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## Prophet or Pariah?

Odd Nerdrum,  
Controversial Classicist

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# ODD MAN IN

*Few artists inspire such devotion—or disdain—as Odd Nerdrum, a temperamental Norwegian who offers some decidedly unsettling takes on the Old Masters* By Alan Jolis

Up an ornate wood-paneled staircase and down an imposing corridor lies the studio of one of Europe's foremost classical realist painters. The visitor expects to find a blue-eyed dandy virtuoso, a cocky self-proclaimed genius living in this Gothic mansion, which was built in the 1870s on a hill in the residential heart of Oslo, overlooking the royal castle. But, at 54, Odd Nerdrum has begun to look like one of the destitute pilgrims he often paints. With gray dreadlocks cascading down over his headband, a mangy rabbit-skin vest, a floor-length black robe, lorgnettes dangling from his neck, and his left eye twitching from Tourette's syndrome, he appears as a cave dweller, an otherworldly figure. He protests that his dress is purely functional, and it is: "The robe protects my clothes from paint, the Afghan keeps me warm, and the sweatband keeps my hair out of my eyes."

His works, including *Pissing Woman* (1994), which presents an amputated torso on the ground urinating, or one in progress showing two men kissing while stabbing each other with knives, are just as disconcerting. Such paintings are in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, among other museums from Seattle to Capetown (and are collected by the rock star David Bowie). To be sure, notes Alf Bøe, former head of Oslo's Municipal Collections, Nerdrum "exerts a kind of fascination. Some of his canvases have an extraordinary feeling for atmosphere of a kind that no one else can paint. He creates an imaginary world, a wasted landscape of threat, where civilization has gone to pieces. It has unmistakable impact."

Nerdrum's disturbing works—and his flamboyant persona— attract as much admiration as they do contempt. Some, like New York critics Hilton Kramer and Donald Kuspit, consider his radical antimodernism, his deliberate adoption of Old Master techniques, and his use of allegory to comment on the human condition as visionary. Others, particularly in his native Scandinavia, are offended by his indifference to contemporary conventions. At Oslo's art academy, one student reports that "when you mention Nerdrum they start frothing at the mouth." And a former assistant even made a name for herself by painting her own likeness holding a knife in one hand and Nerdrum's severed head in the other. "She didn't make me look dead enough" is the artist's only comment.

On the walls of Nerdrum's studio, an original Jacob Jordaens, a purported Ribera, and small prints by da Vinci and Rembrandt keep him company. So pronounced is his atavism and love of the Renaissance that he has adopted the working methods of the masters of the period. When he visits a museum he can stand for hours in front of a painting, not just studying, but memorizing. "For me it is like cramming for an exam. I have to remember what I see, I have to memorize it," he says. "I stared so long at a Titian that a guard at the Accademia in Venice thought I was some weird man intending to do

something bad." His current students—who come from around the world and show a devotion bordering on worship—often double as assistants, priming canvases and preparing oils and varnishes. The togas, turbans, and peculiar garb made from rich taffetas, velvets, and silks in which he drapes his models are all of Nerdrum's own design. So, too, are his impressive dark frames.

Nerdrum holds up a print of Rembrandt's *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph* (1636) next to his *Initiation* (1997). The composition, the postures of the figures, and the colors are almost identical—the main difference is that the central female figure has a penis between her legs. Hermaphrodites are a recurring theme in Nerdrum's work. "Classical realism is considered a joke, it is not taken seriously," he continues. "Modernism denies the human body. Many people don't paint flesh anymore, they refuse to."

Nerdrum claims he does not aim to shock with the unconventional elements of his otherwise classical compositions. "Avant-garde artists want to shock, want a dialogue with society. I don't. I paint for eternity," he says. Nonetheless, he continues to come under sharp attack by Scandinavia's art and general press, most recently for *Self-Portrait in Golden Dress* (1998), which portrays the artist nude from the waist down and fully aroused. His critics have said that the work is not art. Nerdrum agrees. "I never use the word 'art,'" he says. "Art today has no meaning. It provides a service like an electrician does, or a baker. Since there are no rules in art, I am not an artist. So I say my work is anti-art—it is kitsch. I am a kitsch maker, yes, that is what I am."

Being ridiculed by the mainstream is a role Nerdrum is used to and one to which he does not object. "Maybe I am a masochist, but I like it," he says. During his childhood in a bourgeois family, he recalls, "my parents forbade me to play the piano and discouraged my poetry." On an early skiing trip, his father, then managing director of SAS Airlines, pointed at a beautiful sun going down and said, "My son, never try and paint that sunset. If you do you will have a very difficult life before you." Nerdrum laughs, "But of course, I have been trying to paint that sunset ever since."

The relationship with the man Nerdrum thought was his father was always extremely difficult. Then four years ago, a former student told him of an architect in another city who looked and behaved exactly like him. "I got his photo, and I called him. I was like a child at Christmas. When I went to this man's house, I saw him climbing a ladder in his library, and just seeing his body before he turned around, I knew at once that I was looking at my body, my hands, and my legs. My mother is still alive, and until then she had never told me of my real father."

At 18, Nerdrum dropped out of high school and enrolled in the National Academy of Art in Oslo, but it was not an easy



With the exception of the central figure, Nerdrum's 1997 *Initiation* is nearly identical to Rembrandt's 1636 *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*.

time for him. "Pop art was very trendy in the 1960s, especially in a provincial place like Oslo, so I would say that in many ways I am self-educated. I haven't had a teacher at all." He pulls out a portrait he did in 1963 of a fellow academy student. It shows a girl in profile, with her left hand held up to her throat. Already it displays all the angst, desolation, and questioning of his more mature works. "It is hard to be as good as you were at 19. Then your painting is more sincere, more intimate," he says. "So I often look at this painting like a flagellant. I force myself to see if I can be as good or better than I was then."

In 1964, he left the academy—by his own account, he was "chased out"—and for a few months in 1965 he studied under Joseph Beuys at the Düsseldorf Staatliche Kunstakademie. In 1967 he had his first solo show, at Oslo's Kunstnerforbundet, and the popular and critical response made him an overnight celebrity. His reputation traveled abroad, and he was given his first solo show in New York, at the now-defunct Germans van Eck Gallery, in 1986. For nearly the next decade, he was represented in the United States by Martina Hamilton, and, since 1994, by New York's Forum Gallery, which is planning an exhibition of the artist's new self-portraits in June. Nerdrum's prices reportedly start at \$25,000 for his small-scale works and can exceed \$250,000 for his major paintings. Presently, Nerdrum is the subject of a well-attended retrospective at Oslo's Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art (on view there through January 3 and at the Kunsthal Rotterdam from January 16 through March 28).

Nerdrum's household has none of the dysfunctional silence of his paintings. On the contrary, it is full of life. Ex-pupils whose comments and advice he seeks, past models, Jan Kroga, who makes his frames, neighbors, his three daughters from a previous marriage, the man who has built his new seaside cottage—all are welcome at his table. Nerdrum descends from his studio to help with the

**The inhospitable landscape of Iceland intensifies the bleakness of *Three Men at Dawn*, 1996.**

evening meal. He hugs his youngest children, two boys—Bork, four, and Ude (whose name translates as "Deserted Landscape"), three—and he stops to play the piano. His wife, Turid, a folksinger and violinist, most at home in her northern farm dialect, wears peasant garb and, though shy, regales the guests with old folk songs. Her long blond hair gives her the appearance of a beautiful Nordic wood sprite or fairy queen.

Nerdrum, with his growing belly and Medusa-like hair, seems to take command of whatever space he occupies. His energy is prodigious: he never takes vacation, and works every day from noon to 5:30 and then, after dinner and a nap, from eight to well past midnight. "Some things are too beautiful to be painted!" he says, watching his naked boys scream and run between his easels. His work seldom shows movement; bodies are fixed in thought. Even when they dance, they seem frozen.

And he focuses a lot of attention on background. Many figures are presented against an image of a gold-colored leather screen or resting on a green leaf. "Background for me is always something alive, something waiting for change," he comments. "I like to show a leaf because it is an amorphous reclining shape. It is alive yet sleeping within itself. It is about to wake like a caterpillar to a butterfly." His surfaces also reflect the soupy cast of the inhospitable soil of Iceland, a place he calls his "second country." The effect gives the postures of his figures ambivalence and their countenances a powerful expression of inner bleakness.

His work is also meticulous and almost as slow as the frozen, static people he depicts. He produces only six to eight paintings each year. "I paint over and over again," he says, "so the paint becomes transparent. I scrape down and layer up. A painting acquires a history that you can't fabricate. You never succeed, you have to keep trying. I see my mistakes all the time—they scream out at me, like a soft mosaic requiring endless work."

He pauses and then adds, "Today you cannot just be another 17th-century master, another copy, a repetition. You have to be the best." ■

Alan Jolis is ARTnews's Stockholm correspondent.



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