

WETTERLING GALLERY

Love Lundell

Sentimentally Yours, The Red Forest

Text by Jörgen Svensson

I have had the privilege of following Love Lundell's artistic career for a long time. Ever since he was studying at the Academy in Trondheim, actually, where I was one of his teachers. As a student, however, Lundell was not that approachable. He gave the impression of wanting to be left alone. Later, Love told me that I was the teacher with whom he had the most contact. That came as a big surprise. I had always seen him as a bit of a loner at the Academy, which, of course, made him intriguing, both as an individual and as an artist. I seem to recall that his paintings at the time were in different shades of brown and black. Rather heavy stuff. But this rapidly changed, with increased tension between light and dark, and the addition of new colours to his palette. What I found most astonishing, however, was Lundell's approach to paint. His experiments included cracking and varnishes. For some reason, I began thinking of him as "the picture-maker". He was good at creating pictures. These pictures were full of detail. A question that lingers from that time is whether the contents as conveyor of a message was actually of consequence to him. Wasn't it the image itself that interested him, the picture-maker? It reminds me of what Ingmar Bergman wrote in his autobiography, *Laterna Magica*, that he was enchanted and fascinated by the image itself, the moving image in his case. The magic in how it could arise.

Since Lundell left the Academy in Trondheim, I have curated two of his exhibitions. Or three, if we count the group show he never turned up for. Years later, he told me that the reason was purely and simply anxiety. I am still unsure about Lundell's relationship to image versus contents. He collects pictures he finds in newspapers, magazines, on line, and so on. He then composes collages using the images in his archive. But the picture can turn into practically anything as long as he feels a sense of satisfaction with the final result. Or? When I ask Lundell about this, his answer is evasive.

Shit, I don't know. I had this idea that objects lost their meaning the more I reproduced them, like some kind of visual semantic saturation. I tried to solve that with abstract art but failed, and then I realised, thankfully, that the totality is abstract.

Perhaps this originates in the way I discovered creative processes, namely through music. I got a nylon-stringed guitar when I was eleven and was forced to learn how to play it without help. A totally new world opened up, I gave up toys and devoted all my waking hours to hammering on guitars. I think I had that with me when I started painting. That playfulness. The harmonies.

Once in Trondheim, you said I seemed to have an intuitive ability to create images and scenes. I always remembered that. Because that was something I had learned in Trondheim. I was creating round the clock for five years. Five years of searching for a style.

I've repainted a lot of things. Partly because I lacked the technical ability to convey what I intended, and because I had to redo it, and partly because I had failed to get the composition right. I simply find it hard to concentrate and want every day to offer something new; I have to move on, I lose interest as soon as I pause. If I'm forced to take a break from painting, I start drawing instead. (But the totality is crucial, especially in the small drawings. The drawings are very important.)

So, there is something that Love Lundell wants to convey. However, this does not specify to what extent the conveyed message is a clear idea or more of a feeling that is present or not present in the final picture. The question is complicated. Is it the image itself, the two-dimensional, flat surface full of scenes and objects, that comprises the totality? An image where the details also neutralise one another. "That objects lose their meaning", as Love puts it. A portrait of our time?

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To distinguish between a finished picture and its contents is hard, of course. The picture always contains something, and a whole lot in Lundell's case. The viewer always interprets, voluntarily or involuntarily – and adds contents to the image. But Lundell explains to me that there is something he wants to convey, something apparently so strong that he is prepared to start from scratch until he gets it right. I make a new attempt. What is it Love Lundell wants to convey?

I create for the sake of creating and to be surprised and amused by what happens on the canvas, I simply do what I feel like, based on my mood at the time. All the works are scenes from memory that I document through painting, in a slightly therapeutic way, like a deep cleansing of memory; I try to stage what I can't describe with words, a kind of abysmal longing for something I'm not entirely sure I ever experienced.

I know that many artists work thematically from the start, but I only discover connections long after my works are completed. You could say I work backwards.

Instead of a slide show one evening with two hundred photos from my latest safari, I try to capture something else, with brush and canvas.

He adds,

All my works are based on an image archive. When I build a picture, I start with a memory or a feeling or something I want to focus on, such as the influencer culture, which I made a work about last spring. The same way you put together a music album, I methodically build a series of works on a feeling. For instance, the viewer should be able to sense, "Yeah, this is his break-up album."

Since I work along these ideas and use a visual archive, I'm limited in some ways, I have to look for the right mouth, eyes, arm, hand, hair, or objects or landscapes for that matter, and this takes place intuitively. Sometimes, I ask myself what would happen if the archive were destroyed.

I guess I'm processing deeply tragic events in my life and transforming them over and over, but in new ways. Last year, I made a drawing, titled Välliste Vortex, which shows a river sprite playing the fiddle, and a man diving into a lake, with a magical sunset over a mountain in the background. It's about when me and my siblings scattered my mother's ashes in the mountains in Välliste, and how I dived into a lake behind the mountain afterwards.

I have heard Lundell say that when collecting images he looks for objects that symbolise something, but that he wants to put them in a new context and give them a different meaning. I wonder if this is also a way of neutralising them. Possibly, the abstraction he mentions fills the same purpose. But this is obviously an intuitive process that is about finding an emotional state. None of that contradicts my theory concerning Lundell's fascination for the picture's expression, or rather, its mood.

Love Lundell's practice is sometimes compared to surrealism and symbolism. I don't believe he is interested in either of those, basically. Instead, he seems to be searching for answers to what certain things represent, what they purport, whether they be objects, situations, scenes, whatever happens to be charged with meaning for him. By "kidnapping" them and inserting them in new settings and situations, they are "discharged", or forced to find new roles and new meanings. None of the persons or objects seem comfortable where they have landed in Lundell's pictures. Nothing, nobody, is in its right environment or seems at home. Everything is scattered or placed without having a choice. Alienation in a nutshell.

The people in Lundell's appear to be locked into their fixed positions, in a kind of posing where they are mostly, or perhaps exclusively, interested in themselves. I am reminded of the term "society of the spectacle" (La Société du Spectacle, Editions Buchet-Chastel, 1967), launched in the late 1960s by the French writer and filmmaker Guy Debord in his eponymous book, whose ideas seem more relevant today than ever. Debord describes a society populated by alienated people, where

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representation, the image of something, is more important than its actual substance. The book consists of a number of paragraphs. One of them reads:

"The images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered *partially* unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world *apart*, an object of mere contemplation." (Society of the Spectacle, Black & Red, 1970)

Even if I read a large portion of social criticism into Lundell's art, I doubt that he shares Debord's theories, which originated in Marxism. The Debord quote nevertheless serves as an adequate description of Lundell's artistic practice.

It is challenging to include as many elements in a painting as Lundell does and still manage to keep it all together. The colours and the rhythm of light and shade are part of the solution, but it also requires a keen sense of how much a picture can endure. On a personal level, the amount of details and events can also bring peace to an otherwise chaotic situation, just as some people focus better if they can occupy themselves with something else at the same time. We all have our own strategy for coping with and processing tragedy in our lives. Art is a tool, but that tool can also be used in different ways.

Lundell's earlier pictures reveal distinct influences from artists such as Dick Bengtsson and Karin Mamma Andersson. More recently also of Peter Doig. In an increasingly vibrant palette and an ever-more prominent collage technique, he has gradually departed from them, at least the first two. But this also means that the connection between his pictures and popular culture has become more pronounced.

In the last few years, nature has also forced its way into the pictures. Many "scenes" are set in nature, not infrequently represented by dark forests. Why is that?

It's a coincidence. My wife asked if I could make a special edition of a cover for her album that would be printed in 20 copies I played around with a landscape in Photoshop and printed all the pieces, drew them and glued them together. Pure intuition. Then it just kept going and I haven't stopped to think about why it became landscapes. Maybe because I had been habitually copying real estate ads by hand for years. The remarkable aesthetics of an abandoned home being put up for sale, with that basil plant that apparently every kitchen has to have as garnish. But nothing came of those rooms I had drawn. They were dead. But then I heard David Hockney talk about why he paints nature, he said, "Nature doesn't really have perspective." That felt so fitting when I had grown sick of the real estate ads. Nature is indomitable and dangerous, living and totally free from perspective. So I went out into nature.

I have a soft spot for the Peredvizhniki, the Russian 19th century art movement. My favourite is Isaac Levitan. There's something about the light in his works that attracts me. It reminds me of the first cool breezes in late summer when autumn is on the threshold. I try to recreate what I believe I sense when studying their works. So, I steal, yes, I plunder and make remixes of works by my favourite artists. I learn something that way, and the old lives on through me.

Coincidences and intuition. These seem to be two cornerstones of Lundell's practice. His mention of the Peredvizhniki was rather unexpected. I might possibly discern an influence in the ominous landscapes, as a setting for the events in the picture. But whereas the Peredvizhniki had both feet planted firmly in Russian soil, Lundell's quest takes him into the meanderings of the human mind.

Another aspect of Lundell's practice is ambiguity. Several of his images, and a few of his sculptures, are superficially inviting but usually also harbour a dark quality. One of his sculptures resembles a palm tree from a Hawaiian shirt but is actually a scythe with several blades. Another sculpture is shaped like a cross decorated with two crowns of thorns but can be used as a limbo pole, a game accessory. But Lundell is far from the only artist who explores ambiguity. He shares this with quite a few. It is always tempting to tell the viewer, "don't believe everything you see", or "don't be too quick to judge". Still, it might be interesting to hear what Lundell has to say about this.

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People sometimes point out that they are distressed by my works or find them scary. I've thought about what causes this, since my intention isn't to provoke. Perhaps it is because I have transcended what figuratively makes me shy away. But when I watch movies, I avoid kitchen sink realism like the plague, I prefer popcorn movies and other easily-digestible stuff. I talked about it with my wife (she loves realism), and I think it's because my realism quota is filled, I'm simply saturated, so why should I waste two hours watching someone else enact my life in the wrong way?

But when it comes to my own art form I'm at a loss. What is there to be scared about? Everything I do is a kind of backwards search for beauty in absurdity and brutality. Maybe it's a linguistic problem, that we are living somehow in a binary world, night, day, black, white, happy, sad, all polar opposites, but what about the territory in between? Those grey zones, that's where I operate, somewhere between hope and despair.

Of course, that's the answer. Light and darkness, good and evil, happiness and unhappiness, intertwined into a description of human life. If art is to reflect what it means to be human in our time, then it will naturally be hard to circumvent the obvious ambiguities that life encompasses.

Art that comments on our existence and also provides therapy for the artist and possibly for the viewer, is perhaps what it ultimately comes to. Whether it can change the world or the artist is an open question, and a lot of people have raised it. The importance of art in society is most definitely also a political issue. In a time where we are facing enormous challenges, with climate change, migration and democracy, many people see art and culture as a cornerstone in the efforts to save our planet and our civilisation.

At Ernst Billgren's graduation show at the Valand Academy, there was a small poster that read:

"If you want to change the world, you have to work hard, but you could also paint a painting".

Many found this quote provoking. Then, in the late 1980s, the leftist wave from Gothenburg in the 1960s had not yet faded. To paint when the world was on fire was not acceptable. But the quote could also be interpreted as a strong faith in the power of images and art to influence and change. I am fairly convinced that Lundell in his artistic practice wants to achieve more than just a good picture. Those who take the time to study his art will find a great deal that can be applied to our contemporary era.