

Sense and sensitivity

Essay by Nils Forsberg

Membranes (from the Latin word *membrāna*, thin skin) serves as boundaries and barriers between spaces. They are not completely impermeable, so controlled amounts of certain substances can seep through if needed. At cellular level, this concerns substances such as oxygen and nutrients, and the elimination of carbon dioxide and waste products.

The membrane structure is dynamic and fluid, it can change and adapt over time, both structurally and functionally. It is entirely essential to the perpetuation of life as we know it. I see the membrane as a useful point of reference in approaching Anna Camner's art and the veil-like organic shapes that have taken a dominant place in her imagery.

In the beginning, or at least after her gallery debut in 2006, was some kind of nature. There were garlands and Art Nouveau ornaments painted with exquisite technical skill. Those who were aware that plants can be poisonous also saw links to Baroque vanitas symbolism. Beautiful and dreamlike and decorative, the backgrounds were still occasionally in other colours than the black we now associate with her oeuvre.

A couple of years later, the Baudelaire-esque flowers of evil had been joined by bats, bugs and rats; a totally neo-gothic cabinet of horrors whispering of doom and fear. Now, the paintings were almost artificial in their precision, and the contrasting frosty detachment and dramatic death alternately enhanced and cancelled one another.

Long after, I learned that Anna Camner had not painted at all during her five years at the Royal Institute of Art. The school's jargon and attitudes made it feel too difficult and sensitive, so she devoted herself to 3D animation and film instead. At her graduation show, she exhibited a video work of men boxing in the Gold Foyer of the Royal Opera in Stockholm. She refers to it as a great period, with lots of friends, but she kept the art she truly wanted to make to herself.

After graduating in 2003, she picked up her paint brushes again. Nowadays, she makes less than ten paintings per year. It's a slow process. The execution itself takes time, not least the decisions that need to be made along the way, halting the work. But the most time-consuming part is often the preparatory planning. The road from the first vague idea or image to knowing what the painting should look like can take up to a year. Only when that is done does she begin to paint.

The journey went inwards. In the early 2010s, she had a few exhibitions in London and New York, before returning to Stockholm in 2016 with the exhibition *Dunkler Frühling* (*Dark Spring*), a closer, more intimate style of painting. Anna Camner zooms in on details and becomes terser. Mushrooms and plants, meticulous yet slightly foreign, but also thin membranes, veil-like tissue; shapes that seem organic but are not quite identifiable.

The art historic eye had given way to a more scientific observation. It also grew more quiet.

Painting obviously never makes a noise, but Anna Camner belongs to the artists who can paint silence so that it almost becomes, well, audible. It's like those films from the deep sea, where everything is blue-black and seems to be in slow motion, and suddenly some bioluminescent subaquatic creature that resembles a whole funfair slides past and ought to sound like one, but naturally it remains quiet because nothing can be heard a thousand metres under the ocean surface.

The same kind of silence is found in the other direction, so to speak, upwards and outwards. Ever-sharper telescopic images reveal dramatic explosions of colour and nebulas, particle clouds and stars at various stages against the black universe in the background. Galaxies form diffused milky masses and we know that out there, celestial bodies collided, solar systems arose and stars exploded millions of years ago in disasters of interplanetary dimensions. We can almost hear Wagner, or at least John Williams, but we know that the silence is complete.

In space, no one can hear you scream.

In the exhibition *A Plague I Call a Heartbeat* last year, something had happened. It was like the tissue had collapsed in some of those organic shapes, as though a poison had seeped into the organism and the cell structures had decayed. Where her earlier works occasionally veered towards terror and disgust, the violence and doom had given way to something new here. How were we supposed to interpret it?

Anna Camner is hard to pigeonhole according to contemporary matrixes. The natural science aesthetic she has appropriated has little resemblance with anything other artists are doing today. We have to look back in time, and one clue leads to a book from the previous turn of the century. Ernst Haeckel's *Kunstformen der Natur* was an overnight sensation when published in 1904 and was soon found in the bookcase of every educated home. New editions are still being printed constantly. Artists at the time were quick to borrow shapes from the German natural scientist's radically stylised illustrations, especially the ones of marine life forms. Part of the attraction lay in the sharp details and symmetry – here, nature surpassed reality. Never before did a jellyfish in the sea have such distinct contours and clear colours, on shore it was just an amorphous blob. In Ernst Haeckel's colour lithographs, they are almost hypnotic.

Haeckel did what anyone who depicts nature usually does, he generalised and reduced and added, to portray the ideal version of conches or sea anemones. He just went a few steps further than most in his striving for, or dream of, perfection – but he still based himself on nature. Anna Camner scrupulously depicts things that we cannot be sure come from any known reality.

So, how does this relate to Surrealism? Dreamlike and eerie moods infuse her oeuvre, but the Surrealist preoccupation with the subconscious, desires and mindscapes were nevertheless unrelated to this objective, documenting eye. This is no mental topography we are staring at, it is silence and mystery.

Anna Camner herself says that music is important to her, music of all genres. More

important to her practice than pictures, and she says that painting to her is about surrendering control. That comes as a surprise, to say the least, surrendering control is not what immediately comes to mind when seeing her art.

The Naked Dive is the title of the exhibition at Wetterling Gallery in Stockholm in spring 2022. As before, some of the works are linked to the previous phase, a result of the slow work process, while others take new roads. Here we find realistic settings, a pale-blue, viscous matter is a recurring element. In one painting, it oozes out of a pipe in what looks like a factory, in others a Madonna-like figure is trying to break away from the blue formless mass.

Diving nude into unknown territory, maybe that is what surrendering control means?

Here, syntheticism has taken over. Nature is dead, artificial matter flows, stretches and deflates. One painting shows a hand, another a face – for the first time – and the polished, shiny skin gives them the appearance of porcelain mannequins. Is this a new realism? Or science fiction? And yet, it becomes more and more clear that their subject matter is not the main thing, but how they are seen and portrayed. Whatever she paints, we stand staring into the silent void, the mystery.

These days, people are talking about how art should intervene with injustices or wrongs of one kind or another. Art is resistance, the degree of commitment to more or less overt political issues has become a quality in its own right. Art that doesn't behave in that way is rejected as being veritably irresponsible.

But isn't it a greater act of resistance to refuse to follow tendencies and dictates? Can't art just as well serve as a defence against the world, its expectations and demands? A membrane against it, a way of breathing, and surviving.