

Disintegration of the family photos

TUMI MAGNÚSSON - PHOTOGRAPHS

Tumi Magnússon provoked immediate attention for his paintings in the middle of the eighties and since he has been considered one of the more notable painters of his generation.

While Magnússon's paintings have, through the years, become less and less conventional, his confidence and skill in the use of the medium of paint have enabled him to explore new paths. He has put together exhibitions that, only in minor ways, resemble more usual exhibitions of painting, whilst his work has remaining firmly based on the possibilities and variations of painting; it's colour theories and the colour of the environment.

However, in his show in Gallery Sævar Karl, the artist has changed his course and exhibits digitally processed photographs. The exhibition consists of four photos, two of which cover entire walls, while the other two are thin stripes. Thus he is using a popular contemporary method but the result is totally different from that we might expect. The photograph itself is not the most important thing for Magnússon; rather he seems to be interested in the technological possibilities of transforming reality and making it subject to the laws of colour and form. He has done this before, in a row of paintings where he began with the colour of coffee and ended with the colour of urine, picture by picture.

Magnússon's photos still have a strong connection to the most traditional use of the camera, the family photograph. As it happens, the four pictures depict Magnússon's family and himself, but they only show parts of the faces and are enlarged so much that the original form, the ear, eye, mouth and nose, are barely recognizable. The pictures – and therefore their subject matter - are stretched and blown up to fit into the confines of the exhibition space, and at the same time they disintegrate into “some kind of ambiguity” as Magnússon himself puts it. From the distortion of the subject matter a new level of meaning is created where form and space have a greater significance than the original image.

As the artist leaves behind the medium of painting – or takes this detour from it - the familiar limitations of the canvas hung on the walls and dependent of the gallery's architecture, disappear. Here the images are fitted into the space and the room defines the shape of the work. The picture of “Ráðhildur's Mouth” is thus fitted into a narrow gutter along one of the walls, and the image is simply stretched as needed to conform to its shape.

It is good to see an experienced and precise artist dealing with the challenge of a new medium, and even more pleasing to observe how he has transferred the unwavering concentration of his work to this new medium and a new way of expression. Whether or not this exhibition is a digression from his previous work, or the beginning of further experiments, it is a genuine contribution to contemporary art and a demonstration of the fact that the thinking practised by good artists comes through, whatever medium they use.

Jón Proppé
(Transl. TM)