

LOVELY NOXIOUS / anne marie ploug / horsens kunstmuseum

She comes in colors everywhere;

She combs her hair

She's like a rainbow

Coming colors in the air

Oh, everywhere

She comes in colors

(Jagger/Richards, 1967)

By Mai Misfeldt

The artist Anne Marie Ploug is a power girl. Like the manga girls featured in her earlier works, she is both tough and delicate. She can etch out an image of the most delicate of weeds or barge ahead at full force in the realm of painting. She can go nuts in pinks or do quiet in black. Open up pathways for the co-creative voice of the author, allowing images and sound to form new meanings.

Anne Marie Ploug's new works are like a chain reaction of images of the world. From the wild growth of weeds, eloquent of all the things which we who are gardeners raised in the spirit of civilisation seek to eradicate, shaping disturbing comments on our relationships with that which does not immediately fit our symmetry ('weeds' as a term and concept has been allowed to grow into ugly metaphors in our language). To images of the seductive candyfloss reality of media society, the microphones ever-eager to greet yet another sensation, one allowed to take up an entire minute of the programmed schedule which obviously prefers statements to be as curt and pruned as possible, regardless of the fact that the day has 24 hours in it; to cans of toxins, strangely shaped containers that envelop lethal contents. One is reminded of TV features showing Indian workers stomping around in toxins up to their waists in order to bring us cheap towels, courtesy of Lars Larsen, and showing Latin American banana farmers walking through their plantations with toxins running in rivulets down their bodies in order to allow us to buy piercingly yellow Pop-Art bananas; for we no longer accept the natural crop, all spotty and

mouldy as it would be. To the dangling ornaments of medals; discs that people, men in particular, have used to adorn and symbolically upgrade each other, and which Anne Marie Ploug now present as ridiculously empty, hollow signs of unknown deeds. Anne Marie Ploug's paintings are about a lot of things. We could say that there is an easy road leading into her painterly universe; there is something for spectators to grab hold of, an inviting, moving pathway beckoning you into the image space. Once you are there, lured into the image, you can continue to explore the play between plane and space, between that which is painted and that which is unpainted, between positive and negative shapes and outlines.

Anne Marie Ploug's new paintings are not quiet. They kick up a fuss, shout out loudly with their colours, insist on being seen. Historically, the story of colour is a chequered one. Colour has been regarded as too tacky, too female; as weak, associated with perdition (just think of the rush of colour created by narcotics), a too-simple device when compared to the dryness and exactitude of the line. Indeed, the theoretician David Batchelor even believes that our culture can be described as chromophobic, i.e. as scared of colour. The point of departure of his book, *Chromophobia*, was a visit to the home of a wealthy person in which everything was white. Not just white, exclusively white. The furniture was black, the paintings grey.

The encounter with this home, so exclusive that it also excluded colour, prompted him to embark on a journey through literary and art history, investigating the status of colour now and in the past. At one point he summarises the topic as follows:

"Colour is both a fall into nature, which may in turn be a fall from grace or a fall into grace, and against nature, which may result in a corruption of nature or freedom from its corrupting forces. Colour is a lapse into decadence and a recovery of innocence, a false addition to a surface and the truth beneath that surface. Colour is disorder and liberty; it is a drug, but a drug that can intoxicate, poison or cure."

NOTE: David Batchelor: *Chromophobia*. Reaktion Books Ltd. London 2000

In her new paintings, Ploug uses colour with gusto and a great sense of freedom. Her education within the graphic arts reveals itself in the confidence she brings to her work when creating encounters between individual elements. In the clear incisions, the clean planes. A colour is not just something in its own right; it changes according to the colours around it. A striped ribbon for a medal is not just a striped

ribbon; it is an investigation into what happens when planes of colour meet other planes of colour. Ploug's colours are applied like seductive make-up. They occupy the very uppermost layer of the painting, like a shimmering mask, a second skin polished and burnished for a party. They establish a seductive interplay with the spectator, enticing, luring, like glittering pearls beguiling a child, you, to enter their circle. The pleasure offered by their alluring exterior is great, they taste like candy, but behind the sweet façade a bitter aftertaste lies in wait. An aftertaste created by that which they have just made you swallow. Something which, as Anne Marie Ploug points out, we swallow every day. Our raw, crude, far grittier reality all wrapped up in the candy wrappers provided by the media. That is precisely why she called her exhibition *Lovely Noxious*, signifying something that is alluring on the one hand, something which inflames our desire, while also being toxic, dangerous for us.

The medal paintings point back to Anne Marie Ploug's former work on the concept of heroes. What makes a hero in our culture? Medals are given for long, trusty service, but the medals specifically addressed by Ploug in this exhibition are the ones awarded to war veterans. In other words, prizes given for killing other people. With her paintings, Ploug points to the absurdity inherent in such publicly accepted rewards, a practice celebrated in many countries, not just Denmark. P.A. Heiberg did the same in 1790 when he wrote this little poem and subsequently had to pay a substantial fine for his cheek:

Decorations are hung on Idiots
Stars and ribbons are just for the toffs
But of the Mallings, the Suhms, and the Roths
No newspaper kicks up a fuss.
Yet, if you have brains
It gives you no pains
To live without medals and stars.

Ploug's medals are not specific; only the ribbon is notable, while the medal itself is blank. "Fill with own imagination", as Arthur Köpcke would have said. Who deserves them? It is up to you, the spectator, to decide who you think are the heroes of our day.

One of Ploug's heroes within the world of painting, Andy Warhol, also used colour as seduction; in his prints he showed how different colours can make the same image express different things. In the series *Pink Flora*, which looks like Japanese cherry blossoms falling, but is in fact depicting the flowers of weeds, Anne Marie Ploug employs one of Warhol's methods: Making copies of her own original painting. The intriguing – and intricate – question is, of course, whether an artist's copy of their own work is a copy or an original? It is a copy because an original was already in existence, but it is also an original because it was painted by the artist herself, not by someone else. The painting is and is not. Are the statements made stronger by repetition, or does the reiteration cause the motif to almost disappear, becoming pure rhythm or abstraction? Do several copies of the same thing make it something more, or less? Does the copy make each individual work stronger or weaker? And does it matter that the motif in the painting is not what it appears to be? These are the issues that Anne Marie Ploug grapple with in the 21 paintings. Her series can also be viewed as a comment on our expectations of the artist as producers of their own brand. We like to be able to recognise an artist's works; otherwise we say that he or she is all over the place. We expect a certain amount of consistency in the works, a certain familiar feel. Very popular artists can end up as factories, as mere suppliers of the goods demanded. Here, then, we find the goods delivered in 21 copies; but things are not quite that simple after all. Upon closer inspection you will find that the 21 works are not entirely identical. The point is that no-one, not even the artist herself, can repeat themselves completely. There are tiny differences; variations in brushstrokes and colour density; differences in the energy behind the movement of the brush.

Her modern themes notwithstanding, Anne Marie Ploug is an old-fashioned craftswoman. Within the graphic arts she works as graphic artists have always worked, employing the techniques that require genuine cutting, carving or etching, whether in copper or wood. Sure, she could easily take the shortcuts offered by modern technology, but she prefers to work with her hands. Indeed, she also works hands-on in her ceramic weed reliefs, which are all carved by hand without the aid of templates. This approach conjures up fine new shoots – and some wildly aberrant ones as well, as will always happen when chance enters the picture. Which it invariably does in any process. The artist determines quite a bit; accidents and chance occurrences in the firing or printing decide the rest. As far as painting is concerned, Ploug works with traditional oils; she prefers oils

because they allow her to work in several layers and because they bring a smooth, slightly glossy texture to the paintings. Paint thinner also allows her to achieve running layers of colour, e.g. in *Bonsai Cut*.

Anne Marie Ploug views painting much in the same ways as the graphic arts, where the white areas speak as eloquently as the black ones. To her, painting, too, is about the relationship between positive and negative planes. The paintings always include unpainted areas where the naked canvas lets itself be viewed, calling attention to how painting consists of colour on a plane while also forming a negative space around the painted surface. In the series *Chemical Minus* and *Chemical Plus* she worked explicitly with the negative and positive spaces. The spaces where motifs arise either by virtue of their colour, or by their absence thereof. Absence can speak as loudly as presence. Like haiku poetry reducing its elements to the absolute essentials, Ploug's paintings are carved with precision, creating shapes that are by turn positive and negative.