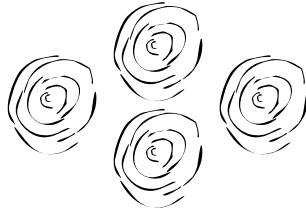


A
conversation
between Henrik Olai
Kaarstein and Madeleine Paré,
over a large seed salad
made by the
artist



Henrik Olai Kaarstein lives beside a canal, and if he stays up late enough, he can catch the morning cyclists as they prepare for their group rides. There is a certain promise to their athleticism. The spandex has an undeniable ornamental quality, announcing a good day ahead. From his window, Henrik once made a short video on his phone starring a few of them. Much of his work has acted as a sort of confrontation with desire. He delves into states of longing by way of poor and popular materials. Occasionally, some of the materials even mature into subjects. Mass produced litter with emotional weight and underappreciated beauty, begging to be seen.

When I first fell for Kaarstein we were sitting at a café table. We were inside his studio at the dining table but it felt more like we were outside on a sidewalk, or on a train in the rickety snack cart; two things that we like to do together. I remember it didn't feel like we were inside at all. But while sitting there, I began to see that his concern was very much with the inside. He has been exploring the recesses of his unaccompanied space since long before the world joined him in lockdown and panicked in its solitude. If Kaarstein's older works are suggestive of shrines to former or fictional lovers, the recent paintings elevate the things one does alone. He has focused (in) on painting, with the collage flowers being exceptional holdouts.

Kaarstein has been finding flowers on napkins and in catalogues for years. They seem to make their way into the works as though they are passing through. You might see one dance onto the next canvas, manneredly hiding behind an appliance. And what about the soft pastel traces they leave behind? Kaarstein finds flowers that are recognizable, stylistically standard—they look as though they might have been pulled from a dried-up Scratch & Sniff Activity Book. But the blissful trails they leave behind, those he invents. They are the affectionate arms, the quiet extremities of his paintings.

Below is an excerpt from a subsequent dinner between Kaarstein and I
March 6th 2022, around 6pm

- » Tomorrow you have this date.
- » The one I think is very young. But he seems interested in meeting so...
- » What do you talk about?
- » I like asking the question: what did you have for dinner? I think that's a nice conversation. This is also what I do with George almost daily and my friend Markus in Norway: "What's for dinner?"
- » As a serious question? You list what you are eating?
- » Yeah, to know what they had for dinner.
- » I like it because it makes you accountable. Sometimes, when I'm alone, dinner is a weird thing...
- » Yeah, when I binge or something. It's good to write it down. Although I guess it's usually my question. But I get it in return sometimes. And if I binge, I don't lie.
- » I had a frozen pizza without you, a whole one. It's actually really easy to eat a whole one... I was wondering if you decided on a title for your show. Wasn't it going to be *Bulimia*?
- » The book is titled *Bulimia*. But I don't want to offend anyone with that title. I don't want to be too open either. The show will be very private in a way.
- » Well, why *do* you consider calling the show *Bulimia*?
- » I think the word itself is quite nice. And it will also be such a surplus of a show. I call it my retrospective, but I kind of changed that position... it will still be a retrospective but it will mostly be works that haven't been shown. Storage works in a way. Or that extra work that you sent to the gallery hoping it would be included in the show, but for some reason it doesn't get in.
- » How many works will be new?
- » Just two new works: the mat we are sitting on and a wedding gown.
- » Whose wedding gown?
- » German Ebay. I made a version for a Romeo and Juliet play at school. I bought it on Ebay and painted on top of it. And I showed that in Italy at T293. And I thought it was a strong piece. It's hung from the ceiling so you can kind of see that it's missing a mannequin, but still...it falls the right way, as though a ghost is wearing it. Hung to the floor.
- » That fits with this idea of retrospective/anti-retrospective...You are unearthing "important" works from the past, but you're actually just remaking them. You are revisiting works that might have been originally overlooked, but that you consider key works in your history.

- » I'm asking my gallery to send me the works that were *almost* in the shows.
- » It makes me think... you are selecting and caring for these "less favorable" or discarded works, in a similar way that you care for the objects you represent in your recent paintings. The broken stool you moved to the entrance of your apartment, expecting to one day throw away, ended up finding its permanent home there. And later you memorialized it, flaws and all, in a painting. Something that was on its way out, or almost forgotten, that you elevated. In the case of the household objects, you do this by literally depicting them. In the case of the works in this show, you create a retrospective just for them. It's not even for you, it's for the forgotten works.
- » My professor, Willem de Rooij, told me that I am very democratic in my practice. Everything has its own importance. Together they are valuable. Alone maybe not in the same way. I don't exactly know what he meant by that. Democracy of objects, maybe.
- » A certain attachment to them as objects, a desire to save them. And so, what is a retrospective?

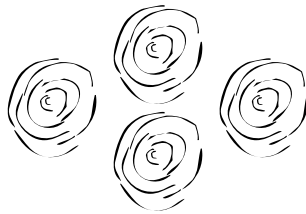
It's a survey of everything someone has done. And that can happen at any point, really.

- » That sentiment that most of the works that I make are not shown.
- » Two types of artists: those that don't want to make works unless they will be seen and those who will be making things no matter what. You will make something, package it with care and attention and then put it away.
- » Label it in my archive...
- » Maybe you know you are not actually putting the works to rest.
- » Yeah that's why I have an archive, cause I feel their importance. All the works have a number and I know when I made each one.
- » So being an artist who has an archiving practice as an extension of your studio practice affects what you do in some sense. Affects the exhibitions that you make. A lot of gallerists encourage artists to only show new works. I think that is problematic.
- » I've been told that before. Never understood it. It's weird, how new everything needs to be. I am excited about this show because I feel that a work from 2012 is perfect for it.
- » Yes, for instance this work on your wall right now feels very fresh.
- » It's from 2013. I found these plexi outside ZARA, the store. They made a storefront window with plexi shelves. And one night I was out walking, and the shelves were on the street because the window display was finished, the special was over. I just really love that sheet. On top of it is an ink drawing of a bird. I'm still making birds, but this drawing is almost childlike. I've gotten better at birds, I think. That's a fish falling from its mouth. A herring, I think. The bird is a heron. I soaked the sheet in this liquid bath of house paint and chemicals, which evapo-

rated over it like a seal. It's still intact after all these years, but it's been in the dark for 10 years. Maybe the sun will patina it now that it's out.

- At least every time I am over here, there is a different work on the wall. Sometimes they are works that you are currently working on, and sometimes they are from the storage. I think that your studio is both a place of production but, also, recycling or rotational viewing, and I wonder if it's as much for the privileged few close friends you invite over, as it is for you. Because you live here.
- I haven't thought about that before but you're right. If I have a date come over or something, I always change the hanging, more even, than I clean. I like changing the walls. Cleaning the toilet and vacuuming too. This is the first time I realized that.
- Because there are so few of us coming over, it seems it's also something that you do for yourself.
- I do hang works for guests, but also for myself, by extension. I want to impress, I feel. It's a bit like asking people what they had for dinner. I take a photo of my wall instead.
- It's interesting to me that you say it's harder, or sad, to work on something when you don't know where it's going to end up. Because I do see you as this kind of daily artist. You wake up and you're inside the work. We are having a salad on the work right now.
- But sometimes I wake up and don't work. I guess people have this idea that it just happens or something, but I feel quite in control of the mediums that I use. I have a pretty good idea of what I want it to look like. I think I know how to compose an image that to me looks correct. So when I'm looking, I'm trying to make it correct. It needs to make sense.
- And when does it feel finished?
- I like stopping myself before that point. I don't want it to be done or overdone. I can tell when I worked a bit too much on this thing or that detail.
- The terminology, of stopping yourself, withholding, et cetera. it reminds me of obsessive compulsive behavior... other ways we control ourselves as humans.
- Sure, eating, drinking alcohol, obsessing over boys.
- I've seen you exercise a lot of control over those things, all of those things. Why do you want your own experience to be hidden from the final works? And in what ways, if any, is it not hidden, even if you would like it to be...in what ways is that outside of your control?
- I like the art to be open. I don't put a lot of views or opinions into my work. I want it to be free, and contained, on its own. There's no message, it's a message in itself.
- Hmm, I do see your works as highly emotive, though.

- » I'm not saying art shouldn't have a meaning, but I want it to be more about a narrative than a message.
- » Yeah, a narrative is something that can be shared with anyone. A message is a proclamation, an assertion.
- » There will be a work with Condoleezza Rice though...
- » Tell me about Condoleezza!
- » I found this work that I made in art school. I think it was the 60 Minutes interview where she talked about the piano. She's a very well-trained pianist, but she didn't feel she could be the best in the world. So she gave up, because she would be the best US Secretary of Defense in the world. Her artistic side is perfection. And I think she thinks her political side is also perfection. It was a very weird clip.
- » Says a lot about her character. I agree with Condoleezza there.. do you?



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov
welcomes Secretary of State Condoleezza
Rice to Moscow in 2006

- » Art is so hard to qualify. You can be the best photo realistic painter, or whatever. Condoleezza didn't have the freedom in her to be a great pianist. She was too controlled, she just played the notes...
- » I also wanted to talk to you about a series of works from a few years ago, they sort of read like shrines to boys.
- » Oh yeah, those ones.
- » Lately you aren't making work about people, you're making work about objects, and I'm wondering where that shift came from?
- » But I kind of used the boys as objects too, in the sense that they were people I didn't know. Grinder and Tinder profile pictures of people who would not reply. Beautiful, well photographed men, that knew how to take a good selfie. I wouldn't say I was obsessing over them.
- » It wasn't about any of them in particular.
- » No, it was more about the image, the kind of perfection, youthfulness, a beauty of desirability.
- » And so you take that photo, that may or may not be their real face and has been put through several filters, and you make an imperfect painting of their image. The ones that I saw, these boys didn't look that beautiful, more awkward than pretty. But being placed in the centre of the painting, with an aura around them, and maybe colors emanating from them, that elevates them. There's something really nice, almost like you were seeing their vulnerability. They're actually just sort of sad lonely boys, and you know this is the one really good photo, or their favorite photo of themselves, the one photo they use to attract other men. And what you show is the thing before they were perfect on the app.
- » Rococo paintings are often quite small, but the frame is so humungous, maybe that countess wasn't as beautiful as she was made out to be in social circles. Maybe she doesn't deserve a very big canvas. The color field with the tissue paper, I consider that the frame. So the subject becomes quite small. My drawing skills aren't as good as the boys deserve. They are always somewhat centred, which is important to me. They need to be in control of where they are put.

