

Galerie Max Hetzler Berlin | Paris

Frieze

Pilger, Zoe: Free Forms. Ida Ekblad talks to Zoe Pilger about painting, drifting, emptiness and energy

No. 170 April 2015



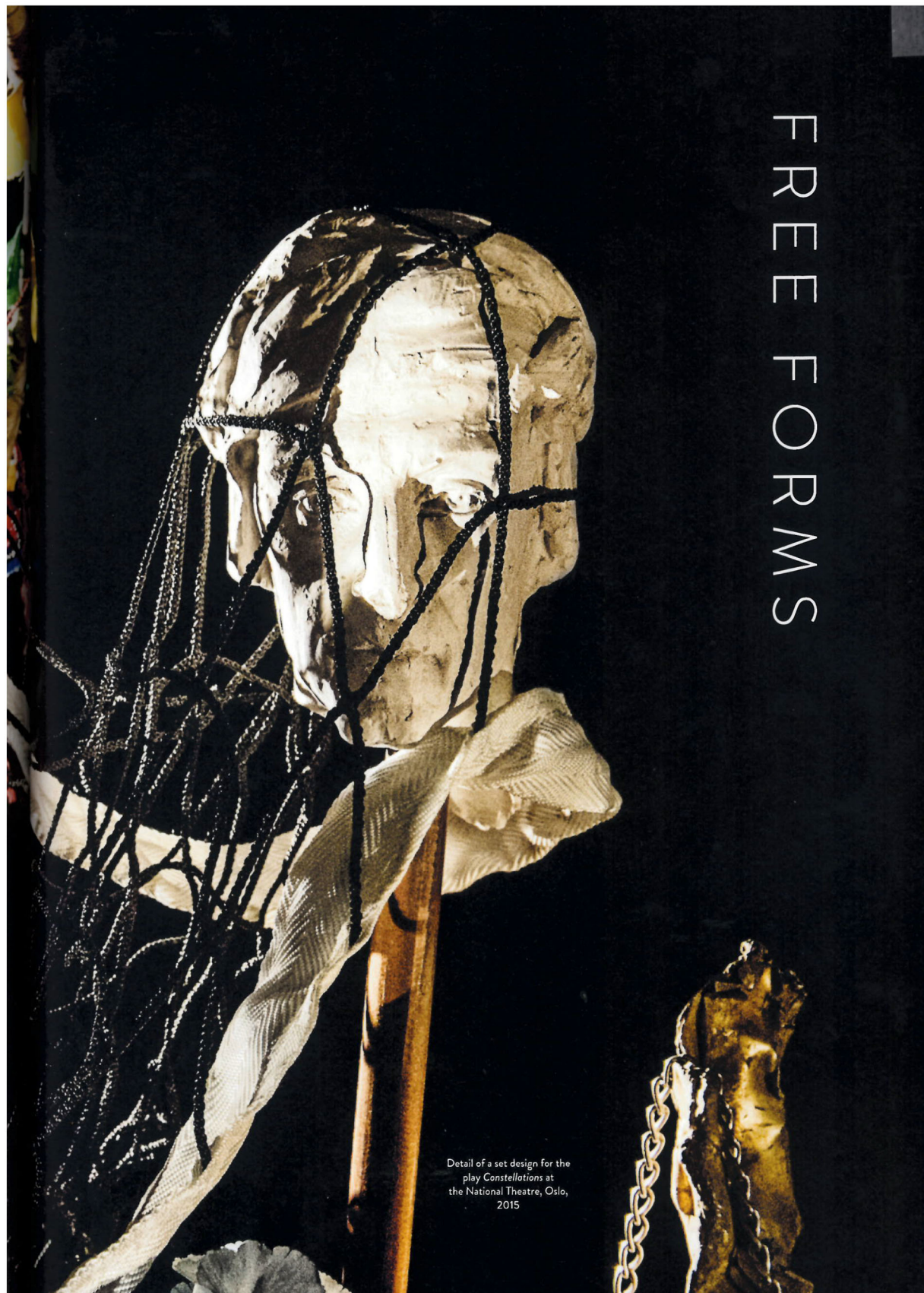
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I meet Norwegian artist Ida Ekblad in The Theatercaféen, the grand *fin-de-siècle* cafe in the centre of Oslo, where writers and artists have drunk for more than a century. Outside, it's nearing zero degrees and snowing. Since 2008, much of Ekblad's work has involved *dérives*, in which she wanders through urban areas – such as Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen or Clapham Common in London – searching for objects she can turn into sculptures. She also makes abstract paintings that are informed by her beginnings in graffiti, her love of music and her own poetry. From the cafe, we go next door to the National Theatre, where Ekblad has designed the scenography for *Constellations* (2012), a play by the British writer Nick Payne. The set consists of sculptures made from drift material – twisted metal, basketballs, fishing nets, flowers – and tall white gates, guarded on either side by sinuous, alien figures. Next, we take a taxi out of Oslo to Ekblad's studio, which overlooks the water. Surrounded by snow, it is silent and beautiful. Inside, we look at her new abstract paintings and talk about art and the uses of darkness.

ZOE PILGER

I'm fascinated by the freedom of your dérives.

IDA EKBLAD

I think what attracted me to them was that I hate to plan. There's something about planning that just turns me off completely and I can't find the lust to work. So, I look for ways of working where there is an element of surprise. When I was preparing to make the scenography for *Constellations* – which revolves around the notion that everything you can imagine doing is simultaneously happening in a parallel universe – I went to warehouses where they stock all different kinds of forks and other things, and I just drifted through them.

ZP *For the situationists, a dérive was a way of breaking the monotony of urban life under capitalism through spontaneous encounters with the city. Of course, they were working in the 1950s and '60s, when radical change seemed like a real possibility. What does it mean to dérive today?*

IE I'm not a hippie in any way: I don't believe art changes anything, really. I just always see the potential in doing something differently or doing something destructive – like when you're supposed to buy something, but you steal it instead. Sometimes you just get little windows of freedom in life, and I've always been attracted to that.

ZP *Do you feel there is a kind of animistic power in the pieces you collect during your dérives?*

IE Everything's so full of promise when it's new, like any new commodity. But you're so aware of the passing of life when you're in a scrapyard. Sometimes,

I've always had this extreme notion of death, and the passing of life. So there's a huge awareness of emptiness and nothingness. And then somehow, out of that, all this energy springs.

I'm drawn to just walking around graveyards and looking at the names and thinking that life's about passing away. But it's more brutal in a scrapyard because you actually see the corpses of things. Whether the scrapyard is in New York, Milan or Norway, what you see is almost always the same – just a pile of corpses, a twisted sadness, but hauntingly beautiful. There's a strong memory that I have from Paris of all these skeletons of bikes by the metro station still hanging in their locks. They were all fucked up – their wheels and seats and everything of any value was gone. They weren't human, but they were still corpses in a way.

ZP *Do you enjoy the element of danger in drifting?*

IE Yes. I was just at the scrapyard last weekend. Initially, I used to sneak in after hours, when no one was there. Then, at some point, I just asked if I could go in. It's like a monster: if you slip, all the bits of metal are super sharp; it threatens to eat you alive. The scrapyard is by the fjord so the setting is really beautiful. You have nature and the ocean. I love the smell of steel, of rust, of old flaky paint and of toxic elements. I also like to find colours. I love it when colours have been rusted or bleached by the sun – all those nuances you get. That's very often how I work; I can stand on the top of a mountain of junk and see 60 different types of greens – metallics and rusty greens, deep sea greens and greens toward blues. And that inspires my painting, of course.

Synke Selv,
2014, oil on canvas,
2 x 1.6 m

All images courtesy
the artist and Herald St,
London • previous
page photograph: Dag
Jenssen

ZP *Last year, you had two concurrent painting shows at both of Herald St's London spaces: 'A day of toil among its ruins' and 'A gentle looking little alien of sorts'.*

IE Something happened before those shows – I got a new studio. It's a perfect painting studio because it's huge and has beautiful light. Somehow, I felt like I could do absolutely anything. I started to experiment: putting oil paint into stockings, making a nozzle and then letting the paint leak out. For 'A day of toil among its ruins', I started to think about the supermarket trolleys that I have often used in my work. I had the idea this time to dip the wheels in chlorine, and then I kind of danced with the trolley, jumping on it and twirling around. The chlorine was bleeding into the fabric, burning it almost. I carved words into the wheels and the trolleys became these primitive but functional printing vehicles.

The trolley works also relate to one time at my sister's apartment when I made a mess with some food and then cleaned it up with a vacuum cleaner. Later, I opened the vacuum bag and used the contents – beetroot juice, dirt – to make paintings. The vacuum cleaner is like a body with a stomach, just as trolleys are bodies with tummies that you fill.

ZP *There's a striking line in your poem Synthetic Turf (2010): 'Fill em up, fill me up.'*

IE Yes. That is one of my own favourite poems, actually. It really gives a sense of how I felt living in Berlin at the time. I was making all these nightly trips to the park to collect stuff and there was a lot of prostitution going on. There were always cars flashing their lights at me, the drivers wondering whether I was for sale. It was a weird moment in my life. I was quite self-destructive.

ZP *What's the relationship between your art and your poetry?*

IE I use materials the same way that I use words. I like to write in English – I can almost taste the words, in a way.

ZP *Which writers do you like?*

IE I really love Samuel Beckett. He has a way of putting words on top of each other like a sculpture. I marvel at some of his poems. I just want to eat them up.

ZP *Beckett's work is often associated with the nothingness of existence, but your work has been described as very life-affirming.*

IE That kind of Beckettian negation is almost embedded within me, I think, and that's also where all life-affirmative things come from. Since I was a child, I've always had this extreme notion of death, and the passing of life. So, there's a huge awareness of emptiness and nothingness. And then, somehow, out of that, all this energy springs.

ZP *You once said in an interview that you couldn't be concerned with the death of painting 'when working at it makes me feel so alive'.*

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IE When I returned to Norway to study, after spending a year at Central Saint Martins in London, there was so much hostility towards painting. In the beginning, I just needed to paint. I got a lot of criticism for that – you know, painting emotionally. Some people think that to paint emotionally cannot be conceptual. I have needed to paint myself through so many stages because I'm a huge believer in using your hands and your whole body, your intellect and your senses, your language, everything. And putting that into work takes a lot of practice.

ZP *Did you always want to be an artist?*

IE I drew a lot as a child and spoke constantly while I was drawing. I really liked playing by myself and I continually made up stories. But there are no artists in my family. I remember proclaiming to my dad that I was going to be an artist. And he was like, 'Oh no, no, no ... don't do that!' I generally did what he told me not to do.

ZP *Do you consider yourself a feminist artist?*

IE I try to steer away from that label. I'm definitely a feminist, but I don't like to think that way. I just like to think that I'm a woman who does whatever she wants – like Gena Rowlands in John Cassavetes's film *A Woman Under The Influence* (1974). I fell in love with her. In almost all of Rowlands's films, she plays a kind

of half-lunatic character and she has a lot of freedom because of it. Maybe she's looked upon as sick or crazy, but you can also view her as a normal human being who reacts a little bit differently to what is expected. It opens up a huge pocket of freedom. Related to that is my love of Astrid Lindgren's character Pippi Longstocking. She's raving mad, but she's also the strongest woman in the world. When you're mad, you're slightly ruined. The ruined woman – I'm attracted to that idea. ♣

Ida Ekblad lives and works in Oslo, Norway. In 2014, she had two solo shows, 'A gentle looking little alien of sorts' and 'A day of toil among its ruins', at Herald St, London, UK. She recently designed the scenography for Constellations by Nick Payne at the National Theatre, Oslo. In 2015, she has forthcoming solo exhibitions at Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, Germany, in May, and Karma International, Los Angeles, USA, in June.

Zoe Pilger is an art critic for The Independent. Her first novel, Eat My Heart Out, is published by Serpent's Tail in the UK, and will be published by The Feminist Press at City University, New York, USA, in May 2015.

1
A Day of Toil 5
2014, acrylic on unprimed
linen canvas, 1.8 x 1.4 m

2
The Gold Bug Drift
(Christiania) 2009, cast
concrete, welded
iron, found mixed media,
dimensions variable



2