

Return to the beginning

Børge Kjeldstad



- *artistic
learning period*

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*A book about the artist
painter Børge Kjeldstad*

Preface

I am often asked why I quitted my work as a naval architect to become a painter artist. This book explains the reason for it and what happened afterwards. The book also shows what I paint and why I paint as I do. Text and photos are made by me. The exception is the photo on the back cover taken by Mathias Marley. I will use this opportunity to express my greatest thanks to Kunstkontoret AS and Leiv Erikson Nyskapning AS for giving me a fantastic support and guidance during the *Live well with your art* programme this past year.

Trondheim, June 2011

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Børge Kjeldstad". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Børge" and last name "Kjeldstad" clearly distinguishable.

Børge Kjeldstad

Le bateau ivre

Spring 1997 I took a master's degree in naval architecture at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, formerly NTH, and started to work in the research institute MARINTEK with development of new ship design concepts. The year before, together with two student colleagues, I had received first prize in the prestigious Dr. James A Lisnyk Ship Design Competition in New York. But already at that time I had an understanding of a desire to become something else. I thought that was to be an author. But in autumn 1997 I joined a drawing class drawing nudes. The intention was to learn how to sketch the ship concepts we were working with. The drawing lessons became a stroke of destiny. They seized me as if a barrier had been broken. Energy poured out. In the following Christmas holiday I got myself some drawing equipment at home and went on studying this further. Would the all-embracing experience repeat itself? Yes. Six months later I had quitted my job to become an artist painter.



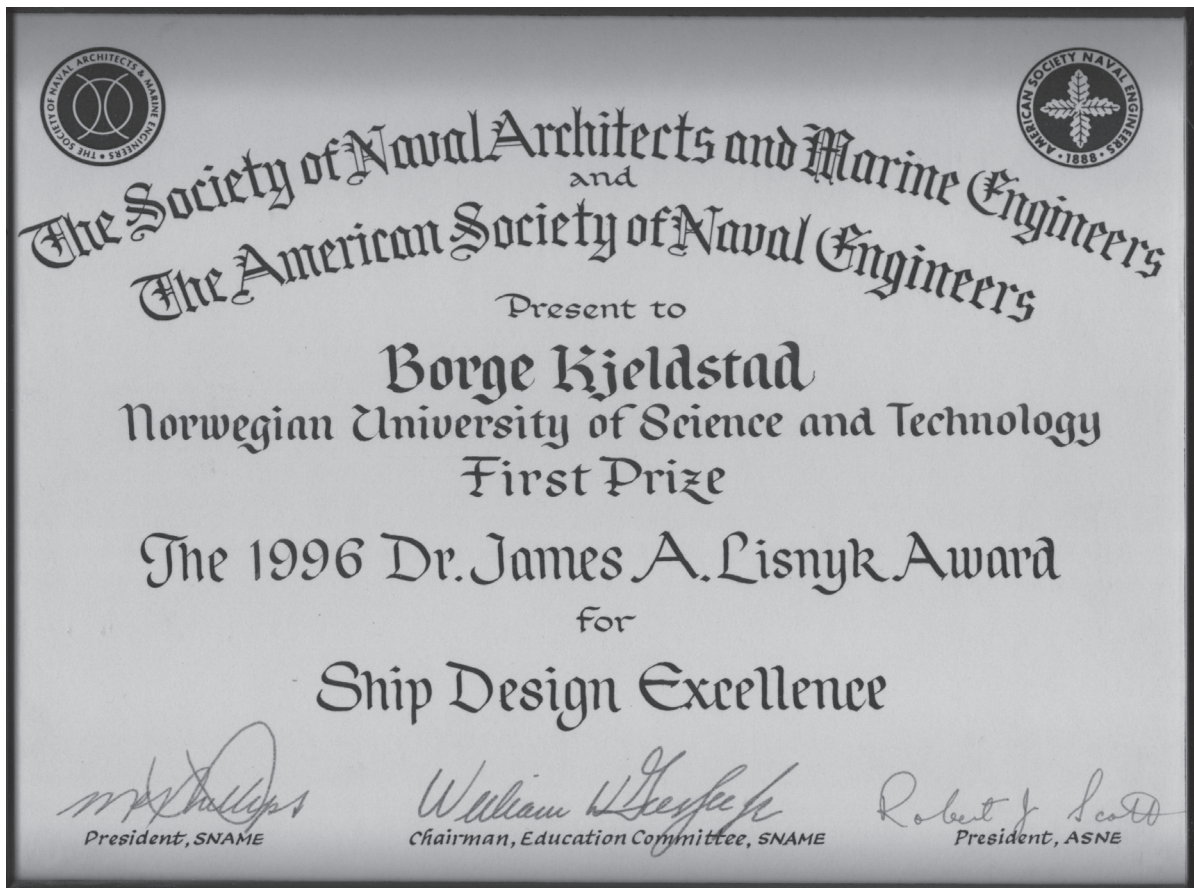
"Captivity and liberation" 2004
Oil on canvas 50 x 40 cm



Nude drawing from 1997 1997
Charcoal on paper, 84 x 47,5 cm



Nude drawing from 1997 1997
Charcoal on paper, 56 x 67 cm



Diploma from SNAME

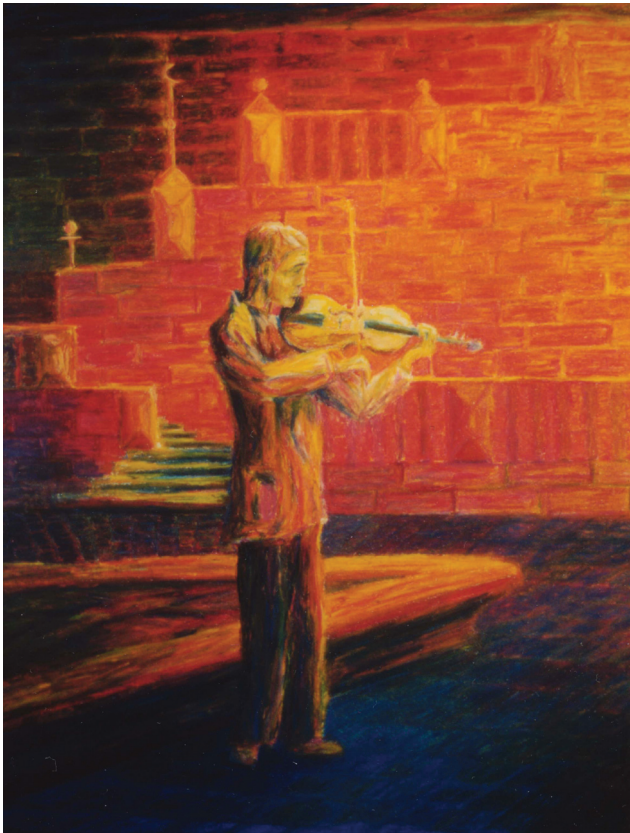
With blank sheets

Mental flow in front of the easel was excellent, but I had no knowledge of drawing. Drawing is a handcraft which must be learned. It took me two years. A book by Betty Edwards titled *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* was my first teacher. Afterwards I went on copying masterpieces from the history of art. My knowledge from university and high school was of little use. I had hardly drawn anything during those years and was completely new to it. I had returned to the beginning.



Copy of Gustav Klimt's "Danae" 1998

Pastel, 77 x 83 cm



"Violin player" 1998
Pastel, 80 x 60 cm

A place to be

My first studio was in the old dockyard buildings at Nedre Elvehavn in Trondheim. This was before the dockyards were rebuilt to shopping malls. A community organization gave art courses there. They had easels, a machine for making prints, excellent light conditions, and all else you could ask for. The only problem was that I had no business being there. Neither was I enrolled in any of the courses, nor was I a member of any of the various groups using the studio. But one day I got the key to the building from a girl I knew¹. Then I took post outside each night at eleven o'clock, waiting for the lights to be turned off and the art students to go home. Then I waited an additional 15 minutes before I locked myself in and made drawings all night. Some months went by like this, and would probably have continued even longer, if not the rebuilding of the dockyards to Trondheim's answer to Aker docks in Oslo had started. Of all the users staying in the old buildings before the reconstruction started, I think I was one of the last, if not the very last, who pulled out. The drawings I made during this period show persons consumed by an intense, nearly physical unity with their work. The same as I was experiencing when I was drawing, but not when I worked as a naval architect.

1. Line Forsdal who makes fine art herself, especially with egg tempera

Villbo

After the adventurous experiences in the studio at Nedre Elvehavn I pulled over to Svartlamon, Trondheim's equivalent to East Village in New York. In straight line barely a couple of stone's throw and a spit, but in absolute temperature the distance could exceed any scale. The loft in Strandveien 23, also known as Villbo – Wild living, was cold. The winter 2010 beat all records when I painted indoors in minus 3.5 degrees Celsius. At that time I had been there for eleven years, and one may say I was worn out. I moved into the city centre after this. Now I want to say thank you to Svartlamon and the people in Villbo in particular, for the great generosity that allowed me to stay there all these years.



Villbo

Hard years

The time after I quitted work at MARINTEK was hard. For the first six years I worked as a bouncer in nightclubs in Trondheim. I had to make some money, but I also needed to have something to do in the weekends. All my friends and mates from the university time had left the city and I was lonely. It was a long step from academia, but the comradeship was great. Today I wish I had some photos from this time, but we doorkeepers had no tradition of photographing ourselves at work. Though, when I see Dennis Hopper's painting Nighthawks, I know that I have been on the inside of that painting.

I had nearly no money these years. To be asked out for a cup of coffee was a nightmare. I could not afford the 15 kroner for the coffee. Several times I reconsidered taking up my career as a naval architect. I read up on the subject and eventually this background fused with the painting. GZ-curves and steel structure drawings occurred in my work. Calculations of metacentric height and propeller efficiency became part of the paintings.

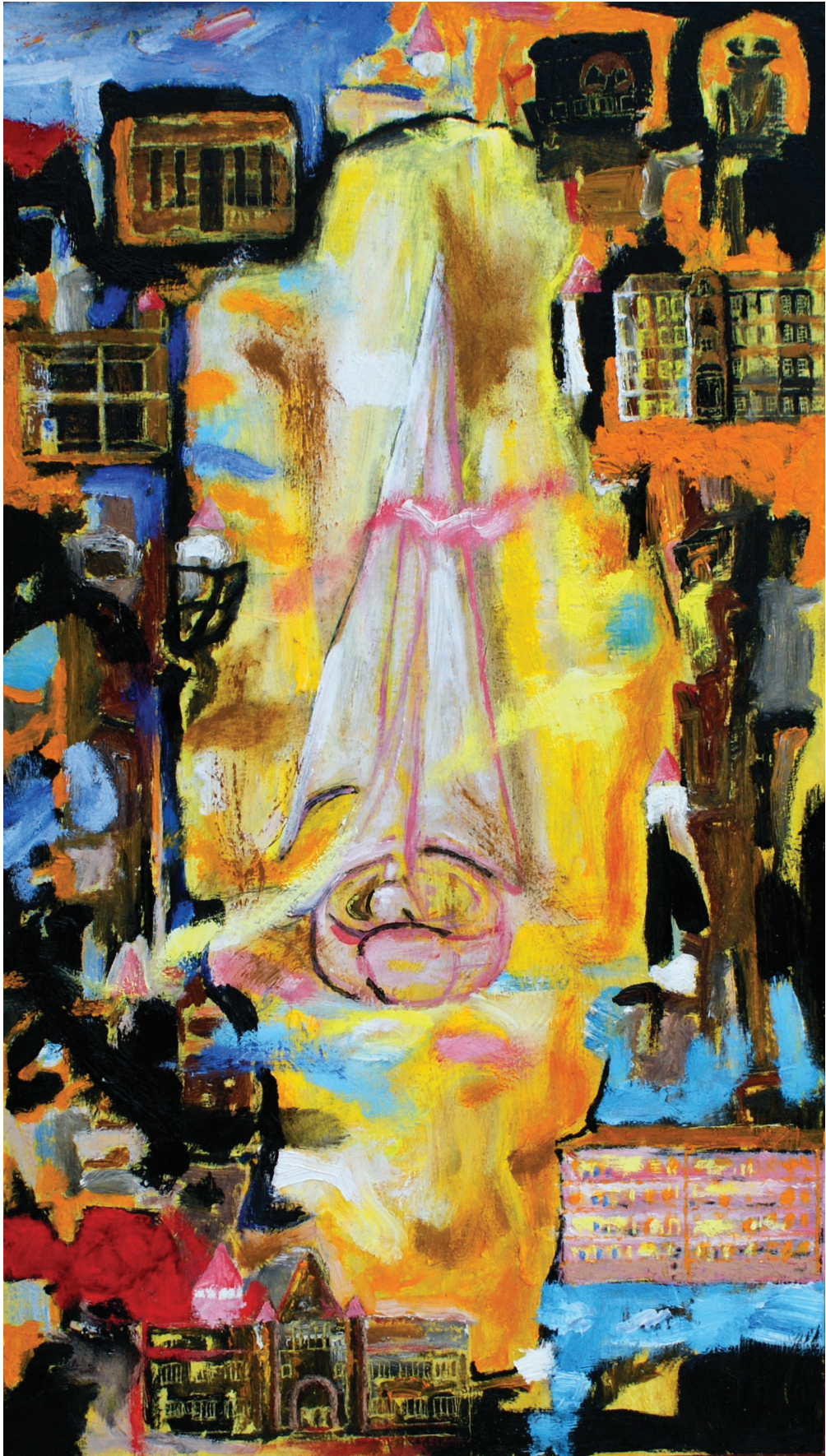


Navigator

"Because I am autodidact" wrote Knut Hamsun. I wonder if it was in *On Overgrown Paths*, but I might have read it in the biography by Kolloen². If you are self-taught as a painter artist in Norway, you not only stand outside a kind of self-righteous environment, you are also not qualified to apply for several of the few scholarships and grants that exist for artists. Dag Solhjell describes the Norwegian art institution as a system of gate keepers and writes: "Those guarding the different gates are all competing to increase the esteem of the capital they manage. They also struggle to elevate the return value of this capital, both for themselves and those they allow through the gates."³ Earlier I found being an outsider difficult. Now on the other hand, I am satisfied I have come through that too. The picture on the next page discusses this topic; a needles eye, build up by elements from the established art scene in Trondheim, and I who have passed it by boat.

2. Ingar Sletten Kolloen, *Hamsun-biography*, Audiobook

3. Dag Solhjell, *Art-Norway, A sociological study of the Norwegian art institution*, p. 77, Universitetsforlaget AS, 1995



Ikke en hobby

"No real artist chooses to become an artist; he is forced to it by a power in himself pressing on and not yielding until he obeys its' will."⁴

Recently I finished the painting on the facing page. I tried for years to paint myself in as a saluting party member on the left half, but it just did not fit. Later I understood that in the light of my real life, this was correct. If I had continued on my original journey inside A4-life, it would have been similar to buying tickets on the sinking ships on the painting's right side: This is as Ward continues to write: "Almost any artist is more at home in his or her private imaginary world – their fantasy world – than in their everyday life."⁵ This is something people do not understand. Even up till today I have had to defend my choice of becoming a painter artist against questions like: "Can't you just keep that painting stuff as a hobby?"

A for me personally remarkable story is connected to the painting *The party*: Since I work in Trondheim Art Museum I came to know the well-known Norwegian painter artist Kjell Erik Killi Olsen a few years ago. The summer 2007 he had a large exhibition at the museum, and I assisted in mounting it. "It would have been interesting to see your paintings one day" he suddenly said while we were standing on high ladders in a dark room mounting *The salamander* night outside the Nidaros Cathedral. Somebody else at the museum must have told him I was painting. "Well, you just have to go to the internet" I answered as I always do. "Everything is there." But no, Kjell Erik had no internet.

The summer went by, and the Killi Olsen exhibition beat all visitor records. One day in the autumn we agreed to meet in my studio at Svartlamon. I wondered what he would think about the peculiar house Villbo, but I think he liked it. "Here you got a real studio!" was his instant expression. I got many useful advices,

"The party" 2010
Oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm

for instance on how I could better organize my work space. But let us get to the mentioned painting; he stood in front of it and said: "You are too careful. You must not be afraid to destroy!" He was quite right, but I was not aware of it. And then, to my great horror and shock, he took a large piece of charcoal and said; "One is not supposed to do this on others paintings, but..." and then he squeezed the charcoal massively into the canvas I had been picking on for years, and made a bold contour outline around one of the figures. That, was education worth several years of study. I took a long step forward as a consequence of that incident. Later Kjell Erik Killi Olsen has visited me at Svartlamon one more time, and it is always pleasant to occasionally see him in Trondheim.

4. A. C. Ward, *Slik nyter vi kunst*, s 13, Stabenfeldt forlag, 1953.
Original title: *Enjoying painting*, London 1952.

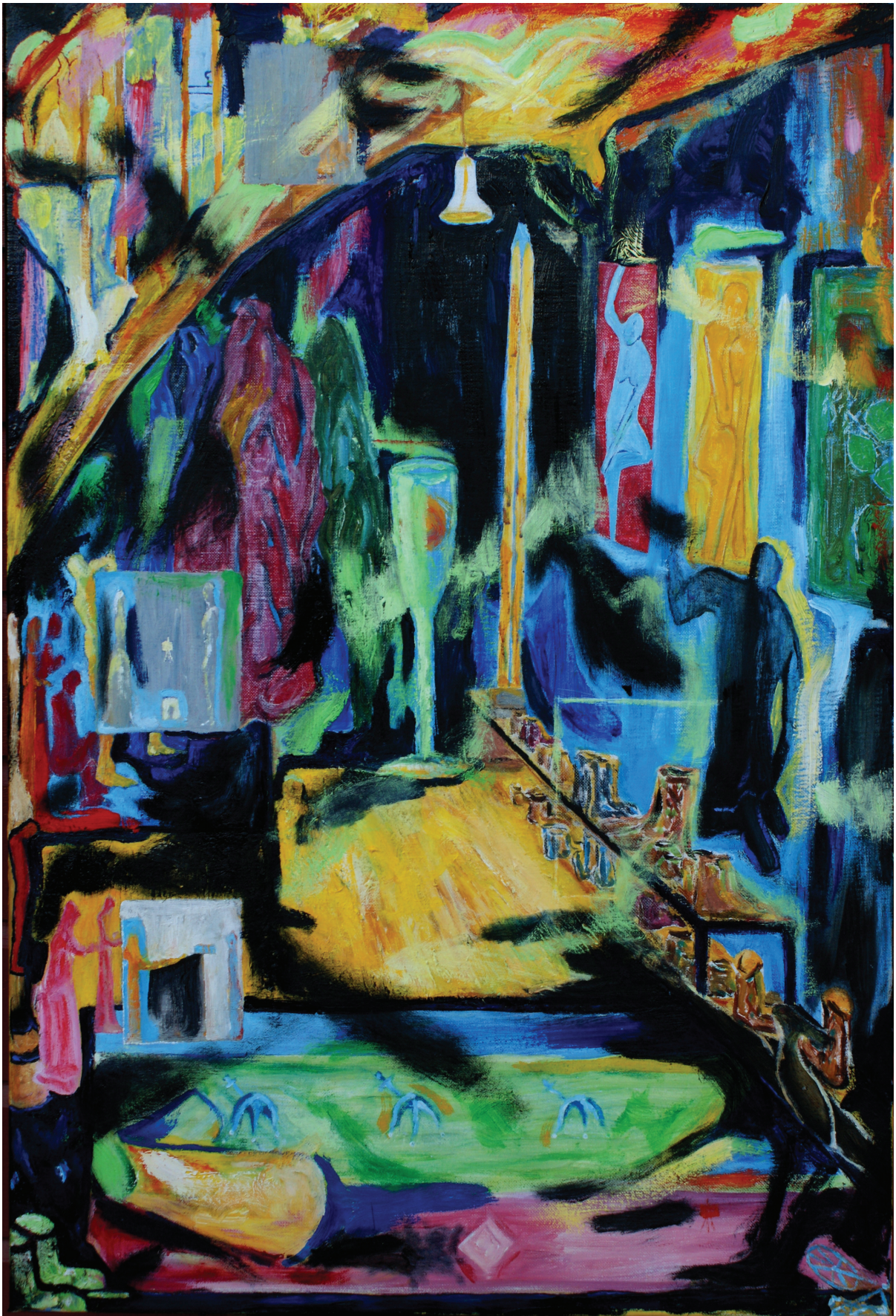
5. A. C. Ward, *Slik nyter vi kunst*, s 13, Stabenfeldt forlag, 1953.
Original title: *Enjoying painting*, London 1952.



Singsakerbakken

Singsakerbakken is a motif reoccurring in several of my drawings and paintings. That was the place where I lived from I returned from the US in 1995 until I went to France in 2000. There the pieces of my soul became visible, though, without finding their right place.

"The hallway in Singsakerbakken" 2010
Oil on canvas, 98,5 x 66 cm



Meeting Håkon Bleken

From 2002 to 2006 I lived in Steinberget in Trondheim. We had the best view in the city, and the renowned artist painter Håkon Bleken was our nearest neighbour. I say “we” because Dyrborgveien 23 was a collective. In winter time when we shovelled the snow away from our garden path, we sometimes cleared away the snow outside Bleken’s house as well. But we, or at least I, never spoke with him. Christmas day 2004, while I was dealing with the snow, he came out. First he thanked us for helping him out with the snow, then he wanted to know what all of us living in the collective were working with. I told him about the others; two PhD students, one person running his own company, one day dreamer, one Master of Science and one with a master in biology. I did not intend to talk about my painting, because I regarded that as pushing myself forward. But his answer came quickly. What about you? Then I had no other way than to say I was going to be an artist painter. Bleken wanted to see that.

It lasted until March before the meeting was arranged. Bleken was quite busy with his projects, and I wanted to paint as much as possible before this meeting which could only be viewed as an exam. Dressed up with a blazer and with nine paintings marched up outside the door, I pushed the doorbell. The strongest smell of turpentine blew out of the door as it was opened. “Welcome, I can see you are on time!” Bleken offered me his hand. “The paintings can be placed along that wall. On top of each other. That is how we do it.”

During all the times i have showed my paintings to Håkon Bleken, I have noticed one particular thing. It is like talking to an experienced and busy professor at the university. It is little small talk. It is guidance and advice straight to the point. Useful and precise. “This painting is finished, I think you should put it

up on the wall. This blue and green painting gives me nothing. And for my part you can repaint all that. This tower needs to be extended beyond that tree for the perspective to be right.” Bleken walks back and forward, displaying his comments on my works with the back end of a painting brush. But behind the busy man one notices a person who cares about the “student” in front of him. This is how it was with the best professors at the university as well.

Finally he summarizes his opinion: “I think it is a very good thing that you have made these paintings. This is something you should continue with.” That was the first time someone from within the established art scene said something positive about my work. I think no other comment has been more important to me than those words. Later I have been several times to Bleken. He has visited me in my studio and seen my exhibitions in Trondheim. The fact that he for seven years now has shown an interest in my artistic career and development has been of great value.

The painting on the facing page is made after a photo I took in the park outside the Prado museum in Madrid in 1994. At that time I could have never dreamt of that I, many years later, would paint something after that photo.



"This painting is finished. I think you should put it up on the wall."
Håkon Bleken, 2004

The meetings with Håkon Bleken and Kjell Erik Killi Olsen have inspired the content of the painting on the opposite page:



"Artistic powwow" 2010
Oil on canvas, 98 x 114 cm

Artistic viewpoint

When it comes to art theory, it has been important for me to investigate whether I can have confidence in the art institution or not. Is something art just because somebody within the institution says it is? This was my centre of gravity when I in 2000 gave a speech on art in the Student Society in Trondheim. Philosopher Lars Fredrik Svendsen was co-speaker. Later, in 2002, I followed up with the anti-idea "The Stake" on the Pirum Bank in the Nidelva River. A six meter tall installation heading up stream. The intention with it was to point out that this stake, being a funny invention, was not art, even though it would be possible to argue it was, using rhetoric from the art institution. In 2008 I again went into dialog with the art institution with the painting "The Art Museum". The picture discusses whether or not art itself suffers on an art scene where creating attention and sensation seems to be a dominating drive.

"The Art Museum" 2008

Oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm



Excursion to France

In 2000 I went on a longer excursion to France. The tour went with an old veteran minibus and was full of experiences. When my paintings eventually started to tell stories, the minibus from this tour became the first symbol I took into use.

"Self-portrait on the road VI" 2009

Oil on canvas, 92,5 x 100 cm

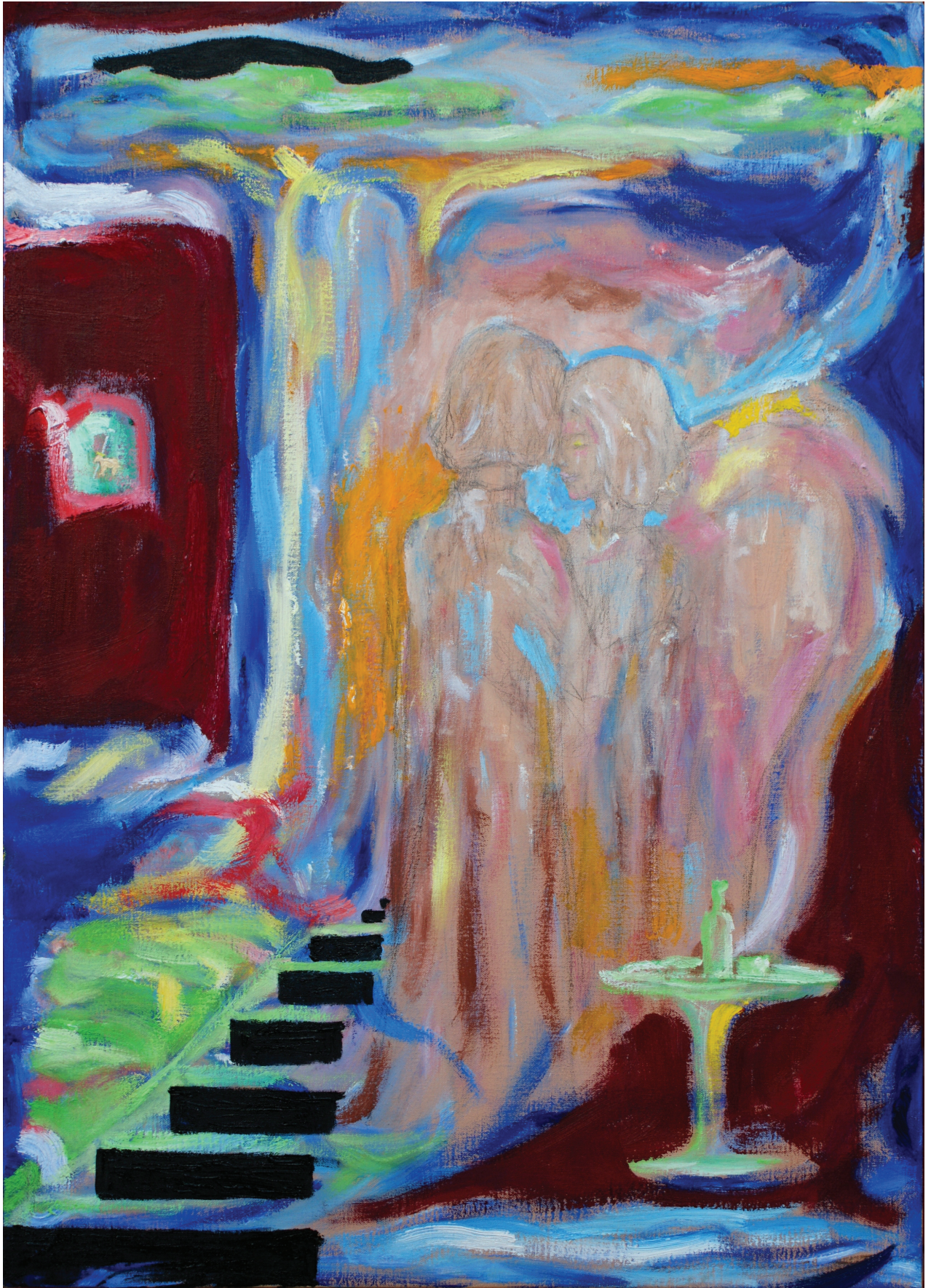


Heidegger's aesthetic theory

"Aesthetics is for the artist what ornithology is for the birds" said the artist Barnett Newman. Maybe so. But I was afraid to be deemed ignorant if I expressed opinions about art without knowing anything of the theory. Thus I cracked on studying philosophy. Together with some other subjects i read, this was combined into a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2005. Particularly I read Kant's Critique of Judgement, Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy and Heidegger's The Origin of Art. It was heavy reading and at least as heavy as the math in my Master of Science degree. My painting Renaissance in Blue Light discusses Heidegger's understanding of der Streit between the world and the earth which is settled in the Riss. I recommend his book.

"Renaissance in Blue Light" 2010

Oil on canvas, 76 x 54 cm



In hoc signo vinces

The Nidaros Cathedral is the most important building in my city. I come here often to find great peace. Probably I also find humbleness in myself. In this painting there are several things that I like. For instance the figures in the top right corner that show that the road to heaven is open for everyone.



"In hoc signo vinces" 2010
Oil on canvas, 52,5 x 57 cm

Art as a baseball bat

Previously I used the paintings to get a grip on my own history, so that it could no longer have a grip on me. Now they are often painted to become ammunition in a political debate. This painting of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani was painted on the main street in Trondheim in protest against the Iranian regime. The mother of two children, Sakineh, was condemned to death by stoning. When the painting was finished, I distributed it on the internet, and it could be downloaded for free for political use. Printouts of the painting were sent to authorities in Iran and Norway too. And several embassies also got emails with a photo of the painting attached.



"Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani" 2010
Oil and acrylics on canvas, 90 x 160 cm

Engagement for the environment

The painting of Sakineh was well received on the internet. From that I continued with one of my other political engagements; environmentalism. I painted my second-hand chair as a recommendation for greater reuse. An excellent chair with superb vintage. Bought for only 200 kroner from The Salvation Army.

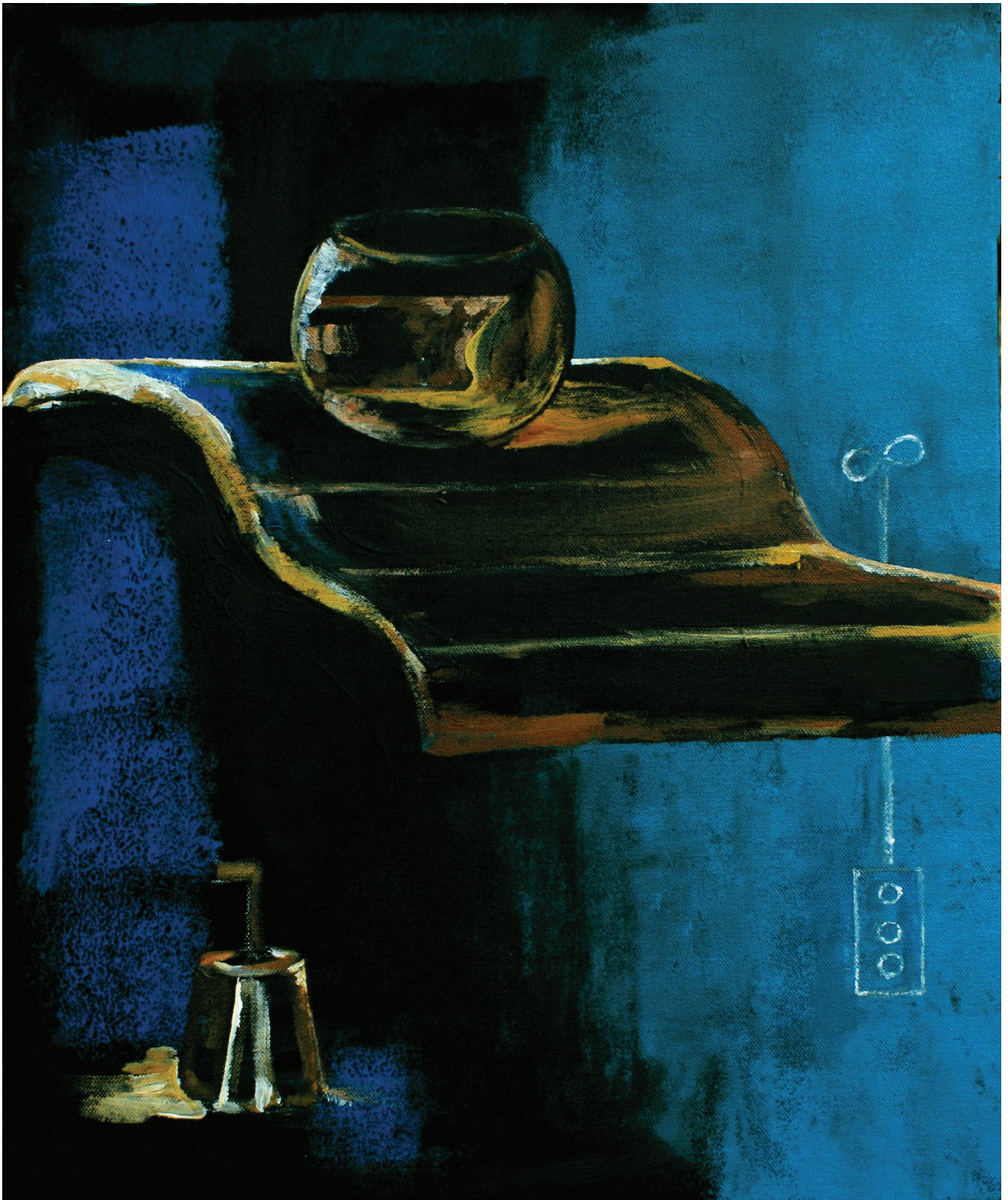


"The sustainable abyss" 2010
Acrylics on canvas, 70 x 100 cm

Fishbowlship

Fishbowlship is the name of the exhibition I first held under the student festival RUKA at the Marine Technical Centre in Trondheim in October 2010. For several years I have had a strong interest in open software and open development processes. And the more I got involved in this, the more I thought the marine technical research environment I was a part of at the university, could move it's science a long step forward if such open meeting places and processes were taken into use. The exhibition Fishbowlship became an argument for this. Further, I have tried to analyse design processes through art. The method has been to move what I learned about ship design at university into new rooms. The result was nine paintings made especially for this series. Later the Fishbowlship paintings have been displayed both at the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna, and at the Manhullet Shipping Conference in Trondheim. There is more information about the Fishbowlship project on my web pages. The common motif is the internet being displayed or understood as a fishbowl. The problem to be solved, for instance a new ship design, is then put into this fishbowl. The problem is then visible from all angles, and anybody can theoretically solve it.

"A new wave" 2010
Acrylics on canvas, 70 x 100 cm



Portraits

I have painted portraits of more or less all the grand children of my professor at NTH, Stian Erichsen. This is one of the most recent ones. I wondered a while what the portrait should be about. Eventually I landed on *Lux Borea – light from the north*, as a portrait of a type of energy that everybody desires.

“Lux borea, Kristine Monsås” 2010

Oil on canvas, 54 x 41 cm



"The unity of the ground" 2008
Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



So what now?

My paintings are going out into the field. Art is an excellent broadcaster, especially if it participates where debate is taking place. It makes the artificial borders between art and society that some wants to maintain, dissolve. It reduces the influence of the gate keepers too, which is good. Simultaneously, and for my own part, it makes the pieces of my soul come together. The engineer and the philosopher do not disappear when the artist arises. Political activity does not take focus away from artistic work. It is as if the curiosity on everything existing can develop itself limitlessly.



Photo of me taken during the Fishbowlship exhibition at the RUKA student festival in 2010.

Photo by Mathias Marley, chief editor of the student newspaper Marina.