

Frans Josef Petersson, 'Painter's Delight: Viktor Kopp's new exhibition in Stockholm reframes the dichotomy between sensual and intellectual pleasure. He also returns to a favourite subject: chocolate,' *Kunstkritikk*, November 25 2020

Painter's Delight

Viktor Kopp's new exhibition in Stockholm reframes the dichotomy between sensual and intellectual pleasure. He also returns to a favourite subject: chocolate.

By Frans Josef Petersson 25.11.20 Review Artikel på svenska



Viktor Kopp, *Symbol and Sign: Two Points of Entry*, 91 x 120 cm, 2020.

Fullersta Gård, seventeenth-century mansion cum municipal konsthall in Huddinge, is an unsung gem in the Stockholm art world. In recent years, the konsthall has hosted a number of convincing exhibitions, all based on the same simple recipe: invite artists, not to answer to some tired institutional agenda, but because they genuinely have something to say, and give them ample room to say it. This is certainly true for Swedish painter Viktor Kopp, whose presentation sets up a number of intricate and humorous links between the exhibited works and the building's historical setting.

Beginning and End

Viktor Kopp

Fullersta Gård, Stockholm
14 November — 21 February 2020

Kopp is not a frequent exhibitor. He is represented by the New York gallery Bureau, but has, to my knowledge, only had one exhibition in Stockholm during the last decade. Some might remember his chocolate paintings as one of the highlights of Moderna Museet's *Moderna Exhibition* in 2010. I don't know why Kopp moved away from chocolate after that, or why he suddenly returned to the subject for his exhibition at Fullersta Gård, which includes both new works, such as *Floating Chocolate* and *Chocolate Shape* (both 2020), as well as older ones, such as *Cropped Chocolate* (2010).

This is an exhibition that raises many questions. For instance, is the chocolate painting Kopp of 2020 the same as the chocolate painting Kopp of 2010? Yet, the answer seems less important than the temporal gap that opens when the question momentarily leaves the viewer uncertain. I think it is precisely this state – walking around ruminating, not reaching any conclusions, perhaps not *wanting* to reach any conclusions – that Kopp's exhibition 'is about'.

The ancient Romans called this *otium*, an ideal state in which humans are freed from the world of necessity, and instead have time to ponder. The word lives on in the modern (albeit old-fashioned) expression "to enjoy one's *otium*." Isn't it precisely this practice that is inherent in Kopp's chocolate paintings, which make it possible to literally have the cake and enjoy it too? Thus, we are reminded that pleasure doesn't have to be linked to consumption, just as thinking doesn't have to be linked to production. It can be something we engage in for its own sake, simply because we want to, because *otium* is essential to our humanity.

I want to highlight three aspects of this which emerge in the exhibition. First, it opens doors in space and time which we don't necessarily have to enter. Second, it makes it possible to be both where we are and in another place at the same time. Third, everyone has this capacity, even though the time we can spend not working is unequally distributed.



Viktor Kopp, *Two Rooms*, 126 x 120 cm, 2020 & *Landscape with Window*, 100 x 80 cm, 2019.

The first aspect has to do with the different layers of time in the exhibition. Just as the refurbished seventeenth-century building is a patchwork of different periods, a painting by Kopp is often a reflection of another, which in turn is a version of a third. The Swedish word for panel door is “mirror door” – that is, a door, common in the 17th century, with two or more recesses, or ‘mirrors’ – and this is also a subject to which Kopp often returns. Sometimes, the door is depicted from the front. Sometimes, it is askew, the oblique angle implying pictorial space in an otherwise flat surface.

The second aspect concerns Kopp’s recent use of an impasto technique where each mark of oil paint remains visible on the canvas. A title like *Symbol and Sign. Two Points of Entry* (2020) might refer to the painting’s two subjects: a door and the letter A, placed next to each other against a blue backdrop. Yet, it could also refer to how the painting simultaneously denotes itself and what it depicts. The brushstrokes would thus be signs like the letter A or the door – visual marks with “two points of entry” on material and symbolic (or linguistic) levels.



Viktor Kopp, *Chocolate Shape*, 120 x 140 cm, 2020.

The third aspect is about Kopp’s common subjects: chocolate bars, panel doors, windows, the odd house. Simple things to which most people can relate. Sometimes, Kopp stirs it up a bit, like when he works with “shaped

canvases” in order to depict how a painting would look from the side. Yet, the viewer doesn’t really have to understand exactly how the painting is constructed; it’s the angle which opens things up, sets the room ajar, that is important.

Here someone might object to say that all paintings invite visual contemplation, but that is not quite true. What I want to emphasise is rather the distinction between, on the one hand, painting that aims to influence or do something to the viewer (regardless of whether we are to contemplate or be gripped by stronger passions), and, on the other hand, painting that does not presuppose the viewer’s active participation, since it is the image itself which is the objective. Kopp belongs to the latter category.

The author John Berger (1926–2017) captured this distinction very precisely in an essay on what distinguishes Renaissance art from more recent art. During the Renaissance, it was the subject – not *how* it was painted – that was supposed to express the artist’s feelings or ideas. This, Berger argues, explains the clarity and lack of ambivalence of Renaissance painting. Later on, the subject became a pretext for what the artist wanted to express, and art became a site for the great genius’ struggle for the public’s attention. This would also explain why less significant Renaissance art still today can give us “profound pleasure” (while, for example, bad Baroque painting is more difficult to endure).



Viktor Kopp, *Painting with House*, 100 x 80 cm, 2019.

What ties Kopp to the older tradition is not only his shallow picture plane and pursuit of visual clarity, but also his paintings' characteristic calmness. I think this might explain why he sticks to such a limited set of subjects. It doesn't seem to be a conceptual limitation or an 'idea' to be embodied, but an attitude that is estranged from the need of constant renewal.

Similarly, I don't think his theme of recurrence has to do with 'repetition' as much as it is about the simple pleasure of seeing what happens when a subject is slightly modified over time. I'm thinking, for example, of *Beginning and End 1–7* (2020), where Kopp has painted the same blue sky with a door opening to what could be a blossoming landscape on seven canvases of different sizes shown together in the main gallery. Nevertheless, I find this to be one of his less successful works. The reason is, I think, that it's too eager to activate the viewer, urging us to compare the different paintings to each other.



Viktor Kopp, *Door Yellow*, 175 x 92 cm, 2011 & *Mirror for Old Work*, 153 x 58 cm, 2020.

In my view, the temporal dimension that Kopp is reaching for is better articulated when he opens up a liminal space within a particular image. For instance, in *Door Yellow* (2011) and *Mirror for Old Work* (2020). The later painting depicts the older one from a different angle, so that the spatial rotation seems to accommodate the difference in time between the two. However, each painting also suggests a temporal dimension, as the shallow pictorial space indicates the possibility for something to occur.

I believe what Kopp is aiming for with this is an impersonal image, one which is neither subjective nor objective, neither expressive nor mechanical. One might think of the still lifes of Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964) or the ordinary world of things brought into being by the overlooked Swedish painter Eve Eriksson (1910–1992). Although Kopp is more of a trickster, he approaches painting with a similar modesty: art is not that

special, and there is no particular 'painterly gaze', even though many would like to believe it. Ironically, artists who aim for a common gaze are, therefore, quite uncommon.

And this is an uncommon exhibition. Uncommonly insightful and uncommonly beautiful. It's almost as if Fullersta Gård has been there waiting for Kopp's paintings to come along, addressing the viewer as a sensually and intellectually whole being. For here, beauty is not an end in itself, but a state in which art does something much more rewarding than educate us in the world of necessity.



Viktor Kopp, *Beginning and End 1*, 29 x 38 cm & *Beginning and End 7*, 158 x 210, both 2020.

Beginning and End

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