

Katarina Hård

a romantic mystic

Text: Ivan Pfeifer, maj 2004

Preface

It is a human and very understandable act to flee back in time. The reason for doing so varies from individual to individual. Dreams, historic nostalgia or heroes from childhood books give an artistic inspiration to in some way “translate” and place them in the actualities of our own time.

Many of the "-isms" within the arts have a romantic element in a more or less pronounced shape. This romantic element is a kind of “evergreen” that even today appeals to our senses, our thoughts and even our behavior. Blinded, self-appointed know-it-alls gladly talk about the importance of depicting the spirit of the times; certainly, but this so-called spirit of the times is fleeting and ever-changing.

It would be wrong to label the art of Katarina Hård as “romantic”. She is a multi-faceted artist with a wide repertoire, and has over the years demonstrated that she is capable of renewing her art. The mystical is another important component in her pictorial language. The supersensual element that is frequently present in her contemporary art, she interprets not as an expression of spirituality but rather of doubt and paganism.

To find reason and coherence in artistic expression is a very personal process. Those who search it will find the spirit of Katarina Hård in her art. The people, the landscape, the symbols and the acts depicted give us different versions to perceive, interpret, love or hate. That is exactly what the artist hopes to achieve: to make the viewer emotionally moved, involved and to take a stand vis-à-vis the mediated message. In this context it is right to observe the ambiguity and contrasting depictions in her art.

If one would want to examine the inner meaning of ambivalence help is to be found by contemplating the paintings of Katarina Hård. The antitheses emerge in their nakedness where one easily entertain contradictory emotions. It becomes a believer’s view of the pagan and the pagan’s view of the believer. Faith and doubt accompany one another.

She has left behind her the enforced need to legitimate her innermost artistic thoughts. Neither ideology nor intellectual objections can justify that an artist should confine him- or herself to a labelled box just because others expect it; the art-loving public rather appreciates an individual behaviour. It is important to Katarina that she is honest to herself, and therefore she observes but does not follow prevailing trends. She wants to be herself and no-one else.

Katarina and her husband Ronny describe themselves as “hard working twin souls who seek answers to existential questions and who ignore what seems to be modern.”

Katarina Hård’s pictures have a genuine, distinctive feature and are given body, life and movement with the help of colour. The viewer of these works of art quickly acquires an active role: the mysticism inherent in the pictures easily makes you communicate with the artwork and entices you to make your own personal interpretation of what they want to say.

Curriculum Vitae

There are people who, even before school age, have a firm opinion of what they want to become

and how they shall go about to achieve it. A child's will and purposefulness depends to a great extent on the parents as role models, and if they with kind and loving encouragement help the child fulfill its dreams. Katarina Hård is a willful person with an excess of energy and visions, which impelled her to face and master the obstacles of life against all odds. She reached her goal and the art public can now rejoice at the fulfillment of her dream.

Katarina Hård was born in Poland on December 16th, 1954, in the city of Radom close to Warsaw. During her upbringing Poland suffered from the suppression of the communist dictatorship. People lived in poverty, hardship and dullness, without any hope for the future. To keep quiet and applaud the communist party's "advancements" was a strategy of survival. To have an education, or being a elite athlete, offered a small opportunity to advance in life. Katarina chose education and an artistic career.

In her family the tradition of education had a long history, a environment consisting of academics who encouraged and supported her studies. Both of her parents were architects working at a state architectural department, and occasionally taught in one of the city's high schools.

Katarina was seven years old when her family moved to Krakow, a valuable step in her lifetime pursuit of the arts. This city is Poland's cultural center, with ancient traditions, and home to the Jagiellonian University. This university, founded in 1364, was and still is a conservatory for scientists, and has given Poland and Europe some of its greatest men: for instance Copernicus.

After her upper-secondary final examination, Katarina enrolled in the Art Academy. She graduated in 1977 with a major in graphic art, and that same year she arrived with her mother to Sweden. One might think that this would have been a time of great change, a time where a new country and a new language might impede her from practicing her profession, but Katarina could not deny her nature and energetic as she is, she faced the challenge and started to adapt herself to a life in Sweden. She first got a job within the social services, and after a short period of time she was offered work with several art galleries. These took advantage of her expertise within the field of culture. Continually improving knowledge of the Swedish language rendered it possible for her to also teach several study circles in Malmö. She felt a strong urge to make acquaintances and to participate actively in the art circles, a necessity to nurture her artistic ability. It is a natural pattern in human behavior to seek people with similar background and interests, and that is how she met her present husband, Ronny Hård; Katarina followed her parent's footsteps and married a man with the same profession and interest as herself.

Katarina remembers: "I lived in Malmö and had known Ronny for quite some time. We often met at art exhibitions and frequently participated in the same artistic activities. After a while it turned serious and we got married in 1988."

Breakthrough and reward

Katarina's Swedish debut took place at Galleri Nordvästen in Helsingborg in 1988, and was favourably received by the critics.

It did not take long for the art public to discover her artistic quality. Katarina got her real breakthrough in Malmö 1992 with an exhibition in Lilla Konstsalongen, where the critics praised her work. The audience's appreciation was overwhelming, and virtually all the exhibited works were bought: acrylic paintings as well as litographs. This was a time in her art career where everything went right, and she was awarded several scholarships for her work. In 1996, at the Malmö Museum of Art, she received The Aase and Rickard Björklund Scholarship of 125.000 Swedish crowns for artists with a Scanian connection. It may be added that she was awarded the same scholarship ten years earlier, but for a smaller sum! On an exhibition on Öland she had the

honor of personally selling to the private collection of King Carl XVI Gustaf. Her artistic career is lined with successes

Community work

Katarina Hård is an outgoing woman, with a great sense of responsibility, always eager to help and enlighten young people, especially those who have ended up at the wrong end of society. She has traveled all over the country, visiting schools and youth recreation centers to inform teenagers about the effects of drugs and the consequences that go with the abuse. Her community work has been recognized in the media and received much appreciation. As a result, the director Janne Linell made a film about the subject where the bitter reality is portrayed without the slightest flattery. The movie is called "Key West" and was shown in all Swedish schools. Katarina's efforts have doubtlessly helped many young people to get back on track. Her sense of duty, commitment and empathy has grown larger over the years and she puts a lot of effort and time into helping and being a "friend on duty" when needed.

She and her husband Ronny arrange classes in drawing and painting for interested teenagers.

The people of Staffanstorp value her community work highly and she has been rewarded for these by the Municipality of Staffanstorp. Her endurance and purposefulness are an asset to us all.

Artistic ability

Life produces situations that may seem irritating at the moment but can turn into something positive later in life. When Katarina attended the Art Academy, she chose graphic art as her major. Unfortunately, the Academy had few resources and lacked the necessary equipment for this kind of studies. Pencil drawings in black and white became a sort of substitution for her ambitions. Everyone knows the saying: Practice makes perfect, and this is clearly be seen in her croquis paintings.

The human body and its movements can achieve an academic purity that in turn enhances the natural gracefulness of the motif. Motif and composition form a harmonic unity. The painting "Dancer" demonstrates that she has a good command of the technique and is familiar with the anatomy of the human body.



The dancing woman in her painting comes to life, and one can sense the music in the background. The shimmering light gives a feeling that the air is trembling around the dancer. It is a refined way of creating illusion, and points of contact with the impressionism exist. The light image radiates harmony and warmth. It was an alluring experiment that has contributed greatly to her artistic development. Starting with nothing and seeking her way forward helped her finding her personal way of expression. Being the individualist that she is, she purposefully sought her own distinguishing language of style and form.

Practicioners of most arts have a common feared enemy – stagnation – making one feel insufficient and resulting in an audience quickly abandoning the artist. This occurrence is naturally true in all walks of life, but much more explicit in the arts. Sooner or later we all reach a crossroad, and are forced to choose which path to take.

I asked Katarina if she had these kinds of thoughts, what they mean and how a process of renewal in her art shall appear. The answer was: "The risk of stagnation is an ever-present threat. It means that the artist has nothing more to give, and with that follows the consumption and eventual death of the

soul. Personally I think this can be avoided by always being curious, daring to be perceptive, and get inspired by the events in our lives. Both positive and negative feelings can be described, and naturally one should mediate this to others and see what reaction that triggers.

I feel that the two-dimensional for me is approaching exhaustion of its possibilities, which is why I have started experimenting with effects that give a three-dimensional illusion. The idea and the precedents exist in the book and illustration art of the Renaissance. I am going to do a book where no letters are used, instead illustrating the story in pictures. You have surely seen books where the pictures are folded, and when you open a page the illustrations unfold and you achieve a three-dimensional effect. If you stop searching, it is an act of denial of your inborn curiosity. This is a gift to all and I intend to use it”.

I am convinced that she will. The three-dimensional can also be seen in the presentation of the pictures, which placed within a thick frame gives depth to the art. The pictures are held within a fixture, which gives the feeling that they are floating between the background and the frame.

The romantic thinking

To read and read a lot is Katarina Hård's motto. Since her tender youth she has been fascinated by the history of the Middle Ages. The ancient Order of The Knights Templar, and the different directions that challenged contemporary accepted doctrines of religion and science, were an eye-opener for Katarina. To be free, to think differently, is important just because that kind of thinking might go against the authoritarian power. Her life philosophy is that these people and their ideas show the rest of us the light.

She manages to capture the spirit and light that create a harmony with the medieval motif. One can only discern silhouettes of people, knights, ladies-in-waiting, shapes and horses in strong colours. Her paintings radiate strength and emotion, and her vivid temperament shines through her art. Hidden meanings and associations with the mystical characterize her images, and they create a mythical treasure appealing to the imagination.

Her last name Hård (which means "hard" in English) does not do justice to the softness she creates through depicting contrasts. An unknown world exists in the background of her pictures where a strong mysticism reigns, and an extremely vivid imagination is needed to interpret it in a tangible way. As the old Greeks phrased it so succinctly: "Panta rei" – "Everything floats!"

"Requiem"

Katarina held an art exhibition called "Requiem" in Staffanstorps art gallery, and which attracted a lot of attention. The "Requiem" series of pictures is a mass celebrating the dead, on several levels, where the melancholic silence is depicted. Despite the faint colours, a vivid interaction between the contrasts remains. The light emerges from the picture's background, making the shadow figures unreachable and floating, and thus conveying an intense feeling of their presence.

One might ask oneself: Are these pictures a nightmarish revelation? Do they depict a speculative spirituality associated with Christianity? The answer is a definite "No". The emotions in these pictures are intensely charged and the deep sorrow is evident. The painful and lengthy mourning process mitigates somewhat over time, but the loss of a loved child is always present. Katarina Hård connected these pictures with the Latin texts of the requiem, telling the viewer that this series of pictures is a spiritual walking of Golgotha. One is escorted through a borderline country where the blurry drawn human body slowly is erased and passes over to a spiritual state. It is the surrounding that we see, where the physical ends and the mystical dream world takes over. The entire series of pictures is pervaded by sorrow and compassion, and reflect despair and solemnity. It is not her intention to erect a monument to the lost child, but rather to bid farewell in a dignified way.

For practical reasons, the Hårds have often coordinated their exhibitions and exhibited their art side by side, which has triggered a strange reaction from the audience. As they are a married couple, people automatically assumed that there would be associations between their art and started to look for similarities.

This is not a rare occurrence; artists have confronted these reactions before. If you read about the life of other artist couples, it is clear that the response from critics and audience was similar. Sigrid Hjertèn has often, but wrongly, been accused of creating art that has great similarities with that of her husband Isaac Grünewald.

It was a disturbing aspect, and these experiences led to the decision that they would hold their exhibitions separate. Katarina Hård has clearly shown that she has her own visual world and her own language. The reality is that the couple differ greatly also in genre and technique. Katarina's art is imaginary, while Ronny practices an art form where the non-imaginary dominates.

Nowadays Katarina paints with acrylic in warm red-yellow colours that give a glowing, mystic impression. Some of her paintings have elements of gold and copper. As a base she uses canvas or cardboard, and applies a technique where the colours are added in layers to get a relief effect. The motifs she use often have a psychological and spiritual image. The figures symbolize the spirituality that exists within people.

The home environment

It might be surprising that I touch upon the Hårds' home environment, but not mentioning it would be like leaving a page blank. The image of how an artist should be, and which environment they should work within, is greatly distorted. Many assume a studio where the visitor has to stride between half-finished paintings and overflowing ashtrays. I must disappoint the readers harboring such preconceived notions.



The live in Nordanå, southern Sweden, in a house called "Norda" that was once a nursing home. It is a calm, rural environment, far away from the stress of the big cities, and ideal for artistic creation. The house has an inner well-preserved turn-of-the-century style, purposefully designed and filled with old and charming objects. There is hardly an empty space on the walls, being decorated almost entirely with the art work of Katarina and Ronny. It is a warm and friendly environment, which goes well with the couple's well-known hospitality. They have become an institution in the region, and the art-interested public can enjoy a nice and social art experience.