

The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



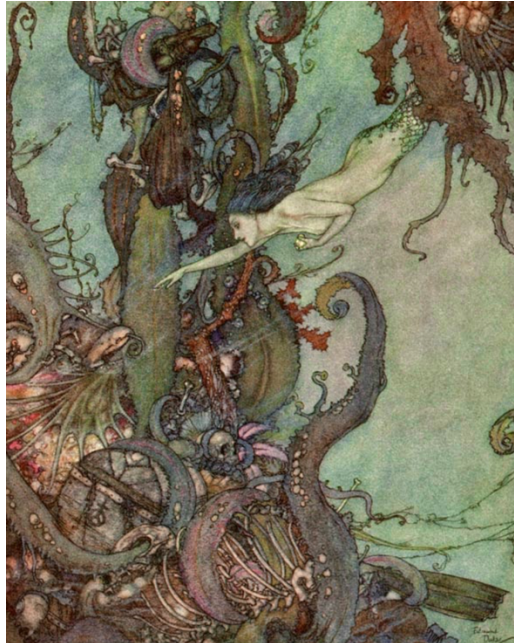
November–December 2024

When Edvard Eriksen was 33 years old, he asked his 28-year-old wife Eline to model for a statue he was commissioned to create. The Danish-Icelandic sculptor had done a variety of pieces before that were life size and required the modeling assistance of his young bride and partner. But this one was different. This one would capture the imagination not just of local Danes along the banks of the Nyhavn district in Copenhagen, or even the other Nordic neighbors curious as their vessels motored up the central canal from the jam of islands in the western Baltic, but the entire world enchanted by the fairytales of the famed Hans Christian Andersen. Perhaps even more shocking to either Andersen, the author or Eriksen, the sculptor, if they had lived long enough, would have been the draw that this statue would have for more than a century, that it would become a tourist attraction like no other, and a piece of popular imagination that would enamor and enchant the world through the generations.

While Eriksen modeled the work after his wife's body, he modeled the face of the mermaid after the famous Danish ballerina Ellen Price. Now, think what you want of that decision, the popularity, attraction, and legacy of the mermaid herself is an extraordinary

Issues 75–76: *The Lonely Mermaid*

example of human curiosity, charm, persuasion, and marketing of a product. And this was due to one Carl Jacobsen, son of the founder of Carlsberg Beer, philanthropist and art collector. The younger Jacobson decided to commission Eriksen to make the statue, and in 1913 it was completed and installed. A hundred and eleven years later the statue remains steadfast, close to shore, adjacent to a boardwalk and grassy path, simple, meditative, and yes, alone. The statue has long been a target of vandals, most recently, the mermaid was painted with the colors of the Russian flag. But the truly poignant matter besides these physical transgressions is that the posture and visage of the mermaid is pensive, worried, concerned, and thoughtful. On a late summer day this year, I took a boat tour near the statue and saw the diminutive mermaid in



contrast to a background packed with throngs of rowdy and unrelenting tourists, all looking every which way; all concerned with their own issues, desires, and wants, sort of paying attention to the mermaid, but also very much not concerned with her at all. The contrast could not be more clear or stark. The deep longing of the mermaid, into a shallow water along the Nyhavn canal tells us the unrealized hopes, struggles, and wishes of the

mythologized and idealized sea woman, staying ever alone, while society crowds into a chaotic oblivion, a forceful mob of assertion and aggression, kept just at arm's length, but always hovering with anxious self-indulgence, self-centeredness, and even social narcissism. Her island (below and right) is only big enough for herself, no room to accommodate another; it is her place of respite, quiet, and repair. But also, almost a precipice between the world that is, crowding around and consuming all the resources of society on the one hand and the underworld, the underwater world of desire, escape, and freedom, on the other.

Yet isn't this the ironic twist from the original story of the mermaid by Hans Christian Andersen? For after all, the young mermaid had wanted to escape the sea, to know about the wonders of life above the surface, which she'd heard about from her grandmother. But



the realities of the human world were harsh, and the narrative of the Andersen tale has the mermaid lost to the prince and nearly lost to the sea, before she is saved by her sisters. She was meant to kill the prince, but refused, and desired a fate that had her turn into seafoam. But in the odd glories of myth and storytelling, the mermaid became a fleeting spirit who would glow at night and protect those at sea

for hundreds of years to come. Perhaps the agonies of the mermaid tale are transfigured today and apply to the whole of society that continues to grab at us, and especially the vulnerable and marginalized.



It is interesting to think about how the world was a century ago and to consider that the stresses and problems and anxieties of the present had their parallels, their stepsiblings in time a hundred years before the present. While the Little Mermaid story came out of 1830s Denmark, similar tools of the imagination were being whittled to the north, later in the 19th century. In Oslo, I went to the Munch Museum and wandered around the vast galleries, long corridors, and vertical-oriented building overlooking the *Bybarna* (or, city harbor), to see the famous scream, the anxious blobs of *fin de siècle* Norwegian citizens bobbing into cloudy mornings or drab afternoons, and even a coterie of bluebonnet and mango-colored portraits of Friedrich Nietzsche and friends. But perhaps the most startling images were the renderings of curious beachgoers ("The Researchers") and versions of an illusionary landscape with a mystical sun centered on the massive canvases ("The Sun"), as big as two large school buses. They were rapturous and reminded me of Thomas Cole's

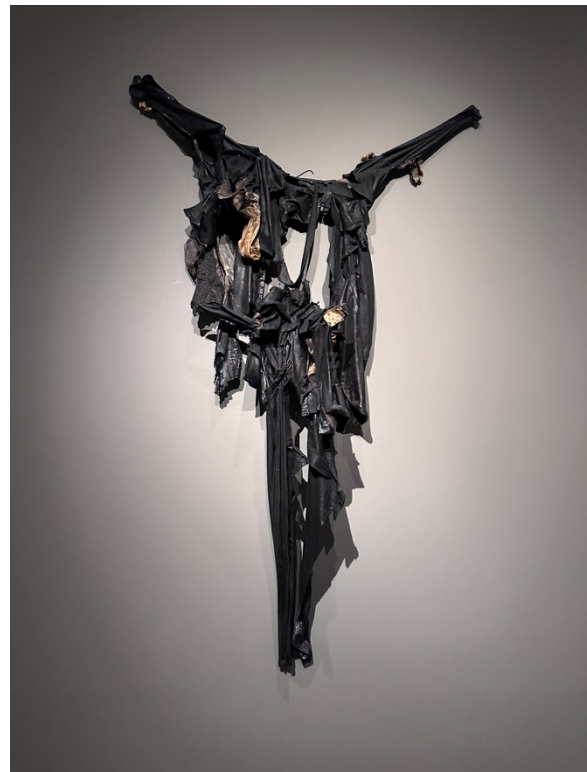
“The Voyage of Life”—done in a mode of high mysticism and mythology.

Art and anxiety, art and stress, art and emotion all go hand in hand. Yet, there is an interesting relationship between the conception and construction of art and the world in which it is displayed, the world in which other actors float through like phantoms of their own mythmaking worlds. In recent months, I’ve toured some amazing galleries and met some extraordinary people in that universe of the art world—a place as visible, triumphant, and paradoxical as the arena of modern American politics, and at times as vacuous and inane as the latest TikTok trend. But that’s where we need to meet the individuals who make it work *well*, because then we can escape momentarily from the feeling of emptiness that follows disappointing, useless, or concocted encounters in those spaces and that world.

The joys of art, new and old, can transcend our expectations and give us new senses of life and meaning. Some of the museums and galleries I visited this fall included a local storefront in the Design District of Dallas that had some exceptional pieces by distinguished Mongolian artists; I attended the grand opening of the Athenaeum at UTD and its renowned Crow Collection of Asian Art with the accompanying DMA exhibition hall; I perused the antiquities rooms at the RISD Museum in Providence one evening, surrounded by boisterous youth groups enamored more of each other than the Picassos and Matisses, but I still very much enjoyed the breadth of color and creative impulses that careened throughout the spaces; and I even found my way into some gala events, the celebratory arrangements that gather those with similar commitments to the

arts—in Houston and Marfa, both lengthy drives from Dallas, but both enriching.

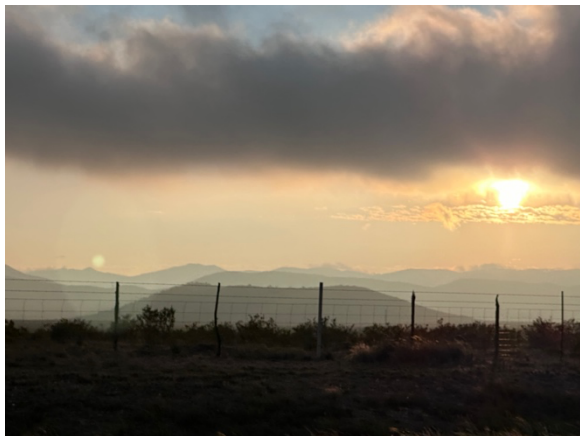
The interesting paradox of museums, art, wealth, and resistance is that they are all centered around the political—as in the human power dynamics of quotidian interaction and the calculus of negotiating those spaces, NOT the rough and tumble nonsense of the last year blown up into regurgitated media bird food and backscratching. The paradox of art that goes back time immemorial, but also thrives among us today, is the commodification of art—sometimes necessarily, sometimes most



certainly not. I’ve come to realize that this market does not place a high value on many historical artifacts but will reach absurd heights for a contemporary piece of commonplace trash for the sake of narrative and perceived ingenuity (just take the \$6M banana or an AI generated artwork made by a bob-cut doyenne avatar who looks like the standard *Mulier bolyokensis* art history BA-turned-gallery owner

in the West Village!) On the other hand, there is some powerful contemporary art that deserves our attention and focus.

Walking the galleries of the Houston MFA, where we had the partial Gutenberg on display for their recent exhibition *Living with the Gods: Art, Beliefs, and Peoples*, it occurred to me that in a room of 250 donors, patrons, artists, and haymakers, the interpersonal dynamics not only continue, they are reinforced and your identity is on full display, and as the dinners go on, you're either engaged, ignored, adored, or dismissed, until the evening melts away like a stick of butter in a cake batter. When I venture into the galleries, I like to take my time and reflect, and not talk to anyone. Many pieces are



meaningful and provocative (like Robert Mallery's *Crucifixion, Homage to Franz Kline*, previous page, made of torn polyester cloth), while some are not. The game of how we are forced to look at something goes on and perhaps the most meaningful interaction was not with the powerbrokers, the Foucauldian elite, but the patristic becloaked orthodox priest from Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, who originally hails from El Paso!

Not long before the trip to Houston, I'd made a junket out to West Texas, when I was invited to a magnificent event and private dinner in the

Presidio County art mecca of Marfa. The event was focused on the life and work of the artist Julie Speed, an indomitable spirit and joyfully creative human being, whose works provoke curiosity, laughter, and for some, anxiety and a slew of other emotions. Her exhibition at the Ballroom in Marfa is what might usually be called a *tour de force* in Curatorialese. And rightfully so. I'd likely describe it as a vibrant smack across the face of color and edginess. When I visited the desert town, the requisite crowd emerged, adorned on the clothier spectrum from Talbots to Tory Burch, and the occasional Goodwill flannel fashionista. It was a joyous and meaningful event, and I met many lovely folks. Of course, the designated critic du jour dressed in the most noticeable getup, with \$2K spectacles, and the air of a *Village Voice* editor. The evening dinner was engaging and featured a catered spread with some of the movers and shakers of the Texas art scene. Gaiety and banter rose above the long table set under summer lights and live oaks. Clinking glasses and laughter quieted, and everyone said goodbyes with wispy air kisses.

In a place like Marfa, the art of space has special meaning. It emerges in contrast to the desertscape of emptiness, a palette of blues, yellows, and reds swirled by nimbostratus clouds and sunlight (left). Solo driving in the desert is an empowering and ennobling experience that creates intense feelings of reflection and existential belonging, perhaps because it is a pure space that is mostly devoid of human construction. There is a juxtaposition of the humanmade, which can be provocative and vibrant, with the nature made, which is almost always awesome, overpowering, and sublime. I felt this tension when I was in Minnesota recently, walking 45 minutes in absolute darkness through the

woods of St. John's Abbey, before coming to a meditation chapel near the lake there—while it had some power, being alone in the dark woods at 5AM was far more intense and beautiful than the humanmade structure.

Back in Dallas, I'd been invited last month to a gallery that was hosting the life's work of a distinguished Austin-based artist. It was a

This summer I went to over a hundred museums in eleven countries. In those many museums there were moments of joy and profundity, while at other times I found myself being mixed with both boredom and exhaustion. What is a museum after all if it makes us bored?—or is that a “we problem?” Life in the museum world is like living and working through a series of coded interactions,



temporary chapel of about 20' x 15' and consisted of built-in panels of contemporary interpretations of ancient biblical scenes. All who visited this chapel were struck by the raw humanity, suffering, and grace that were depicted in its many subjects. It's hard to describe profoundly beautiful art, like music—you need to experience it, and sometimes to reflect and be with it alone. There is a tendency to want to be in a space like this with a group, to unpack and debate the art, to be articulate and toss out the joyous verbiage of art criticism. But sometimes, subtle reflection and meditation are the best critiques—saying nothing, just feeling.

very much like what the French literary theorist Roland Barthes wrote about—we have levels of meaning, signifiers, and objects that indicate various ranges of interpretation. In the art and museum world, there are so many things to encounter, approach, and interpret, and we often find ourselves overwhelmed by these distinctions, as much as we are consumed by the necessary relationships that we have in those worlds. This was apparent in the new Vesuvius exhibition at the Meadows Museum at SMU—*The Legacy of Vesuvius: Bourbon Discoveries on the Bay of Naples*. It was particularly meaningful, because I brought some students into the exhibition halls and had Dr. P.

Gregory Warden, the Mark A. Roglán Director of the Custard Institute for Spanish Art and Culture, lead a tour. And we saw everything from ancient frescos buried under meters of volcanic ash to 18th and 19th century masterworks, like Pierre-Jacques Volaire's *Eruption of Mount Vesuvius on the Ponte della Maddalena*, 1782



(Oil on canvas, previous page), which has vibrant and violent reds, oranges, and yellows bursting off the canvas. But the true meaning of multiple worlds

of the museum came alive when students wrote essays that revealed hidden truths, biases, and creativity that was not obvious to me or my colleagues. I visited so many museums this year that many of them blurred into oblivion. Some were profoundly instructive, while others were non-events. Sometimes it takes other eyes to reveal a truth about art; a realignment of created works with space is necessary for deeper meaning. And sometimes a museum is boring not because of what it displays, but because we're not in the right frame of mind.

Walking along a street in Wittenberg, Germany after visiting a dozen museums I came to the *Schlosskirche*, where Luther hammered his 95 Theses; a few blocks away, I spotted this massive mural of Saint Mary, mother of Jesus, in a parking lot (above), shown entranced by her iPhone! In some ways, it was yet another depiction of a woman by herself (like the Mermaid) pulled into something mesmerizing, something brain-numbing, something

isolating. It was a provocative work of public art and made me wonder what it meant in the context of this hugely and globally significant *Lutherstadt*. Art is about contrast, conflict, and paradox, about simultaneously being made aware and misunderstood, which makes it sound like religion itself, and finding meaning in absurdities. And this is probably true whether it's Luther, Mary, or the Little Mermaid, whether in Wittenberg, Pompeii, Houston, or the deserts around Marfa. Or Copenhagen, where we began.

The wharf where my tour boat launched was also the site of the lesser-known cluster of underwater bronze statues called *Agnete and the Merman* (below) sculpted by the Danish sculptor Suste Bonnén

and situated in the Frederiksholm canal near Højbro (the high bridge) and Christiansborg Palace. The work is an inversion of the Little Mermaid: it is of male



figures, and it was sculpted by a woman. It is submerged in a canal, mostly unseen, a twist to the long-held narratives and power dynamics that ruled these canals and the world since time immemorial. The world is changing, and the mermaid has begun to bolster herself, no longer alone, against a world of war, worry, and wonder that surrounds us all today.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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