

Fragments of the World

– I work mostly with subject matter from my close surroundings. What I observe around me. Tufts of grass and soil are everywhere, they are very ordinary things, explains the painter Thorbjørn Sørensen about the works he presents in the exhibition *Through Nature* at the Stenersen Museum.

TEXT ARVE RØD

– Tell me about the works that are on view at the Stenersen Museum.

– They are a continuation of what I presented in the exhibition *Å gå rundt et hus (To Walk Around a House)* at Galleri K last year. They were watercolour studies of mounds of earth and plants. The technique is well-suited for the subjects that are depicted. The simple, relatively innocent quality of watercolours corresponds well with what is characteristic about the things that I actually depict.

– How did you begin with these studies?

– It really began with a failed attempt to make studies of nature outdoors. I just couldn't do it. I ended up taking the fragments of nature into my studio, and then something happened to my gaze and my thoughts about the things I painted. I saw a totally different object. Instead of just seeing grass or a plant, I had brought with me a whole little system of coincidental elements and things that I had not foreseen; in the earth beneath, in the root system – there were so many fragments of a much larger nature there. I began work on them when we were forced out of the artist collective in the building that was called Borgen, in Gamlebyen in Oslo, which has now been demolished. In the process, the small fragments of nature nearly became victimised symbols of an overall process of displacement in the city.

– So that project had a political side as well?

– Yes, in a way, but working with these motifs is not a form of manifesto. They represent a low-key way of protesting. I do not take upon myself the political task of speaking out for urban development or nature. Artists can of course have interesting things to say about such topics, but I have a humble respect for professions and knowledge that lie beyond my field of expertise.

– But the works nevertheless have a moral perspective?

– Yes, you could say that. But one goes through different phases in one's work. Occasionally you think there is something more you want to say about society and the world. At other times you are more withdrawn into yourself and your own thoughts. During periods like that, when for days you are sitting there looking into that tiny pile of earth, and then suddenly a little ant crawls out of it, well that is a sensation in my world!

– We were given a tour of the Natural History Museum in connection with this exhibition, and we met a geologist there. He was able to tell us that all of the electronic devices we buy have components made of metal, which is extracted from rocks in one form or another, and that rocks are in fact not a recyclable resource.

The consumption of these wares has increased drastically, which leads to a corresponding increase in encroachments in nature. I had not thought about that, and it was an eye-opener and an unsettling perspective on life in our time. That adds another dimension to a reading of my own works.

– The relationship between nature and culture appears as opposite extremes in your artistic output, from what I can see. The pictures of stripes from the nineties feel very urban compared to the intimate studies of grass and plants, birds, etc. What are your thoughts on that?

– In a way the various projects are about exactly the same thing. I like the element of chance in what I take with me when I bring plants into the studio. The pictures of stripes were also driven by coincidence more than being a response to an urban visual aesthetic. They are first and foremost a question of creating something of visual interest, something you would like to look at. It is so easy that you suddenly become tired of your own work, and ask yourself what it is you really are interested in. I am interested in nature that is close-up, plants or ordinary birds we can see in the city. It is very far from being a scientific study.

– Then what is it?

– What I paint is not quite definable, either as aesthetical or natural science objects. I look at nature with a discerning eye, but there is something vague in the way I work. There is an element of integrity in looking at the world as it presents itself to your everyday gaze or experience, without there being anything academic or literary about it. It has to do with asking yourself what the world is about, without necessarily making it into a great narrative. And I understand the world based on what I see around me, says Sørensen.



Thorbjørn Sørensen is one of the artists in the exhibition *Through Nature* at the Stenersen Museum. Photo © Behzad Farazollahi



Thorbjørn Sørensen: *Untitled (studies of mounds of earth and plants)*, watercolour, 2013. © Thorbjørn Sørensen / BONO 2014. Photo © Halvard Haugerud