

# ”Know thyself”; an essay on Ronny Hård

Text: Ivan Pfeifer, June 2004

## Preface

The art-loving public frequently visiting exhibitions and gallery showings have certainly noticed a somewhat extraordinary but important detail of the guests' behavior; a hasty walk through the premises, and sweeping looks around the objects on exhibit, are sure signs that the artwork does not possess the quality to live up to the visitors' expectations.

The artist of this essay commands the ability to spellbind his viewers, and awaken their interest in personally examining whether the artwork has something to convey to them.

I make use of allegory when contemplating the art of Ronny Hård. My thoughts wander, like the bubbles in a newly opened bottle of soda. The atmosphere, the mysticism and the colours create a harmonic yet challenging whole, bringing the viewer to a halt before entering deeply into the artwork. The essence of the artist's intention is to catch the thoughts and the feelings, to bind the viewer to the artwork and let him interpret it as he wishes. The picture should speak to the viewers' senses, and stimulate us to let our associations run free and explore how our own imagination works. It is an act of magic through which the artist mediates between different illusions, and the audience asks itself the question: How did that happen? The meetings with the artwork thus reach a new dimension; it becomes a quest for the artist behind the creation.

Ronny Hård has reached an artistic maturity, and won the appreciation of the art-loving public. With maturity follows that one does no longer feel the need to participate in the artistic community's "rat-race" where everyone wants to be ever-more contemporary and modern. To show and reproduce one's innermost thoughts and feelings never loses its topicality. At the same time, his art is a philosophic quest for a higher being, or a philosophy of life where light and darkness are dominant features. These ceaseless shifts between light and darkness, not only in their physical form, become a symbol for the known and the unknown. It is in our human nature to be cautious, and even show fear of the unknown. For as long as the human race has existed, darkness had been an ingrained symbol of insecurity. It is Ronny Hård's intention, in his paintings, to encourage a quest into the darkness in order to see the light in one's true being. It is part of his life philosophy to explore the physical darkness and the light, and then translate it to our living conditions.

The word empathy is a positively charged concept, and this positive view of humanity for which he lives also characterizes his art. The search of the true self is a long process and part of our maturity. In addition to the aesthetic experience, the artist Ronny Hård gives help and encouragement to seek and maybe find our own true selves.

## Curriculum Vitae

The mystic mountains and forested landscapes of the geographical area of Dalarna, as well as the myth-shrouded events and legends from his native region of Stjärnsund, are all deeply rooted in Ronny Hård's consciousness. These impressions from his youth form a recurring feature of his thoughts and his view of nature, and are evident in his art. It is said that a person's roots, and his awareness of these, have a significant importance and follow the individual from the cradle to the grave. This is confirmed in a convincing way when Ronny talks about his roots and the environment in which he grew up. It has given him an inexhaustible source of inspiration and security in life.

Ronny, and surely everyone else from Stjärnsund, are proud of the historical heritage that characterizes this community. Here lived and worked "the father of Swedish mechanics",

Christopher Polhem, whose numerous inventions caused admiration throughout Europe. Christopher Polhem founded in the year 1699 in Stjärnsund a manufacturing plant, which became his experimental workshop. As his assistant he had a person who would go on to become one of the leading figures of the Age of Enlightenment, the scientist and philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg. With people like these hailing from his native turf, it is obvious that Ronny Hård feels proud.

Ronny Hård was born in Stjärnsund, close to Hedemora, on January 6 1950, on a cold morning when the temperature had dropped to -28 degrees Celsius. His parental home was a small soldier's croft, constituting a kitchen and a maid's cubicle. His mother's family originated from Småland and brought with them a Bible-adhering, deeply religious outlook and way of living. They were poor and found comfort in religion.

Ronny Hård remembers: "My maternal grandfather was big, self-assured, deep and philosophically inclined man who often sat and thought next to the woodstove. For long periods of time he would gaze into the roaring fire. My grandmother was a strict, talkative woman, and the conversational topics were often limited to religious matters, the Bible and, not to be forgotten, God's punishments."

Sometimes it is necessary to set reason aside and establish that fire and water are compatible with one another. Such was the case with Ronny's family. On his father's side, they originated from a long line of knights that dates back to the times of King Charles XII. It was a cheerful, genial, bohemian family who completely ignored the customs of the day and the expectations of others on how one should behave. Ronny Hård's paternal grandfather and his brothers enjoyed life, chased women and pleasure, consumed alcohol and fought if needed. Two distinct ways of living that despite all, or maybe just because of it, could be compatible.

Ronny Hård's paternal grandfather was, just like all his brothers, a folk musician. He was a very talented and much-appreciated folk musician around Stjärnsund, a natural entertainer at parties, and he often played at the region's inns. He composed a number of songs that are still played today. This artistic, musical talent was handed down from father to son, and Alvar, Ronny's father, passed it on to Ronny. According to an old saying a musical talent is most often accompanied by an artistic one, a saying confirmed by the Hård family.

Ronny's interest in music began in Arboga when he played the cornet in the city's youth orchestra. A trip to Bolivia in 1969 was a new and refreshing experience that awakened his interest in another topic, Indian folk music. South America left in him a deep impression of Indian culture and its musical traditions. Ronny's life companion at the time was of Chilean descent, and her son Fernando is famous for his interpretations of Bolivian folk music and has received acclamation from near and afar. Ronny is a dedicated collector of the charango, a Latin American musical instrument. He will cheerfully play this instrument, and often entertains the audience at gatherings and other social events.

Ronny's father, Alvar Hård, was a famous musician and formerly played in a band called "Vegapojkarna" that was famous in its time. In addition to his performing, he was also a talented painter and had numerous drawings published in various newspapers.

The family moved from Stjärnsund to Arboga when Ronny was one year old. The house in which they came to live was a historical building from the 18th century. Ronny's childhood in this environment was a very happy one. In the 1960's vast parts of the historic city centre were demolished and replaced by tall, grey concrete blocks. Ronny talks about this indignity with sadness in his voice. He says. "These buildings have deprived us of our cultural heritage; it was a ruthless, thoughtless act which one cannot forget. It is hardly comforting that the same thing was done all

over the country. It is lost but not forgotten.”

A new phase of his life began when his family moved to Malmö. This new environment, in many ways different from his home grounds, led to a slow process of adaptation. The difficulties were many, but the joys were numerous too, and a balance was achieved. The art and the constant search for answers to his own questions was his driving force. It helped him achieve his dream – to be an independent artist. A successful artistic career, lined with exhibitions, scholarships and prizes, is great proof that his goal was achieved.

Since 1991 the married artists Ronny and Katarina Hård live and work in Nordanå. The house in which they live, called “Norda”, was once a nursing home.

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In addition to their artistic activities, the couple take time to help less fortunate teenagers whose lives somehow got adrift. Classes in painting and other social activities help them back on track. The concept of empathy is not just a word for them, they translate into in action.

### **Artistic ability**

Ronny Hård is certain that faith rules our lives. A faith of predetermination exists in his way of thinking. In itself it is not very surprising that one can discern from his art that Ronny is a mystic. His artistic path was marked out at an early age. He was eight when he first wound up in the spotlight: Arboga’s schools had announced a drawing competition for all pupils (up to age 16) in which he took first prize and won the for him at the time large sum of 20 Swedish Crowns. The proud parents wholeheartedly supported their son’s future ambitions. His father, himself an artist, helped Ronny to keep his enthusiasm burning and to develop in the right direction.

In every person’s life comes a time of trials and tribulation. This affects the individual; it becomes a sort of watershed which later in life can show to have a positive or a negative impact. At 19 years of age Ronny formed a family, something which carries a lot of responsibility. The obligation to provide for himself and his family meant that his artistic ambitions were shelved, and so an employment at the sausage-skin factory in Malmö secured the family’s sustenance. It was monotonous work, without joy or hope for the future. He worked there for six years and could not find himself, constantly tormented by an inner anxiety. The need to express himself through painting created a sense of loss. To him it felt like lacking an arm or a leg; he quite simply felt that his life was incomplete.

### **The social realism**

During the 1970’s Ronny was caught up by the spirit of the times, a trend most young artists of the time followed, and which became a common denominator for the viewpoint of the great masses. It is easy to be caught up by the current and to follow the prevailing trend, eventually becoming a product of the times. Ronny developed a great interest in social realism, which resulted in a new series of paintings. In these paintings he portrayed people and society as he had experienced them. The paintings speak for themselves, and sometimes they might lay it on so thick that the viewer becomes emotionally cold in front of the object. The grey everyday life receives a prominent role while the joy of living and striving is held back.

This is the social realism of the 70's, reflecting a society in transition; a new human outlook that left its mark on our everyday life and work. Ronny Hård is an observer with a sharp eye for peculiarities, and he gladly emphasizes humanitarian values. His work on this employs an examinatory pictorial language that shows signs of curiosity, and at the same time a hidden wish for change. In a transforming society where the individual's wish to show his individuality is sometimes forgotten, Ronny experiences doubts about collective thought, and yearns to get away from the stranglehold of group pressure.

Conflict, and a breaking point, are imminent when the prevailing idea is that everyone has to do the same things in order to achieve to-the-inch justice, no one may stand out, and individuality is denied. The collective of artists in Malmö became a brake that neutralized artistic ambitions and strangled all individual action. The breakup gave Ronny new viability and new ideas, and the search for "his own thing" proceeded at rocket pace. It was a time of renewal and enthusiasm that pretty quickly was acknowledged and rewarded by the art public. The prestigious scholarship from the Foundation of Malmö Konsthall celebrated its 70th anniversary in 2001, and was awarded to Ronny Hård with the words: "A scholarship of 25 000 Swedish crowns is awarded to Ronny Hård for an unusually individual artistry, where he in a forthright manner accepts the consequences of his insights into the arts as well as into the condition of man. For Ronny Hård the existentialist questions are always present: of the human struggle, the eternal and the ephemeral, light and darkness, hope and despair, and from this stems his intellectual strength and courage."

Art and artistry are highly individual phenomena by nature, and here the individual characteristics are decisive. Collective thinking and jurisdiction in this sense should be limited to an inspirational and social function. A collective neither can, nor should hold sway over the opinions among the art public. An individual is as valuable as the collective.

### **To be a "constant guest"**

Undoubtedly many readers will raise their eyebrows and wonder what it means to be a "constant guest". The explanation is dramatic in any way. In Gothenburg a shipping company named Tärnatank gave Ronny the assignment to observe, and register in images, his experiences during a passage. The term "constant guest" resounds with character, and is a polite title of honour that the shipping company bestowed upon the visiting artist. Life aboard, and the encounters with different cultures, became a source of inspiration and resulted in a great number of paintings that were shown at Gothenburg's Naval Museum at the end of the journey. The exhibition was well received by the public, and the "constant guest" was one experience richer.

### **Relation to surrealism**

After a while Ronny Hård had had his fill of social realism and its possibilities as a form of expression. During his entire life he has sought, and still seeks, after his own Holy Grail. It is not only a search for the sake of searching, but a tool in order to find himself. Surrealism opened new possibilities as a means of expression, and at the same time it was an experimental period in his artistry. I would like to call it a metamorphosis, a transformation of both an outer manifestation of the senses and an inner re-direction of the mind. This is exactly what is reproduced in his images from the 1980's on.

The landscape and the cities he depict have a sadly abandoned character that sends shivers down one's spine. It is an almost clinically clean environment, created with sharply accentuated lines, and yet it feels like it has been taken from a misty dreamworld. It is a world of contradictions where decay is manifestly present, and becomes an indication of what is to come. Despite that there is neither any human nor any other living creature in the images one can perceive of human ravage and destruction of our environment. Unbidden, one asks oneself the following: Where are we going? The message need not be explained further, it is all the same evident in its clarity. It creates

an immediacy that does not allow the viewer to rush past the paintings.

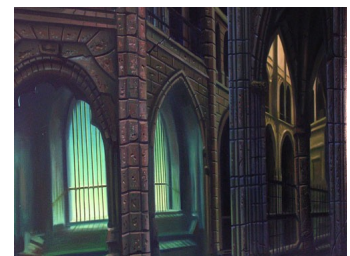
During the 20th century surrealism is abandoned for good and replaced by newer ways of thinking, to mediate feelings in a more refined way that fits Ronny Hård better. Stagnation is a word he will never come to terms with.

### Non-figurative art – a new phase

The memories of his youth, the nature of his home ground, the changing seasons when the light shifts in colours and hues have a refreshing influence on his paintings. Strong contrasts that he will happily use recapitulate his experiences; snow glistening in the sunlight, and the darkness of winter, create two different worlds at the same time. Such recollections have become a lead motif in his later artistic production.

During his career he has exhibited a varying assemblage of motifs, and with that also varying techniques. For Ronny it is of utter importance to experiment with the mix of colors in order to extract the light and its changes. This in turn causes an effect which presents the onlooker with a new view and angle of approach, to see more of the painting than is really there. When observing his paintings from the side, one sees the colours and the hues shift, and the motif takes on new life and movement. This effect is accomplished through the application of ten or more semi-transparent layers, on top of each other; it causes a clearly marked relief effect that brings out details in the motif. Such techniques are old, and have previously been used by the Dutch masters and later in a more marked way by the masters of northern Germany. Today Ronny Hård mostly paints using acrylics, cheerfully in his own color emulsions where mother-of-pearl is an element. Mother-of-pearl gives a glittering radiance, enhancing the play of light that he so happily strives to accomplish.

It is the contrasts between light and darkness that fascinate Ronny Hård. The light he loves to depict can be turned both against the outer world and against our inner world of the senses. Ronny Hård often depicts tense atmospheres in dazzling colours, where one can only imagine the human presence in diffuse, contourless landscapes. This is man's inner landscape, where changing feelings, suppressed but strong, bubble up to the surface and overwhelm you.



It is like a piece of music translated into to a contrasting cascade of colours. Through the seemingly impenetrable darkness a faint light silently and slowly trickles through; a condensed pianissimo that becomes stronger and stronger and finally reaches an explosive crescendo. It is as if seeing and hearing both the creation and the end of the world at the same time. Listen to Fortuna Imperatix [ska det inte vara "Imperatrix"??] Mundi, the first movement of Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana", while looking at the painting and you will understand that the simile is justified. It adds spice to the sensation of both seeing and hearing.

### Contemplating reality or ourselves...

Ronny Hård's art is composite, multifaceted and ambiguous, which is reflected in a convincing way in his choice of motifs. Twilight and nocturnal motifs are constantly recurring topics. Several of his works have a suggestive colour romanticism, where the motifs seem to have been gathered at the edge of a twilight country characterized by almost painful abandonment.

The landscape in these diffuse paintings turns into an anxiety-ridden being, with ghostlike shapes. One can almost feel the anxiety in the face of this unknown, obscure power. The atmosphere is animated by regretful suspicions. All this stands in stark contrast to Ronny Hård's personal characteristics. Taking his personal character and feelings as a starting point, one would believe that it is his cheerful outlook on life that should characterize his art. One must however remember that

already at the start of his artistic career he focussed on man and the human condition. He describes and warns of man's distressing circumstances during a demanding, hard time that becomes increasingly pushy. It is a reaction to alienation, loneliness and the inwardliness of the soul that is consciously registered in his art.

Most of us have surely wondered who is the role model of a painter whose work one is watching. This question is delicate and one will often receive a cryptic answer, in which the artist eagerly explains that he does not really have any role models, but instead has his own style with its own features. However, artists will gladly talk about their favourites which they admire. I could not help myself, so I asked Ronny; and after only a moment's thinking he answered: "My favourites are from the 18th century where inventive ideas and classical features go hand in hand. I am fascinated by the light and its contrasting shadow. There are two artists that I really admire. One is Caspar David Friedrich [det ska inte möjligen vara "Friedrich"?] whose landscape paintings literally bathe in light, with all its nuances that enhance the impression. The second is William Turner who is counted as a forerunner of impressionism. The way he captures the play of light in the atmosphere is exceptional, and very few can be compared to him in this regard."

### Object – what is that?

A less known area of Ronny Hård's artistry exists, namely those sculptural works he has created over the years. When asked questions about these sculptures, Ronny explains with animated gestures that they are not sculptures and should rather be called objects. They have their roots in his historical vision, and are supposed to be a constant reminder of the passing of all things.

In his life philosophy, the existential questions are of great importance. Life, death and rebirth are given physical form in these objects, through a symbolic reincarnation that is constantly occurring. It is not easy to see such a symbolism as self-evident, and Ronny explains: "Man and the objects he uses have a relatively short life-span. Their ephemerality exile man and his objects to nature's eternal cycle. Man is reborn in another shape, and these "objects" are reborn in another shape and function. Trivial artefacts, like for example an ancient handmade everyday object, receives a new function as a decorative adornment in a house. There you have the symbolism of rebirth, in another form."

Ronny has established his own carpentry shop in his basement, and creates his own frames so that the object of art in its entirety can be viewed as his own work. Completeness, and independence, are important matters of principles for this sympathetic artist.

