

Immaculate, engaged, vibrant images of the times

By Julie Thaning Mikines

The visual artist Maria Torp paints intense, compelling portraits and impressions of space. With a variety of drawing and painting techniques she unveils vital, hyperrealistic images of human beings in various relations and situations. There is a distinctive depth and sensitivity in Torp's precise portraits, and her paintings remain vibrant and alive in expression – indeed, they almost quiver with life. Torp works with sculpture, painting and on paper.

Maria Torp's visual idiom is flawlessly precise and reproduces complex surface structures such as hair, skin, clothing and textiles in a hyperrealistic way. Similar in style to photorealism, the surfaces in Torp's works are smooth and glossy as the pages of a fashion magazine; but Torp's works extend beyond the photorealistic; her working process with the paintings involves not just the reproduction of a photograph, but a personal or intimate story – Torp's approach rather has roots in the nineteenth-century art movement *Realism*, which is characterized by the consistent observance of the requirement to deal with the contemporary scene, often combined with a socially critical focus on the human condition. Unlike Naturalism, which means a striving towards the objective rendering of visual impressions, the Realist representation always has a certain element of attitude-influenced interpretation – a striving to emphasize those very features that are considered particularly indicative of the true underlying reality.

Maria Torp herself singles out this quality in her work: “What I love most is when the final layer of paint is applied and the subject suddenly acquires a weight and crispness where skin becomes transparent and the subject comes into perfect focus. What I love about the successful Realist painting is that the direct decoding seems so simple, yet the subject still remains living and vibrant.”

In the same way Torp's works stand out in being content-rich and profoundly personal depictions of the times. In the work *The Diner*, 2013, we see a detail of a woman who is eating fresh pasta and drinking red wine from a water glass. The woman sits at a patterned table top, her arms are covered in colourful tattoos; she has red-varnished nails and wears a small red and white check top. The woman's face is outside the picture, but the work still functions as a profoundly intimate portrait. There is a closeness in the painting that has a surprising effect and arouses the viewer's curiosity: who is this woman and what is her story? The characteristic patterned tabletop and the wooden panelling behind the woman create a feeling of familiarity, and as a young Copenhagener you know that you are at Café Dyrehaven in Vesterbro. This immediate decoding helps the story of the woman on its way and activates the viewer.

Maria Torp's images are created in an extended process. The artist works with drawn sketches that subsequently become photos, which in turn become the designs for her paintings. The artist describes the reason for this process as follows: “To begin with, I was interested in seeing whether it was possible to translate a highly personal expression (the drawing) into a slice of reality (the photo) – and then to paint it. Whether it was possible to

preserve the original power and essence of the drawing. But I was also aiming for a process where I was better able than before to enter into a dialogue with the work. And because many random factors arose and lots of circumstances are in play in a photo shoot – personal tics and others' ideas etc. – it becomes much more challenging for me to work with. I use the drawing as a guiding model, but if chance suddenly dictates something different, it's important to be open to that. The three stages can perhaps be seen as the maturing of a motif..." The people that Torp portrays are found both within and outside her personal circle.

Transition, 2015, is another overwhelming work from Torp. Here the artist has moved away from the classic canvas and instead has painted directly on unfolded cardboard boxes. The work measures 3 x 8 m, and it is both the size and the subject that make it so overwhelming. With oils, acrylic and spray the artist has painted a grim situation out of the raw surface of the cardboard: a young boy lies stretched out asleep in a turquoise sleeping bag – the boy is bare-chested and lies on his side so we can see half of his face and his blond hair. At the boy's feet a dog sits keeping watch; garbage, tin cans and clothes lie scattered around the boy, creating a distinct feeling that we are on the street. The fact that many homeless people in fact use unfolded cardboard boxes as a sleeping underlay creates a clear association with the reality of society. Torp's precise, vital and flawless visual imagery contrasts sharply with the raw look of the cardboard, just as the age and naked skin of the boy make his situation even more vulnerable and telling. As is often the case with Maria Torp's works, the subject provokes a myriad of questions in the viewer: who is this young boy, how old is he and where are his parents? Why does he have to sleep on the street and who is responsible for him? The thoughts come swarming in and the viewer cannot help engaging with the work and the situation.

This engagement that the artist's works prompt in the viewer is quite exceptional and underscores Maria Torp's rare artistic talent for telling captivating stories through painting. The depth and sensitivity in Torp's works are surprising and challenging, and her intense portraits paint a stark, enthralling picture of our time.

Maria Torp was born in 1975, studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2000-2007 and before that at the London College of Printing. She lives and works in Copenhagen. Torp works with sculpture, painting and on paper and she has participated in several group exhibitions at galleries, museums, art halls and art fairs both nationally and internationally. In addition she has executed decoration commissions for among other organizations FTF, Ferring, The Velux Foundation and TrygVesta.