

ODD NERDRUM FORUM GALLERY

If you think the long revolution of the avant-garde is a permanent one, then you're likely to find Odd Nerdrum's paintings quaint, somewhat bizarre narratives. Which they are—but the point is, to what end? The answer suggests the critical consciousness informing Nerdrum's use of old-master technique. Unlike avant-gardism, which likes to think that art can be perpetually young and new, and can refresh and even refigure social life, the old masters understood that the world is always in decay and surely heading toward death; under the cover of religion, they accurately assessed life's inadequacy.

The eschatology found in Nerdrum's work is what gives his figures their strange edginess as well as their probity. His subjects maintain a peculiar integrity, no matter how insane, injured, and inwardly isolated they may be—and he invariably contrasts such fragile types (as seen in, e.g., *Dancer with Snake*, *Unarmed Man*, and *Stripper*, all works 1996) with sturdy, self-reliant warriors. No doubt this is partly because their identity is drawn from the role they play in the community—generally, that of mad prophet or guardian hero. Indeed, the sense that the community must hold together, however much it tends to fall apart, is crucial to Nerdrum's paintings: it is what human beings do to others within the community—particularly to the “exceptions” in their midst—that forms the basis of his allegorical canvases.

Nerdrum's pictures are thus scenes of a kind of struggle for survival staged in apocalyptic times. Though *Release*, 1996, in which a terrified figure waits to be buried alive, ostensibly deals with basic inhumanity, the action in question may in fact be euthanasia: the soldier digs a grave for an insane person who has become a burden to the community, unfit to survive in the wasteland that appears in every picture. (There is a kind of Knut Hamsun-like undertone—either become a stoic or go mad—to Nerdrum's paintings.)

Catastrophe seems imminent in all of Nerdrum's work. The underlying *tedium vitae* is conveyed by *Three Men at Dawn*, 1996, all naked and old in a boat on dry land—a scene of decadence and sterility,



Odd Nerdrum, *Unarmed Man*, 1996,
oil on canvas, 66 x 72".

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of life going nowhere. If love and hope on occasion appear in his grim pictures (as in the idealistic *Lifesaver*, 1996, in which a strong young soldier holds a newborn infant), they are rarely presented without irony. Thus, a female figure offers her full, nutrient breast to a soldier only in exchange for his protection in *Barter*, 1996.

Nerdrum's pictures rehumanize the dehumanized avant-garde figure and argue for the psychological and moral significance of painting. That significance is immanent in its form and texture: tenebrism suggests the struggle between forces of light and darkness, and painterliness instantly communicates unconscious affect without reifying the sense of its inchoateness. Although Nerdrum frequently fills his neo-primitive world with alert soldiers clothed in animal skins and armed with rifles, war can be signaled by style itself rather than exclusively through content. His pictures seamlessly integrate the two.

Unlike Nerdrum's forebear Edvard Munch, another “dark” Norwegian struggling to find light in a world in which it disappears for months on end, Nerdrum seems to imply that experimental means, appropriate for the beginning of a young century, are no longer apposite at the end of an old one. While the innovation of the avant-garde signaled hope, especially the hope that art could transform life, its ideas and aspirations have become reified into entropic novelties. Perhaps “old masterism” may now be “avant-garde,” in that it can bespeak the depression and disillusionment that are true to this blood-thirsty century. Nerdrum's paintings are a brilliant, necessarily indirect articulation of the underlying mood of our times.

—DK

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