

Sovereignty Now

Can Jarl Ingvarsson deliver us from late capitalism's pandemic fatigue?

By Frans Josef Petersson 05.02.20 Review



Installation view from Jarl Ingvarsson's exhibition at Galerie Forsblom in Stockholm.

Before I sit down to write this, I pour myself what's left of the coffee and carry it over to my desk. The cup is chipped, its contents lukewarm. These are trivial details, yet it is as if my whole day depends on the strength I believe the cup will provide. I think this dependence is what Jarl Ingvarsson's exhibition at Gallerie Forsblom is about. We need the objects around us to maintain our existence.

Fabricae
Jarl Ingvarsson
Galerie Forsblom, Stockholm
17 February — 16 February 2020

This is Ingvarsson's first exhibition at the Finnish gallery's Stockholm branch, although he has exhibited in this space before, back when it belonged to Lars Bohman Gallery. Ingvarsson is a blue chip painter from the 80s generation, yet hasn't always received the critical attention

he deserves. He is a devout Catholic who seems unburdened by any belief in his own artistic sovereignty. Today, such purist notions otherwise appear as common symptoms of late capitalism's perfectionism, with dire consequences for all human well-being, including art.

Upon closer consideration, Ingvarsson may be as sovereign as they come. Today, an "excess of positivity," according to philosopher Byung-Chul Han, transforms attention to that of a wild animal. The South Korean-born thinker argues that society is approaching a "wild state." Hunt or be hunted, eat or be eaten. This situation is inimical to sovereignty, save for one based on dominance. This is not progress; this is societal decline.

Ingvarsson's attention is, by contrast, not like that of a wild animal. If he is sovereign, it is not because he strives to dominate his surroundings. On the contrary, it's because he has a vision that is alert to things around him. That gaze, that piety is the basis of this exhibition – and in a quite peculiar way.

First of all, he's painted on curtains, tablecloths, and duvet covers, not on canvas. He's stretched some of the works on frames, like regular paintings, or hung them with ropes from the ceiling or on the walls. The result is surprisingly experimental, while also conjuring a cosy domesticity.

Furthermore, Ingvarsson's motifs are various objects which are probably found in his studio: a coffee thermos, a stool, a ladder, and angel wings, which reoccur throughout the exhibition. He seems to be arguing that a cup of coffee or a stool can carry a person in the same way that an angel is kept in flight by its wings. The result is an image of faith delivered with both humour and sincerity – the viewer will have to be the one to judge.

The exhibition unfolds in two parts: the more traditional paintings on frames are in the front rooms; the painted textiles hang from the ceiling and the walls in the back. The atmosphere evokes a church, or a clearing in a woods where the viewer's gaze is gently directed upwards.

Unlike many 'Expressionist' painters, Ingvarsson doesn't emphasise the materiality of paint. Rather, he distinguishes himself as a draughtsman. He draws an animated – perhaps we could say Cubist – line that pulls here and there and in some strange way manages to render objects from several different angles at once. This amplification of existence resonates in the entire presentation, emphasising that one is entering a realm in which the artist is supreme ruler.



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The works in the outer rooms depict concrete objects, but the further we move inside, everything seems to dissolve into an ecstatic gathering. This also occurs between the single paintings exhibited in pairs. In the first room, one notices two works on pink sheets. In *Anna kommer med kanna* (Anna comes with the pot, 2019) the black contours of a coffee pot cover almost the entire surface. Next to it, in *Morandis morgon* (Morandi morning, 2019), the same image is repeated. Suddenly, the pot wavers and is covered in white paint with the artist's signature scrawled across it.

Perhaps Ingvarsson has painted the same pot on two separate occasions, when it appeared in completely different light. One morning, the pot had clearly defined edges; the next time, it seemed blurred. On the other hand, perhaps he wants to remind us that while objects provide life with stability and endurance, this dependence is also what makes existence precarious. Further into the exhibition, a tipped-over stool emphasises how everything can turn in an instant. Our days are finite, disappearance is always a possibility.

Another aspect of this precariousness is accentuated in the rear room. All the fabric makes me imagine that the artist simply got up, stripped the sheets from the bed, pulled down the curtains and started painting on them! This looks to the connection between painting and the state between sleep and wakefulness – when the demand to perform has not yet taken over, and the world is embedded in a condition of deep kindness. Isn't it precisely this connection that is severed when art is subjected to late capitalism's decree of always being productive?



Jarl Ingvarsson, detail from installation at Galerie Forsblom in Stockholm. Photo: Kunstkritikk.

Ingvarsson, by contrast, seems to be after what Han describes as a deep tiredness when things “flicker, twinkle, and vibrate at the edges.” Like in *Cloud of Unknowing* (2019), in which a green spot of paint represents both a cloud and the state the artist is in while painting. The green returns as an echo further into the exhibition, which is truly invigorating.

Today, contemporary painting is often viewed through the lens of media theory. Since painted pictures look good on Instagram, they are supposedly on par with life in the age of the screen.

The problem with this view is that it submits painting to the realm of images (or “networks”), while saying nothing about painting *qua* painting. What Ingvarsson makes us attentive to, by contrast, is that painting gains momentum precisely at the point when it is not mediated. Or, differently put, when its ‘here-ness’ conveys a sense of life’s precariousness.

This exhibition might lack singular paintings with the same dignity and complexity that Ingvarsson has achieved before. At times, his experimental ethos comes across as almost too light-headed. That, however, is a marginal objection served to an exceptional painter.



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