

Capturing energy: Maria Torp's paintings of presence

By Maibritt Borgen

Maria Torp's art--like herself--strikes you like a lightning bolt. Conversations with her move effortlessly from macro politics, human rights and political and social structures to moments of intensely dwelling together on a miniscule blue detail in a flower painting. She embodies perpetual motion, and she has an always-expanding curiosity for more. For a long time, it intrigued me how this energy could reconcile with her immaculate, labour-intensive, painstakingly detailed and rich paintings. They possess a slow exploration of images that captures the spectator. That they could capture her long enough to create them seems almost against reason.

Investigating cliché

Torp often works in series, revisiting an image or a theme over and over again, with each painting adding another facet to the investigation. One series of fifteen paintings, one of which is Torp's *The Diner* (2017) shown on the cover of this publication, investigates commonly depicted themes in the history of Western art and their relation to female subjects. Meals, for example, occur from the religious scenes of *The Last Supper* to the harsh poverty of Gustave Courbet's *The Potato Eaters*. If women have a seat at the table -literally speaking- at these meals, few of them seem to be eating (cue Edward Hopper's melancholic women in diners.)

In *The Diner*, Torp presents a contemporary meal scene with a distinctly different sensibility. In the centre of the image, a woman's tattooed arm moves a forkful of tortellini and Parma ham from a bowl to her mouth. The framing cuts the depiction off at the woman's neck and the slice of Parma ham cascading down from the fork--its meaty surface almost vulgar--doubles as a kind of oversized tongue, ready to gobble up the pasta. If the dish is bland--plain pasta with cherry tomatoes and basil leaves--she is anything but. Bling adorns her arms with symbols of riches and glamour on the left (perfume bottles, diamonds and jewellery) and a lexicon of tattoo clichés on the right (anchors, a butterfly and a clover). The flat-bottomed, cheap-looking glass most likely contains red wine, and the watch on her wrist shows the time as a quarter to 11, which is either a bit on the late side for dinner or early for lunch. Either of the two interpretations would create a sense of disdain to regularity. Patterns resonate across the painting: the checked pattern of the woman's top reverberates in the rhombus pattern of the laminate tabletop, whose shapes mimic the high-rise buildings we glimpse outside through the window. The image tilts in the mode of a snapshot photograph, and it captures energy and motion in a way that seems distinctly counterintuitive to the labour-intensive technique of the painting. The intensity continues to rise in every inch of the painting, as pattern, topic, and energy resonates across and beyond these surfaces, to the rest of the series, the history of painting and the role of meals in social interaction.

Seeing (darkness)

A recent series of paintings has the suffix (darkness) and gives emotional and perceptual quality to stillness, rest and darkness. In *Magic (darkness)* (2021), a woman sleeps. Her head rests in her hands, and her body is bent as if she is leaning across a table and has succumbed to sleep in the middle of a task. A cone of light--possibly emanating from a recently opened door--falls on her face and hands and makes them glow against the dark background,

providing a visceral effect. This painting charges you with the task of slow examination. Gradually, your perception of the motif shifts as your eyes adjust to the dark surface.

Faced with the canvas, my mind flips through the points in our visual history when images have gradually emerged from darkness: cave drawings lit by fire, the sun shining through a stained-glass window in a gothic cathedral, a photograph caught on film by the shutter, a magic lantern and a movie theatre. Like these, Torp's paintings confirm the basic truth that darkness is a precondition for light and images to exist. In an age when darkness is becoming a scarcity, gobbled up by glowing screens, there is acuteness in this realization. Torp has suggested that darkness eats part of this painting. Perhaps the magic in this painting is eating darkness back for us.

What's more, the relationship between darkness and light depends not only on elements internal to the painting but also those external to it; the work dramatically changes with the lighting conditions in any space where it hangs. I want to see it hang where changes in natural light will occur most dramatically, such as the industrial space of the Dia Beacon Museum in upstate New York, the radical filtration of natural light in the Menil Museum in Houston, or perhaps lit by votive candles in a Venetian church. Or, most preferably, I'd like to see it in my own home, where I can explore darkness alongside the painting again and again—and perhaps figure out how this painting succeeds in giving darkness a physical form.

If this painting is mostly about, well, painting, there is a new dimension added by our contemporary moment: a nagging uncanniness. Why is this woman sleeping across a table in a dark room? Who else has access to this room? Who is opening the door towards the source of light? Issues of control and power arise. Are we, as beholders, put in the position of perpetrator or lover? Friend or foe? Our age of #MeToo awareness brings out questions of power in a drama hidden in the darkness. Torp's earlier paintings have often had a distinct theatrical quality. The drama here is more subdued but no less dramatic: sleep and wakefulness, power and submission, light and dark.

Shaping a Pattern

Torp's series *Shaping a Pattern* (2017–present) is a potent and poetic investigation of how painting can make us aware of urgent issues, equally shaped by both her personal drive and her artistic skill. This series—which requires more explanation than others—comprises five (so far) large-scale portraits of individuals working to advance equal rights for women and girls worldwide: Afghan activist and rapper Sonita Alizadeh, Tanzanian anti-female genital mutilation (FGM) advocate Rhobi Samwelly, Ukrainian feminist activist and FEMEN leader Inna Shevchenko, to name several. Each canvas is the result of a research-intensive process that is mapped out on the wall of her studio—the steps of which seem more closely aligned with journalism or documentary filmmaking than painting. Her process starts with a basic question: What are the issues that prevent women and girls worldwide from having rights equal to those of men? Torp identifies issues such as child marriage, lack of birth control, FGM, abortion of female fetuses, honour killings and legal rights, and she works her way through researching each issue with relentless energy and enthusiasm, working from her personal contacts to contacting experts in her efforts to locate individuals working worldwide for social change. Like matching up the rows of color on a Rubik's Cube, the individuals she chooses to

paint must comprise different functions (such as doctors, lawyers and teachers) and differ in geographical location, age, and gender.

The process of locating and approaching the exact person she wants to paint (who most often agrees) can take months or years. Torp travels to meet her subjects where they work and spends time with them; she researches their background, history and context, and she takes many photographs and draws sketches. All these elements become the foundation for the painting she creates over many months back in her studio.

In *Shaping a Pattern*, portraiture functions as a process of gradually getting to know someone “other” to yourself through painting, a process that functions similarly to journalistic research. Each interpretation of a subject takes both issue and personal history as a starting point. For example, Rhobi Samwelly, who manages a safe house in Tanzania for girls fleeing FGM, is depicted sitting on a green plastic chair as if she is a bulwark against this cultural practice (and, unfortunately, many of the girls’ own families). The background is smudged paint, but you can also make out traces of dirt and grass. The canvas is covered by traces of footsteps, as each girl residing in the safe house danced across it with paint on the soles of their feet, dragging with them the dirt and grass of their surroundings. Samwelly and the girls’ lives together and this shared history becomes the literal material foundation on which her portrait rests. To add a second layer, Torp’s chosen subjects are often highly conscious of the self-image they project to the world. By process, Torp’s paintings become personal meditations on a person, an issue and on the social structures of our contemporary media. Here, the political aspect is a prompt to understand something—not just shouting an opinion.

Whether excavating the foundations of painting in darkness or addressing social justice, each of Torp’s paintings is the tip of an iceberg. They are arrestations of energy, of flow, of an enormous interest in experiencing our world and all its complexities. Torp’s dedication to detail and technique provides encounters with others—and ourselves—in a way we can experience over and over again.