bo Bjerggaard
//Works on Paper
//Online Presentation

When Galleri Bo Bjerggaard first opened its doors in 1999 in Pilestræde, one of our exhibitions was Works on Paper by such art heavyweights of the period as Baselitz, Fautrier, Immendorff, Jorn, Kirkeby, Lüpertz, Mortensen, Penck, Picabia and Polke.

Back then Mikael Wivel wrote the text for the exhibition catalogue. We still appreciate Works on Paper and still think the catalogue text is pertinent. As a result, we decided to reprint the exhibition catalogue text last year when the gallery celebrated its 20th anniversary with the exhibition Works on Paper in the gallery at Flæsketorvet.

We would like to take this opportunity to focus on Works on Paper again by showing a selection from the gallery's magazines as well as giving you the opportunity to reread Mikael Wivel's text.

See Works on Paper by Anna Bjerger, Brigitte Waldach, Georg Baselitz, Jannis Kounellis, Jonathan Meese, Jules de Balincourt, Per Inge Bjørlo, Per Kirkeby, Peter Linde Busk and Tal R.

Thorvaldsen is not easy. We can admire him, but getting any closer to him than that is much harder. Authoritative and reserved, his work eludes any attempt at banal intimacy. Confession was never his game. We search in vain for any sign of such life in his sculptures. Whatever the man thought or felt in his time, during his work, is now sealed deep below the flawless surfaces. It is no longer possible to get a wedge in anywhere. There is not a weak spot to be found in the sugar-white marble.

Above all, Thorvaldsen's sculptures have served a representative function. They were never intended to show anything but their ultimate statements. The sculptor's preliminary deliberations were entirely irrelevant. Any uncertainty he might have felt, any groping he may have done toward the end result, was nobody's business, nor did he apparently feel any need to document the different stages of his working process. On the contrary, unceremoniously and with an amazing lack of sentimentality, he obliterated their every trace. His drawings, in particular, fell victim.

Plainly, Thorvaldsen thought of his drawings merely as a kind of preparatory notes before the actual sculpting, not as pictures in their own right, and so he never thought twice about discarding them as soon as they had served their purpose. This likely happened during production, and were it not for the fact that Thorvaldsen, like all other charismatic personalities, was surrounded by a throng of admirers, not a single one of these notes would have survived. In his orbit was Baroness Stampe of Nysø, who managed to save a pile of his drawings – on their way into the bin, so to speak. Another was the librarian Just Mathias Thiele, who combed Thorvaldsen's home on Via Sistina in Rome after the artist's death. In the cellars, to his delight, he discovered hundreds of badly damaged drawings among the rubbish from the workshops above, drawings that had been torn or crumbled or otherwise annulled by the artist.

Such dispassionate shredding is quite shocking to the modern observer, considering that Thorvaldsen's drawings have been the only available window into his sculptures. But so it is. The drawings, often several at once, were torn into two or more pieces. Briskly executed, without fuss, but also without hatred, this was just another job to be done. Much would indicate that it happened during a general cleanup of the studios shortly before Thorvaldsen left Rome for good in June 1842. What Thiele found was the last of what was left. Judging from the diverse nature of the drawings, one can only guess at the amount of material that must have been lost before the cleanup.

In a way, this is beautiful to contemplate. There are incredible pieces among Thiele's finds, supreme sketches unspooling the artist's trains of thought in uninterrupted moves, dashing and vibrant. Pure abundance, Thorvaldsen's drawings rank among the most important works of Danish art. Knowing that he intended for them to perish adds cubits to his stature.

He was not unique in this, of course. It was almost a tradition in the field. Before his death, Michelangelo burned a great number of the drawings he had lying around. This, too, happened in Rome and followed from considerations similar to Thorvaldsen's. Michelangelo, too, did not want to leave behind anything that was imperfect, anything that did not make a definitive statement. Incidentally, the same goes for Donatello: not a single drawing by his hand has survived. Real men clean up after themselves!

This mentality is hard to understand today, when we are fascinated by fragmentation, and artists' drawings are considered crucial for grasping the unconscious, creative layers of the mind. People collect, exhibit and scrutinize drawings with interest and seriousness like never before. Gone are the days when a collector, with unabashed pride, would write on a Michelangelo drawing, "Its equal in beauty is not to be found." Now, even the smallest scribbles by the master are eagerly sought after, not so much for their beauty, as for the information they might provide about his psyche. No one writes on them anymore. The drawings are stored with the reverence once reserved for splinters of the Holy Cross.

Not that there is anything wrong with that. The interest derives from the development of art research and, as such, is both commendable and consciousness-expanding. But there have also been side effects. The price of old master drawings has skyrocketed, of course, as demand has increased. More surprisingly, the production of new master drawings has also been powerfully stimulated. Witness the deluge of drawings by contemporary painters and sculptors – Per Kirkeby, say, Georg Baselitz or Sigmar Polke.

Artists draw like never before, and often thematically. These drawings are not notes or drafts of more perfect future works but finished works in their own right – comments, perhaps, on the practice of art now, at the end of the 20th century. There is an economic aspect to this production, naturally, since a drawing is more affordable than an oil painting or a sculpture. But that is not the whole truth. There is also a metaphysical aspect. Far more than any other artistic expression, drawings have kept their innocence and credibility. There is an air of immediacy and authenticity about them that painting, for one, seems currently to have lost. There is something spontaneous and incredibly personal about drawings. We believe they will take us closer to the artistic act of creation and, in turn, to the real and the true. The inspiration is right there – on paper.

Mikael Wivel, May 1999

This text was originally written in 1999 for the gallery's exhibition *Works on Paper*, and is reprinted with the permission of the author.