

frieze

Rasmus Nilausen

García Galería

In one of the first stories about realism in art, Pliny the Elder's proto-encyclopedia, *The Natural History* (77–79 CE), tells of the rivalry five centuries earlier between Zeuxis of Heraclea and his contemporary, Parrhasius. The Greek paint-off that ensued resulted in a depiction of grapes by Zeuxis that was so exquisitely life-like that birds were lured to the picture. Yet Parrhasius triumphed when he asked his rival to unveil his painting: Zeuxis realized too late that the curtain itself was a painted image. Denmark-born, Barcelona-based Rasmus Nilausen delights in alluding to such parables, yet the 14 paintings in 'Read the Image', his second solo show in Madrid, bring with them none of the gratuitous windbagery that can result from contemporary artistic invocations of the ancient world.

The Origin (2014) pays tribute to the virtuosity of Zeuxis's spectacular failure. A dangling bunch of grapes, roughly sketched out against a clayish-green background, casts an unlikely shadow that appears more solid than the grapes themselves; it, too, seems to cast its own penumbra. For Nilausen's brush, the Zeuxis-versus-Parrhasius duel is a volatile lesson that speaks not only of the technical sobriety of painting, but also its capacity for bravado and hubris. Demonstrating a dedication to skills, learning and the history and discipline of painting, the artist's canvases simultaneously betray an irreverent sense of the mild silliness of it all.

Nilausen deals with elements of genre, Mannerism and 'windows' of representation – chiefly still lifes. These modestly scaled canvases marshal the repertoire of a Realist painters' guild – figure and ground, shadow and light, opacity and transparency, brushwork, texture and so on – in a dynamic exploration of 'minor' or anecdotal subjects. Text-based paintings function like marginalia writ large – the words which lent the exhibition its imperative title are spelled out in *Read the Image* (2013), a depiction of a page torn from a spiral-bound notebook. These are also opportunities for repartee and a kind of painter's gallows humour – 'Unarticulated Potential' declares *The Potential* (2014) and 'Horror Vacui' was painted as green-bean letters in a 2013 painting with these same words as its title.

The Storm (2014) relays the motif of an open window or frame-within-a-frame that borders a maelstrom of sepia-

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By Max Andrews



Rasmus Nilausen, *The Storm*, 2014, oil on canvas, 130 × 97 cm

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outlined broad and washy banana-coloured brushstrokes which are partially scrubbed out to suggest a sunset. The largest work in the exhibition, *Omnipotence* (2013), evidences Nilausen's particularly mischievous eye for foodstuffs and the improbable role of vegetables in the history of painting, one branch of which might fork at Édouard Manet's gorgeous *Bunch of Asparagus* (1880). A woozy starburst of orange is formed by three concentric rings of carrots on a cerulean background – a carotenoid mandala that would be a fine blazon for any painters' cult based on clarity of vision and eternal motivation. (The carrot's benefits to eyesight are as well-known as its partnership with the stick.) As if a digital upgrade of the *trompe-l'œil* curled page corner, a greenish bar and icon at the foot of the painting emulate a mobile graphical interface and it's easy to imagine 'minimizing' the entire composition to reveal the raw canvas with a single tap. Elsewhere, two paintings depict candles that project lighthouse-like beams. In the gloom of *Technology of Painting* (2014), the wick forms the number '1', while '2' and '3' appear in a conical ray of light. If these numbers suggest a three-step programme of artistic self-empowerment (or a diagrammatic origin-myth epiphany of the birth of painting from flickering flames and shadows) the companion candle of *Stagefright* (2014) is anxiously overwhelmed against sky blue, as if true painting were only a thing of the night, or of caves.

The German Picnic (2013) is an inspired depiction of the monogram signature of polymath Albrecht Dürer in the form of a sturdy wooden table and bench, while *The French Afternoon* (2013) invokes Jean-Siméon Chardin and enriched dough. The bread form of Chardin's *La Brioche* (1763) in the latter seemed to have emerged, turd-like, from a stain at the centre of the canvas, as if through Salvador Dalí's paranoiac-critical method. Evolving from a concern about the origins of mimesis and the painterly discipline, Nilausen's exhibition correspondingly accrued ever-more co-conspirators. These works by a young painter nevertheless seem alluringly, and prematurely, 'late' in the sense of stylistically unburdened or devil-may-care 'late works' that ignore the tides of taste. The thrill of Nilausen's paintings is not only that they cock a snook at brand-name consistency and the current art-market mania for what has been disparagingly termed 'crapstraction', but they participate in a more awkward – and, dare I say, honest – art history of 'disobedient' works and individual caprice. Painter beware! According to legend, the aforementioned Zeuxis was commissioned by a grotesque old woman to paint her portrait as the goddess Aphrodite. He is said to have found his resultant composition so preposterous that he died laughing.

Max Andrews

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