

Maria Wæhrens

The Child

17 June - 07 August 2022

In 1962, as a developing interest in film and performance began to shift the direction of Carolee Schneeman's painting practice towards a new understanding of bodily gesture, she wrote in a notebook: "I assume the senses crave sources of maximum information; that the eye benefits by exercise, stretch and expansion towards materials of complexity and substance."

Maria Wæhrens is another artist whose innovative and experimental approach towards abstract painting shares the same commitment towards eye-expanding complexity and full-body participation. For the artist's debut solo exhibition with the gallery, OTP Copenhagen is proud to present a series of new works on canvas and paper that mark an important development in Wæhrens' exploration of faith, memory, psychological growth, generational inheritance, religious icon painting and queer sexuality.

On a damp Sunday morning, as I hid from the rain and waited for Maria Wæhrens, I drank two cups of strong coffee inside a bakery. One hour (and half-a-stretched-canvas later) the sun had emerged from its grey covers and I asked if I might accompany Maria on the brief journey from the gallery to her studio to collect a bag of wooden wedges. She obliged, and as we cycled slowly over the warming tarmac, I listened with caffeine-buzzed excitement as the artist offered casual and insightful comments on shyness, vulnerability, painting one's lovers and the trade-off between concept and expression in painting - speaking with the same confident ease and gradual tempo shifting that the spokes of our wheels performed as they cheerfully whirred us forward.

All of this is to say that, for Maria Wæhrens, the language of painting is second nature. As if it were an elective mother tongue, Wæhrens' fluency in the material is obvious, even when the substance, that we would typically rely on to recognise such technical proficiency, is absent.

In Maria Wæhrens' practice, faith is inextricably tied to painting and the creation of images. Having first experienced the medium at the hands of her grandmother, who would often produce devotional pictures and speak about painting as something carried out in service of God, the young Wæhrens would hold painting in such high esteem that she was unwilling to participate in it with the other children at school.

This changed when, aged thirteen, Maria Wæhrens had a dream where she was told she would become an artist. Permission had been granted in the form of a calling, and Maria Wæhrens embraced the alchemistic tradition of painting with the appropriate intensity for a person who had now been brought into direct dialogue with something greater than themselves. For Maria Wæhrens, the canvas would come to represent the thin boundary where material transforms into the ineffable - something impactful, poetic and revelatory, beyond the fact of its accumulation.

There is an important distinction to be drawn here however, between faith and religion, as they are not the same. For Maria Wæhrens, painting can be understood as a structure that facilitates the nurturing and exploration of faith, in much the same way that any single church might provide similar opportunities, or at least a framework, to structure such exploration.

Grounded in the artist's personal history just as much as it is in the history of their artistic practice, this exhibition concerns itself with the symbol of the child, naïve perspective in general and the psychology of the developing mind.

In works like *Untitled* (2022), Maria Wæhrens confronts the iconic motif of the Madonna and Child, negotiating with an abundance of Modern and contemporary Western Art Historical references that include: Kazimir Malevich's prioritisation of pure feeling above object depiction, Martin Kippenberger's religious iconoclasm and Maria Lassnig's unflinching self-portraiture.

In this painting, we find the enlarged glowing pink head of the Virgin, that is Maria's namesake, confident and beneficent. Loose, snaking gestures in egg tempera locate the subject in a warm expressive field of golden saffron and muddied burnt oranges. Below the beaming head, the Madonna is shown as clutching an ambiguous bundle, whose bulky indigo shadow endows the painting with an uncanny sensuality. Here the child is a stand-in for physical relation: between people, between humans and the Divine, and between artists and the means of their expression.

Other paintings in the exhibition such as *The Birds Of The Sky And The Fish Of The Sea* (2022) and *Suffering* (2022) approach the difficult task of projecting the internal impressions of a hyper-sensitive individual, who is yet to fully develop an effective means of articulating their experience to those around them.

These works draw upon childhood memories of lonely sleepless nights, a fearful attraction towards large birds and the fraught relationships that can emerge from relationships with family figures that inspire feelings of self-confidence alongside shame and repression. Combining aesthetics of the remembered, of the reconstructed and of the imaginary, these paintings appear as immersive dream-like landscapes populated by strange creatures and brimming with bold affect and unfamiliar yet seductive sensory impressions.

The title work of the exhibition is a small study on paper, produced one Sunday afternoon as the artist sat with her own children. It depicts a small figure in a giraffe costume, its pink hairless head much larger than its dainty frame and looking skull-like in the vacant intensity of its shadowy eyes. Above this figure, a series of abstract looping forms evoke a tirade of impressions and emotional effects, springing from the head of the child, or swooping to peck its skull, like the long beak of a vulture.

Here, Maria Wæhrens synthesises the symbol of the child as it has come to operate in various cultural contexts. In part this figure is the phantom of fragility, embodying the sense of helplessness that is projected onto 'impressionable young minds' and used to police our social behaviours and censor our expression.

At the same time, the figure appears as the developing source of newly abstracted, progressive and forward-looking forms of expression; it appears like the artist's brain child, radically open to the world beyond itself, and contributing to a less-restricted, wilfully vulnerable future where a broader range of impressions can be felt and understood.

Oscar Gilbert, Copenhagen, June 2022

Maria Wæhrens (b. 1976, Hjørring; DK) graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts' MFA programme in 2005, having studied for four years under the tutelage of Ursula Reuter Christiansen. Wæhrens' recent exhibitions include: *Vera Icon* at the Danish Museum for Religious Art (2022; DK), *Psychopathia Sexualis* (curated by Mathias Kryger) at Overgaden (2021; DK) and *Maria Wæhrens* at Vejen Kunstmuseum (2020-2021; DK).