

When the obscure creates clarity

This is one of the mysteries of art. But actually it isn't difficult to understand. You simply have to think a little more deeply to approach the core of art and of art forms. What is it we actually want to express? Why do we paint? Why do we play musical instruments, why do we sing, why do we write? The questions come thick and fast. And the more we ask, the more difficult it is to arrive at a definitive answer. So we have to try to approach what is regarded as the birth of art. The action of seeking itself. The indefinite, that which we cannot actually describe.

The thing that merely is. And we seem to long for it.

Perhaps it begins in that very diffuseness. That obscurity. Something that comes from nothing. From a diffuse nothingness. But the emotion, the will, the imagination all have their interpreters.

I believe it is somewhere here that we find Anna-Karin Björk. For when I look at her paintings, other artists' works appear in my mind. Not because she has attempted to replicate their paintings. Indeed, perhaps she has not even seen them. But because for the viewer, one picture often leads to another, to an earlier and different experience. This is how our mental imagery, our memory for images, functions.

Anna-Karin Björk's paintings are radically different in a personal way. But perhaps she has unconsciously imbued them with something common to a range of predecessors within the art world. And that something is the diffuse.

This is the case, for example, in her 2005 painting "Tovull" (Cottongrass). It shows a group of balls of light on rods and is a very beautiful picture, one that makes me recall Eugén Jansson's shimmering Stockholm paintings with sweeping rows of street lamps in the twilight blue hour, in what the French call 'l'heure bleue'. Not to mention the American impressionist and expressionist James Whistler's bridge, illuminated by the explosions of fireworks. Anna-Karin's painting "Tovull" even contains a Strindbergian shade of black, dominated in her painting by diffuse clouds of light.

Once again, the diffuse is present. This is something of great significance in Anna-Karin Björk's paintings. She holds a master's degree in architecture from Chalmers University of Technology, has undertaken studies in drawing, painting and sculpture, and has worked as an architect in both Norway and Sweden, where she still practises.

An architect is normally a person who works with straight lines, rectangles, cubes and triangles (with obvious 'flowing' exceptions such as Gaudi), but in most even slightly representational paintings there is a vertical, a horizontal and a diagonal.

In another of Anna-Karin's untitled acrylic paintings, we have a perspective diagonal that leads us into a hazy, almost snow-white vista. I can't help but think of JMW Turner's onrushing locomotive on an early railway track. In Anna-Karin's painting there is no locomotive, but an equally dramatic and light-filled picture. A truly effulgent painting, but also an appreciation of straight architectonic lines, a grateful celebration of the rules of perspective.

In another untitled painting there is something that reminds the viewer of the snow thrown up by a snowplough, or perhaps quite simply of snow smoke. But in any case, the lightly sketched cascade provides a diagonal that gives the painting a depth terminating in the three red ochre wire bale-like forms in the background.

Composer Carl Nielsen wrote a piece of music entitled "Dimman lättar" (The fog is lifting). And it is from the dim and diffuse that creation can begin. As in the works of Monet or Turner. Monet painted many canvases of fog, with icy rivers from which the sun gradually draws back the grey curtain. And in one remarkable work, perhaps the most beautiful of all his paintings, he depicts his beloved wife as she lies on her death bed with a thin tulle veil over her face. Her features can only be dimly perceived. And yet, in a curious way she still emerges from the painting, becoming dreamily apparent as if on a shell cameo.

Sculptor Axel Ebbe's "Mannen som bryter sig ut ur klippan" (Man emerging from a cliff) taps into a similar spirit. Something that has been invisible becomes apparent. The same is true of the rock art carvings in southern Sweden, which tell the story of Bronze Age people but must be photographed in oblique light to be visible at all. And perhaps outlined in red for emphasis, as is done with runestones. It's only then that we can read and discover the image.

I experience Anna-Karin Björk's paintings in a similar way. They are almost magically diffuse, and I have to decipher them, interpret them with careful consideration – or perhaps rather with my senses at full stretch.

And one has this opportunity, one is forced to do so, through the recurring designation "Untitled". Here, the artist allows the viewer to interpret the artwork, to become thereby a participant in its creation. And of course this means that the spectator is also free to pick out their own image. One that perhaps doesn't entirely – or perhaps doesn't at all – agree with the artist's intentions. But this is a right granted to the viewer. Because art creates art, even in the person viewing it.

But let us pause for a while before an image from 2009, entitled "Luna". A moon with shadows, recalling observations of moonlit nights, cold winter nights or soft warm August nights. A brilliant nocturnal landscape that has fascinated us for thousands, if not millions of years. Perhaps this was the cause of humanity's first aspiration to look up, to see further and higher than a tough everyday life where mere survival was a struggle. To begin to think, question, ponder. Perhaps it was here that art was born. The art of recreating, but also of creating something new. Capturing the soul in an object, an animal, a tree – quite simply in something. It is thus with Anna-Karin's acrylic painting "Luna". The moon is larger than the diffuse earth below it. And it is as if we experience something huge and brilliant. Something that we cannot understand. We are overwhelmed. Can art overwhelm us in the same way? Can art lead us to new discoveries, open up new worlds?

But art need not be grandiose. Like the painting "Blå måne" (Blue Moon) from 2013, it can consist of a small blue circle, a small blue dot. With its square, umber and ochre coloured surroundings, it reminds us of a nesting box with a small hole to fly in and out of. Or a musical instrument. Perhaps a mandolin, with its sound holes, as if made to convey the South Sea tones of "Blue Moon". The essential aspect is how the painting gives wings to our imagination.

The acrylic painting "Mellan himmel och hav" (Inbetween) is a soft, blurry image with a rusty isthmus punctuating the boundary between sea and sky. Here nothing is decided, there are no clear lines, only colours that fervently embrace each other. Colours that appear to love each other.

In the 2016 painting "Nattljus" (Vigorous), the silvery light climbs up a pale reddish-ochre 'staircase'. The background here too is of Strindbergian black, yet still with a dim light in the darkness. A guiding light – but guiding us where? A kind of comfort in the dark. Perhaps a type of salvation.

Anna-Karin Björk's paintings constantly give rise to questions, awaken wonder. But this is how good art should be. Really good art should stimulate such emotions within us that we think we have received a ticket to better understanding of our own existence. Regardless of whether the painting is realistic or more like a dream. Something that we see before us but that we cannot quite make out.

The view in the painting "Drömmar" (Dreams), from 2011, shows a view out from a kind of opening in a wall towards a distant, diffuse coastline. It seems, as in the words of the poet Dan Andersson, that there is "something beyond the mountains", something we long for, something we hope for, something that we aspire to. Can art interpret dreams?

It seems as though Anna-Karin Björk may not be unfamiliar with this. In any case, her 2013 painting "På scenen" (On the stage) makes an allusion to the human's entrance into the world of the almost invisible. As in Pär Lagerkvist's poem, everything is indistinct. Everything is close, everything is far away. Everything is given to us for a little while. It is this marvellous world the artist wants to show us. With her soft, colourful paintings, she herself emerges in her art. Here, her self-portrait is far from diffuse. On the contrary, she is well aware of her goal.



Hans Janstäd

Member of AICA , International Association of ArtCritics