

Islands in the Cosmos

Visions of Man Adrift and Apart

by Rainer J. Hanshe

Odd Nerdrum, Paintings

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Adrift and Apart

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“

O that is why his audacity drives him far
 From your safe-keeping, Earth, and in vain are all
 Your gifts and all your gentle fetters—
 Little to him, who wants more, the wild one!
 —Hölderlin, “Man”

“

It is by being ‘natural’ that one best recovers from one’s
 unnaturalness, from one’s spirituality.
 —Nietzsche

“

The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice,
 a continual extinction of personality.
 —T. S. Eliot

Humanity is broken. Like a tree uprooted from the earth by a tornado and blown into another hemisphere, long ago, primarily through the dispossession of its infallible drives, humanity was severed from its original body, *nature*. Our roots have been torn from the earth and now dangle in the air—thick, gnarly, broken veins, they reach back towards the ground, struggling to return to the hollows from which they have been ripped. Since then, we have been in limbo, unmoored ships drifting on straits, in fjords, and through firths and canals; occasionally, during certain ecstatic moments, we return to our original body, we rediscover our place in nature and in the world, but it is rare, and a myriad of formidable barriers impede our returning. The most impassable or treacherous barrier of all is consciousness. We are a piece of nature, but we forget this. Our consciousness refuses this truth, even though we carry the whole of the world within us, even though the primitive, that implacable force of nature, comes to the fore again and again and drags us by our roots, knocking us to and fro, thrusting us back into the earth. Yet, it is never long enough for our roots to permanently reestablish themselves. Man remains rootless; we are like astronauts without gravity boots and cannot touch the ground.

Since the systematic decimation of the pagans, we have been violently alienated from nature and from ourselves. Our natural bodily functions, like nature itself, have been demonized, engendering phobias, neuroses, aversions and other crippling forms of unnatural self-disgust. Throughout history, we have been further and further alienated from both nature and our

bodily processes; we have learnt, been conditioned to despise them by the 'slanderers of nature,' who have deformed every natural inclination into a sickness, into something that disfigures. We have been seduced, as Nietzsche put it, into thinking that our inclinations and instincts are evil; the slanderers of nature are "the cause of our great injustice against our nature, against all nature." While scientists, too, through their desire to master nature are slanderers of it, alienating us from it in altogether different, more insidious ways. Yet, even if we are irreligious and not wholly subservient to or reverent of science but approach it with skepticism, the echoes of this alienation remain like scars in the body of humanity. All suffer the predicament. It is a history, an inscription which all of us have silently, unknowingly inherited—our bodies are scored with invisible hieroglyphs that are difficult to erase. It is the tattoos which we cannot see that are the most intractable. Life is the struggle of deciphering; a rewriting of the body in order to recover from our unnaturalness, to erase the text which man has written over himself in order to conceal his instincts. Do what we will, they remain, more powerful than ever, but in our separation from nature, our nerves have lost their immediate knowledge of what we are actually composed of, of the thing of which we are part, and, however much we fight to refute it, we remain inexorably bound to. It is a traumatic dissociation and whenever nature reaches towards us, or its inexorable forces shatter our human, only just human masks, that which remains opens up the wound in us, the wound of our brokenness—and *nature* conquers. It may "sometimes [be] overcome" as the essayist Francis Bacon said, but it is "seldom extinguished." Struggle as we will to extinguish it, we cannot—it is us who will be extinguished in the end, never having lived in the first place. It is not only that we hardly exist at all, but that through separating ourselves from nature, *we exist even less*—in our brief duration, it's imperative to struggle to exist, to, as much as is possible, bury our roots in the ground.

Humanity believes that it never was part of the earth, that it *is* simply *only* an uprooted tree, thus it constructed separate, illusory worlds to exist in after it lost union with the world it once was part of, or was so terrified of it had to distance itself from. First, the slanderers of nature posited the body as corrupt and the soul as pure—heaven would be a safe and distant sanctuary from the corrupt body, which would finally be eliminated; then, later, for science, *mind* would become as pure, and nearly as holy, as soul was for the religious, thus proliferating the contempt of the body in other equally subtle and menacing ways—scientists, like many academics, are the new ascetics. Not only are we broken from nature, which is what or rather *all* that we are, but from ourselves. We are also separate from others and from the world: while man, as the hackneyed saying professes, is not an island, man has struggled to make himself into one. Humanity's predominant inclination is to believe its singularity to be a truth. But the single man "is an error" as Nietzsche declared: "he does not constitute a separate entity, an atom, a 'link in the chain,' something merely inherited from the past." The species, Nietzsche proclaimed, "is everything, one is always none" for "nothing exists apart from the whole."

Despite what man may wish, he is not an ordinary island, but instead

“constitutes the entire *single* line ‘man’ up to and including himself.” What is the primal source of malevolence, what gives birth to the most excruciating suffering, is actually individuation. Therefore, it is in overcoming singularity, our excessive individualism, that humanity will find its restoration and surmount its most extreme and delusional form of suffering; it is through unity that it will return to its original body, *nature*, and situate itself in the ground from which it came and to which it belongs. That unity is gained through forms of communion with others and, ultimately, nature, which we may reach via the multitudinous pathways of ecstasy; in reuniting with a community, which is the highest form of Becoming, we shatter the “beautiful illusion” of Apollo, which distorts the truth of the continuous sinuosity of Dionysus, making false islands of us. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche noted that it is the emancipated spirits who stand “in the midst of the universe with a joyful and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only what is separate and individual may be rejected, that in the totality everything is redeemed and affirmed.” Such emancipated spirits no longer negate anything; they are part of the earth, not isolated figures floating above it. This kind of faith is “the highest of all possible faiths” since in its refusal to idealize the world and offer comforting hopes, which in the end are illusory and serve only to weaken those who court them, it is perhaps the most honest, the most truthful, and the most difficult faith to live up to. In that, it is, in the highest sense, *tragic* and only such faith can be consecrated *Dionysian*. And Dionysus is the one who shatters the illusion; he is the one who, after being torn to pieces as we tear ourselves away from the body from which we came, is reconfigured. In that reconfiguration is the truth of our wholeness: that we are not islands, but fragments of a continent which have been separated from their body. To unite is not to relate or to succumb to a herd, but to connect with other *select* individuals, like the epopts of a cult, for we do not want to and cannot connect to everyone, nor must we be governed. Those who wish to govern and control others against their will and to dictate what kinds of cults are permissible in the polis will suffer the fate of Pentheus.

But epoch after epoch the originary island that humanity has made itself into, through, primarily, the development of a kind of ghost limb of a limb that we never had—consciousness—is becoming not only smaller and smaller and more and more distant from the other individual islands but also from its original body. While it is remotely possible that some few, very rare humans—Shakespeare, Goethe, Nietzsche (yet, these very rare human islands always cast us back to the original continent)—may, to some if not a large degree be originary islands, in general, humanity is composed of continental islands—we are pieces of land broken from their original mass, and it is only through bridging the interstices between our isolated selves and the cosmos that we will recover ourselves, *through loss*. Not through the loss of our continental bind, but through the loss of our illusory individuality, of the corrupt Western sickness of absolute originariness, which has swiftly infected the world, spreading through even the most remote hemispheres like an inescapable microbe. We are not islands in the cosmos, adrift and apart, but *parts of* the cosmos, stars coursing *within* its grooves—when disrupted from the furrows,

we are like needles on the surface of a record that cannot produce music, only violent noises. And if we do not find our furrows, we will never be able to recover ourselves, thus we will never be able to lose ourselves, never able to unite through our erasure, and it is in erasing ourselves that we will be 'redeemed.' Religious redemption is not what we need, but *natural* redemption, to be cast back into the earth from which we have unnaturally thrust ourselves; when we are united with Nature, we give birth to music.



He is made one with Nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird.
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Adonais"

To unite with Nature is one thing, to unite with ourselves another, and to unite with other select people is something else altogether. First, it seems imperative that we unite with Nature, for to know Nature, to live in it and to imbibe its riches is to receive the abundant gifts it possesses and such gifts await us. If we are at war with it, it will only destroy us; if we respect and listen to Nature, it will instead speak to us—out of it, we create, out of its voices, we learn, out of its profuseness, we grow and it grows in us. In uniting with ourselves, we will become more integrated, less neurotic, stronger people capable of realizing or actualizing our greatest potentialities. It would mean acknowledging and embracing what is instinctive in us, that is, learning to operate according to and living with our instincts instead of combating them. That does not mean to obey and succumb to one's every impulse, but to listen and to be cognizant of them, for there is wisdom in them and they tell us who and what we are. To act upon them when necessary or to sublimate and reconfigure them, but not to extirpate them and lacerate ourselves or others because of our instincts. It is a question of health and bodily sanity. To know them is to know the truth of ourselves and if we are not integrated beings, we will only destroy ourselves—that is the real road to perdition: to refuse to integrate oneself. To unite with other select people is to share the gifts which one has cultivated and to receive the gifts that others have; it is a coming together in order to build, to see, and to share, it is a necessary leave-taking of the self out of which we gain a greater ecstasy, which we can never create on our own. And it is a way of celebrating—in coming together with other select people, we can enact festive rituals, which we must. It is imperative that we celebrate our existence and create new festivals, and we cannot do that as isolated individuals, for we are not islands in the sea and even originary islands have visitors, even they celebrate their existence with others.

In *The Gay Science*, the announcement of the *requiem aeternam deo* is not only a clarion call alerting mankind to the greatest sacrifice it has unknowingly committed, it is also the beginning of the "de-deification of nature." After asking when this event may be completed, for which no answer is given—it is more

than likely an eternal task—, Nietzsche asks when it will be possible to “begin to ‘*naturalize*’ humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?” The question is unanswered, left open; it is an address to the world and each of us must answer it, each of us must respond, especially if we want to belong to the making of the new, higher history. The naturalization of humanity is precisely what we are in the midst of, and have been since the madman’s announcement of the death of God. It is a demand which we must live up to, but with which we are constantly at war—our very consciousness is pitted against it, we have made an instinct of something which never was and should not be an instinct, and because of it we are not even present, we are destroying the selves we have, which barely even exist in the first place. We kill our more primary, vital instincts with a falsely developed instinct and we are hardly aware of it because we have grown deaf; it is not clear to us that the tumult which surrounds us is not music but the noise of our violent desecration of ourselves.

Despite all of our seemingly ecstatic activities, the gulfs between us continue to widen and it seems more and more difficult to bridge those interstices, if there even is a desire to do so. Whether in fact we are at all even *capable* of bridging them, let alone returning completely to the continent is a serious question. It is as if every one of us were like Hamlet, that is, like Nietzsche’s characterization of Hamlet as a Dionysian figure who, having gained a profound kind of knowledge of the world after looking “truly into the essence of things,” is so overcome by nausea that all action is impossible. It is a state of deep spiritual inertia and art once was for Nietzsche the “saving sorceress” who was “expert at healing” humanity of that nausea; whether humanity is actually capable of being healed of its nausea, or whether it even *wants to be* healed is questionable. Our relationship with art has also revealed that such healing is merely temporary, but at least it is that. Our relationship to art, our encounter with it also reveals something of our condition, and the artist is the diagnostician whose remedies we seek in order to better understand, if not overcome our conditions, if that is ever possible, while the work of the artist also serves to rejuvenate and enliven us—art is an intoxicant that increases our strength and fullness. It enriches us and we are in need of enrichment, deep, deep enrichment. It is also a scalpel and a telescope and with both instruments we peer into our veins and muscles and organs and out to the galaxies and universes afar. Now, we remain in the throes of nihilism and we must have recourse with art that addresses this condition.

Since the announcement of the death of God, man has had to wrestle with the question of meaning, to struggle with the predicament of nihilism, and it is a crippling force we are every day in combat with. In this existential epoch, few artists are concerned with the spiritual, or even comprehend the necessity of the concern, especially if not more for atheists than anyone else, and there are a multitude of superficial atheists who have not experienced the trauma of their non-belief. But it *is* one, and it yields a concern, an exigent concern, for without some form of the sacred, the atheists are doomed, destined only to stumble like blind men through forests, to be

whipped by gravity like scarecrows on the moon. Until they create some form of sacredness, they will remain hollow men, empty shells whimpering in the dark, weightless objects cast about like willows on the wind, buffeted by the relentless sea, burned by the stars, obliterated by the planets and the nebulae.



We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
. . .
Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.
—T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"

For the Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum, who clearly sees himself as a kind of 'sorcerer' and views art as that which may heal humanity of its wounds, our spiritual condition is of deep import. "Today," Nerdrum declared, "the world resides in a spiritual darkness. . . The entire world gropes for spiritual renewal." In the epoch following the death of God, what precisely is meant by spirit and the spiritual demands definition; such words and phrases cannot be bandied about without clarification. Today then, spirituality is a way of being *in* and relating *to* the world, of how we live with ourselves in time and what animates and guides us. In having eviscerated the monotheistic deities, we discovered how threatening and dangerous they were to us, if not to the world we once thought they created. Yet while they have been sacrificed, and we will *continue* to sacrifice them, we are still broken from nature; we still have not completely purified nature of the deities. Thus, we are not living with ourselves in the world as contraries; though we have killed the gods, we still possess bodies which are bifurcated; instead of the religious conception of the body as distinct from the soul, the schism remains, but as mind and body, and this schism gives rise to myriad psychological and physical problems. As Blake had the Devil tell us over two hundred years ago, energy is not evil; in fact, "Energy is *the only life* and is *from* the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy." It is rare that we retain and live with such truths. The schism still exists and reason for us is not what it was for Blake, but a ghost limb. The spiritual renewal that the world then gropes for is the renewal of the truth of contraries and the lost unity of opposites. It is the overcoming of the schism of body and soul or body and mind and of the need to revere the animal in us, but that is not a base primitivism. "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy,

Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.”

Nerdrum, who has generally been roundly condemned by his contemporaries as reactionary and kitschy, is truly an untimely artist, both a critic of his era and in his refusal to capitulate to its whims, an exemplary model for it. He is engaged in an *agon* with the herd of popular artists who lack his formidable skills and vision and who castigate him for being a kind of reverse heretic. They are hardly admirable opponents though and even admit the fact; in a brief review in *Art in America* on an Nerdrum exhibition at Forum Gallery over ten years ago, Robert Kushner confessed that his generation lacked the ability to execute traditional techniques—what he referred to as their “collective distrust and rejection” of such techniques is surely rooted in such inadequacy, at least in part and that part is large. It is also rooted to the pernicious notion of singularity which has corrupted most of humanity, which cannot stand to be other than completely originary. For to embrace tradition is to realize and acknowledge as T. S. Eliot noted in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.” To be among the dead is anathema to most of humanity though, and especially for most artists, even the most mediocre, who long to spring from voids and vacuums. In two hundred years, the painters of today who imagine they are so radical and anti-traditional will become the models of another tradition, and one which will be rejected by future artists. While they donned costumes and performed the role of the artist, Nerdrum was one; while they fashioned themselves radical, he truly was radical and gave birth to work out of a real vision wholly alien to the caprices of his time. In our era, one of the most dubious caprices is that of contextualization; it is an intellectually deficient idea promulgated by the herd in order to legitimize works wholly devoid of skill, effectiveness, and vision. It is a crutch to support unrepentant mediocrity, an art of *ressentiment*, which lacks sensitivity, imagination, and true force. It is not the work of a talent developed and refined through discipline, devotion, and sacrifice; it is not the realization of any genuine achievement. It is an art of ready-mades, of true effortlessness, of inadequacy and laziness and it has rendered the galleries a veritable if not at times literal cesspit. Nerdrum was not seduced by the caprice and rejected it wholesale; to him, it was a sign of corruption, of the complete impoverishment of art. In the future, when the myth of contextualization perishes because of its exiguity, the detritus in the galleries that survived only out of the poverty and decadence of the era will be forgotten and Nerdrum’s paintings will remain, shocking testaments of a true iconoclast.

In turning away from modernity and towards the ‘spiritual’ style of titans like Titian, Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Velazquez but transfiguring it and making it new, Nerdrum, as Donald Kuspit observed, explicitly condemned modernity as inadequate. Picasso once said that “there is no past or future in art. If a work of art cannot live always in the present it must not be considered at all. The art of the Greeks, of the Egyptians, of the great painters who lived in

other times, is not an art of the past; perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was." To Nerdrum, most contemporary painting is as dead and destitute and decadent as humanity, and both come under fierce scrutiny in his work. It is not that he is returning to a dead past as some of his detractors claim, but that he is reviving a *living practice*, employing a technique that is in line with his philosophical and artistic principles. The technique coincides with the vision. To condemn modernity is to condemn modern styles and techniques. To paint as Nerdrum does, to reject the caprices of his time, is to proclaim a revolution in art, and his work is an enactment of that revolution. The transfiguration of the high style of venerable painters like Titian and Rembrandt is the very application of it in his era yet, there is more to it than that as the simple adoption of an earlier style would clearly be sentimental, a nostalgic or naïve and hopeless gesture, like driving a wind-up Ford down a superhighway. It is through his perception and his analysis and his critique that what is oft referred to as 'Old Master' technique is transfigured; it is through his vision, for what and how he perceives is different. If Rembrandt and Caravaggio were alive, they would not paint like Nerdrum and next to their paintings his would be quite strange, foreign, peculiar, work not of their time at all, but from beyond—it is the work of a new era and of a wholly different consciousness. In critiquing his era, he could not do so with its instruments or techniques. Yet he is not a luddite, for he is not rejecting technology outright—a paintbrush is a technological instrument—but he is a symptomatologist diagnosing a disease. His eye is the eye of a painter who is future minded; it is the eye of a physician and a poet and a philosopher, and through his work he is struggling to heal, to sing, and to see. He has stated that he views the present "from a diagnostic angle" and that he tries "to depict the world in which we live and the one yet to come." For Nerdrum, a "painting ought to be a window onto a world—into a world—where the truest and simplest ideas reside." Undoubtedly, as is evident from his new paintings, the world in which we live and the world yet to come is a world wherein humans seem even more alienated than ever. It is the world of a rootless species. Nerdrum: "Our time is the age of fragmentation. The spirit of unification is gone."

In the new body of eleven paintings currently on view at Forum Gallery from January 25 to March 17, 2007, "Odd Nerdrum: *Paintings*," the diagnostic vision the painter has of the world is palpably clear. In the press release, Forum Gallery explains that the paintings in the exhibition "present a new level of inquiry into the artist's exploration of the state of humankind's being." The state of humanity has been a long standing concern of Nerdrum's and his inquiry into it has been intense and serious; what it yields is always provocative, often enigmatic, and typically unsettling, but the truths of humanity are unsettling. When the tragic reality of the world is clear to one, such truths must be tended to. And it is only through being *un*-settled that we will gain insight into ourselves; it is only through disrupting the false ground on which we stand that we will at last be able to struggle to find our roots again, to truly be settled, as settled though only as are roots, which always turn and shift in the ground as they drink up its riches. Nerdrum unquestioningly believes it is of dire necessity

to confront these truths and many of his paintings are confrontations. His current inquiry has yielded a group of unforgettably evocative paintings that are the product of truly insightful diagnostic work. It is work born of harrowing knowledge and it reveals something of the state of humanity, and the vision is grim.

As claimed in the press release, Nerdrum's new paintings are supposedly a "marked departure" from his previous work but, in terms of their vision of man, such a striking departure isn't at all evident. Nerdrum's inquiry has not revealed new truths about man, but that is only because man remains the same. The tragic reality has not changed. The impending doom, the struggle, the fear, the helplessness, they are all the same and Nerdrum's depiction of them isn't altogether different from his previous depiction of such conditions. In his other work, one finds not only the portrayal of similar conditions but a similar viewpoint of those conditions; the drama of humanity does not occur in space but it does occur in equally alien and indeterminate landscapes which may not at all be earth. "Earthly human needs" may not be addressed in these paintings as the press release declares, though gravity, which it lists as one of the earthly human needs (are they different in space?), is hardly a human need, it is a law, a force which exists regardless of whether there are even humans on the planet, but then, perhaps it is only that they are not explicitly addressed. In space, though space in Nerdrum is always more than space alone, it is not possible to fulfill them, and what Nerdrum is conceivably illustrating is the enormous difficulty or the impossibility of struggling to fulfill our needs. What is markedly different though is the visual landscape in which Nerdrum executes his vision; through displacing man in space, he heightens and intensifies his expression of our conditions. The revelation of the inquiry is that, even if we are thrust into space, and we already have been, at least as a species, we will still be lost, we will be even more lost in fact, tattered, beaten, and insensate. While already *in* the cosmos, in fact, we always are, it is rare that we *feel* it, just as it is rare that we feel that we are in nature, that we are a part of it, and it is that dissociation which is one of Nerdrum's main concerns. But we can't feel space because the space we are locked in is the space of the mind and the de-deification of nature, and that includes man, is part of Nerdrum's work as an artist. Once that is accomplished, if it ever is, we may at last be able to feel the presence of the cosmos, to feel ourselves in it.

In an interview, Nerdrum explained that his task "is to clarify life in a way that adds to what has been created before. Nature is no longer man's adversary—*it is man's salvation.*" Nature and man have been slandered and Nerdrum knows this well; he knows that man must return to nature, he knows that we must erase the hieroglyphs and rediscover and reawaken our deepest instincts. This seems a simple truth, if not a platitude, and many surely have a rich, intimate, and fructifying relationship with nature, but, predominantly, such relationships are rare, and Nerdrum is at war with the principal forces which are blind to or disdain this truth, whether out of fear, ignorance, or for gain and glory. For Nerdrum, the painter, like most of humanity, has "lost touch with the functional within himself and in nature," and part of his work is geared towards

the re-unification of man and nature. To speak of reawakening our deepest instincts and grounding ourselves in nature is not to invoke Rousseau and the enactment of a primitive regress. Nerdrum specifically rejects such naiveté and stated that he is “no worshipper of nature in the sense of our National Romantics. What I seek is to bring out is the higher being in nature.” What is it that Nerdrum means when speaking of the higher being in nature? Is it man in nature, yet not only man but the integrated man in nature who is at one with his instincts? Is it the man who knows that “Energy is Eternal Delight” and that only those whose desire is weak are able to restrain it? Is it the man who would “sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires”? Is it the man who knows, “Where man is not, nature is barren” but, equally so, where nature is not, man is barren? It would seem to be all these things and that the higher being in nature has perished, like Dionysus once perished, and that it awaits resurrection, which is why it must be brought out. If God died from his pity for mankind, what has propelled us to where we are?

It is the sickness of consciousness, of, in particular, the madness of rationality and its desire to tame nature and to know all that has led to the cataclysmic state we are in. While the Delphic Oracle commands “Know thyself!” the other, equally vital imperative inscribed over the Temple of Apollo is rarely invoked: “Not too much!” Knowledge is not limitless, it has bounds, but out of audacity man refuses to heed such limits, and that is part of the madness of reason—we pursue the first imperative of the Delphic Oracle like predators but often neglect the second. Moderation seems as alien to us as our instincts. While nature as Nerdrum realizes is clearly our saving sorceress, man doesn’t seem to want to be saved; man resists nature for he fears it as he fears the truth of himself, and that fear is evident in nearly all of Nerdrum’s new paintings, wherein man is cast from out of the habitat of the earth and into a cosmos which, intrinsically, he is part, but not even or hardly ever part. Nerdrum is aware that man cannot possess nature, “but is an anxious part of it” and that anxiousness is but one thing he seeks to evoke in his images, which he deliberately strives to make universal, not local. And this may be not perhaps a marked departure, but, certainly, it is something new, something different, a fresh achievement: in these eleven new images, from *Dissolving to Love Divided*, 2005, *Drifting*, *Void*, and *Burning* (the paintings without dates were deliberately left undated by the artist), Nerdrum’s desire to make his images universal has been fulfilled in an exceptionally dramatic manner. In not dating many of the paintings in the exhibition, Nerdrum not only increases their potential universality but their timelessness as well, making them not only reflective of our era, but of any and every era. Stripped of all accoutrements, stripped even of seemingly indiscriminate landscapes, which may have been suggestive of certain terrain, man naked in space is man as universal as can possibly be. This is not the state of being of the people of Iceland or Norway, this is the state of being of the world:

In *In Limbo*, a number of bodies are jettisoned through or suspended in space; some seem to float, others to fight against or are caught in currents that they cannot extract themselves from. Whether they are dead or alive

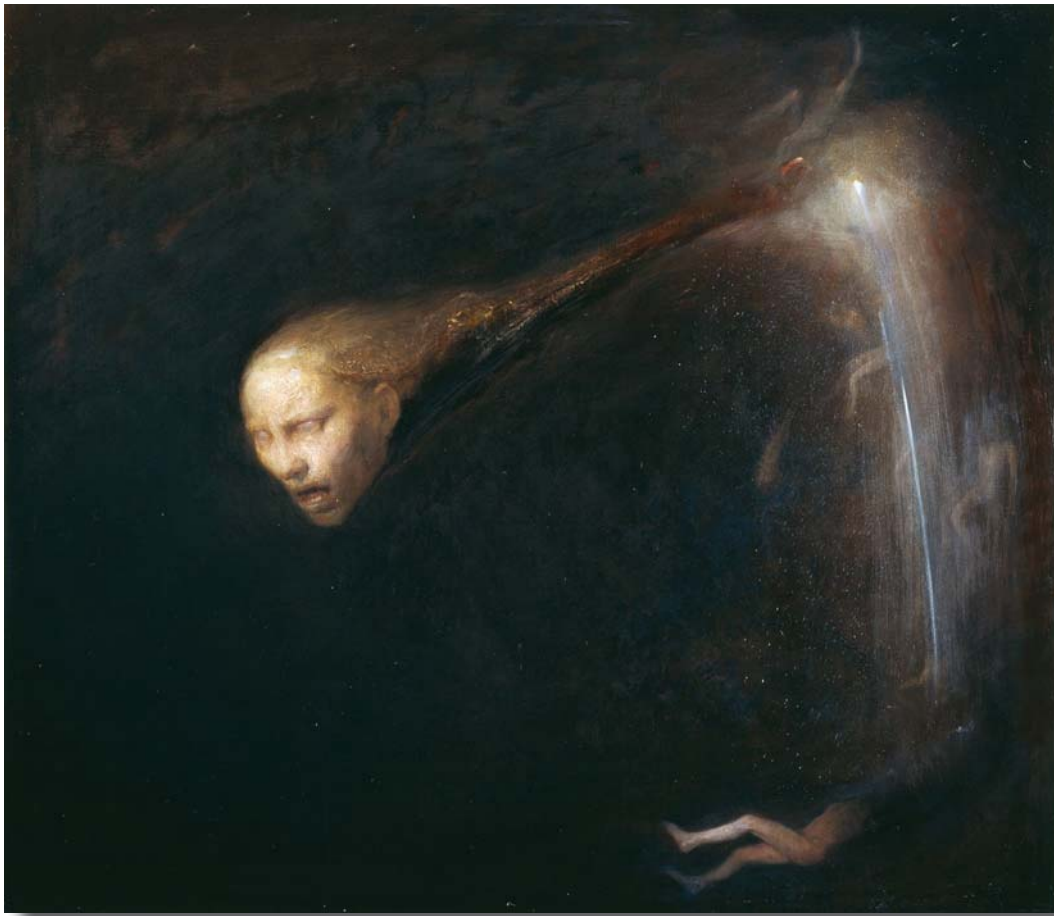


is unclear. But here, as in all of the paintings in the exhibition, man is even farther from nature than he is on earth, and farther still from his own nature. Though directly in space, man is still remote from that space, of which he is nothing more, and of which man is far more. It is man caught, cast in a world in which he belongs but cannot situate himself, where he has lost the ability to exist—he no longer knows how to. Perhaps then the ambiguity of the status of the bodies, that is, whether they contain life or no, is appropriate. It is man as man is. Individual, isolated bodies which rarely, like islands, have knowledge of what is around them though, as with the woman gazing downward, there are rare instances when we are conscious of the continent from which we have separated ourselves and of others who we long to communicate with. It doesn't seem at all possible though for anyone in the painting to communicate, let alone to come together like members of a community—each is in their own gravitational furrow and each will remain there.

In *Head*, an enormous male head is jettisoned from its body and shoots through the dark space which surrounds it like a comet bursting across the sky. A trail of hair and blood and matter and sinew flows from out the head as it continues in its trajectory; there is such ferocious velocity to it, it seems as if the head will emerge out of the canvas and into the exhibition room. One half expects to leave the gallery with the head in one's hands. The body of the head lay below, floating as if in water, its legs gently kicking in the air while several other bodies are caught in the wake of the jettisoned head. The countenance of the man is ripe with fear, his mouth gaping open, his pupils nearly washed out, his eyes devoid of definition and white like egg shells.

Odd Nerdrum, *In Limbo*, 2005
Oil on canvas, 76 x 110 1/4 inches
© Odd Nerdrum, Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

Odd Nerdrum, *Head*
Oil on canvas, 43 7/8 x 50 1/2 inches
© Odd Nerdrum, Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York



What is this? The moment of death?

Obviously, this is a death experience, but the head still clearly possesses life, enough so that one suspects that wherever it ends up, it will continue to speak or scream or gaze in horror, awake, terrifyingly awake. Is it man dreaming and awakening? Man gazing into the black abyss as he perishes? It is unclear, but the terror in the work is self-evident and as in the other paintings, light seems to have no source but to erupt out of the faces and the bodies themselves. Man seems to be the source of illumination; that that may be the case is possibly verifiable by the fact that the stream which erupts from his body is a long blue and white shaft of light, like a star shot from the man's innards. This is fragmented man in the midst of self-destruction and the other bodies are his other selves, the conflicting multitude of selves of man at war with one another and the world.

To witness and perceive the subtleties in the paintings is slightly difficult at times, while one has to strain to see the paintings in their entirety, thus one doesn't experience the paintings as one truly could, and *needs to*, and as every artist and every painting surely *demand*s. In general, the exhibition is finely lit, but it could be exceptional and the paintings demand perfection, thus it would be wise to take into consideration. While our doors of perception

are far from cleansed and we rarely see things as infinite, we should at very least be able to see, not to have glaring lights obstruct our attempts at seeing. There is enough obfuscation in perception itself; this only compounds our difficulties and truncates our ecstasies. How paintings are illuminated is one of the primary concerns of the writers of *Hyperion*, and it should be one for every gallery and museum (not that it isn't, but the art of lighting demands perfection and such perfection is rare), as this problem is not particular to Forum Gallery, but to many galleries and museums. The most exemplary and striking use of light which I witnessed was in a Caravaggio exhibition in Rome in 2000; the curator clearly knew that the sculpting of light was as important as the paintings and without the proper dramatization, the real power of the paintings would be lost. But at many exhibitions in New York and around the world, one is often forced to bend, stoop, and stand at the oddest of angles as well as at far distances in order to eliminate glares that are the result of poorly staged lighting, and this is precisely a question of staging. The glare from such over-bright, misdirected, or poorly dramatized light washes out areas of whatever painting or sculpture one is viewing, thus impeding one's ability to experience art and reducing the intensity of the experience. And if our experience of the art is reduced, then the art is reduced, too, and it isn't seen as it could be seen; certainly not as the artist wishes us to see it. Bad lighting disrupts our dreaming. While many galleries and museum directors surely have lighting designers, most of them seem to be merely adequate and art commands something far higher. To inadequately light is to commit a great disservice not only to the spectators viewing art, but to the artists and their work and, ultimately, to the experience of art itself. It would have been truly mesmerizing for a museum to have invited Sven Nykvist to light one of its shows, but his going under no longer makes that possible. There are other masters though, like Vittorio Storaro. It would be wise to invite him to curate and light a show, for all of us would gain from it.

In *String*, a group of five figures, perhaps a family, are afloat in space. Three of the figures are close together, intimately united or delicately crowded against one another—a brother and sister? Or two lovers? Whoever they are, they seem attached to one another, physically attached or bonded together and a string emanates from their hands and stretches out across space, connecting them to the body of a man floating upside down, who holds the string in his hands gently, his fingers closed gingerly around it. Again, the bodies provide the brightest illumination and the space around them is relatively dark, save for the stars and patches of what might be gas from nebulas. Another figure floats below the main group, his arms protecting or hiding his face. He floats below them, though in this as in other paintings, the sense of direction is not necessarily clear and there may not be one. If there is any up or down it is questionable; the stars are not above or below us, they *surround* us. Again, the features of the bodies are nearly white washed and it is unclear if they are dead or alive. The general tone of the painting is one of coldness, fear, and isolation. The figures in it are connected but unable to communicate. Distance and isolation rule, and Nerdrum reflects all of these things in his very rendering

Odd Nerdrum, *String*
Oil on canvas, 72 3/8 X 84 inches
© Odd Nerdrum, Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York



of the paint, but one must struggle to perceive it.

The bodies in the paintings in the exhibition are the same palpably fleshy bodies of Nerdrum's other work, but they reveal something other paintings of his have not or they do so in different ways: the bifurcation of the body, the split between man and man and the bifurcation between man and the cosmos. Some parts of the bodies are evaporating or burning up; some are literally aflame or being torn apart, like man has been torn from his original body, like man torn from other men. Nerdrum reveals our hidden roots adrift in space, dangling in the ethers, torn out of us by others, or like umbilical chords which have never been cut, never been played—it is only noise, not music which we hear and Nerdrum reveals the wounds which result from this, the anguish in our bodies

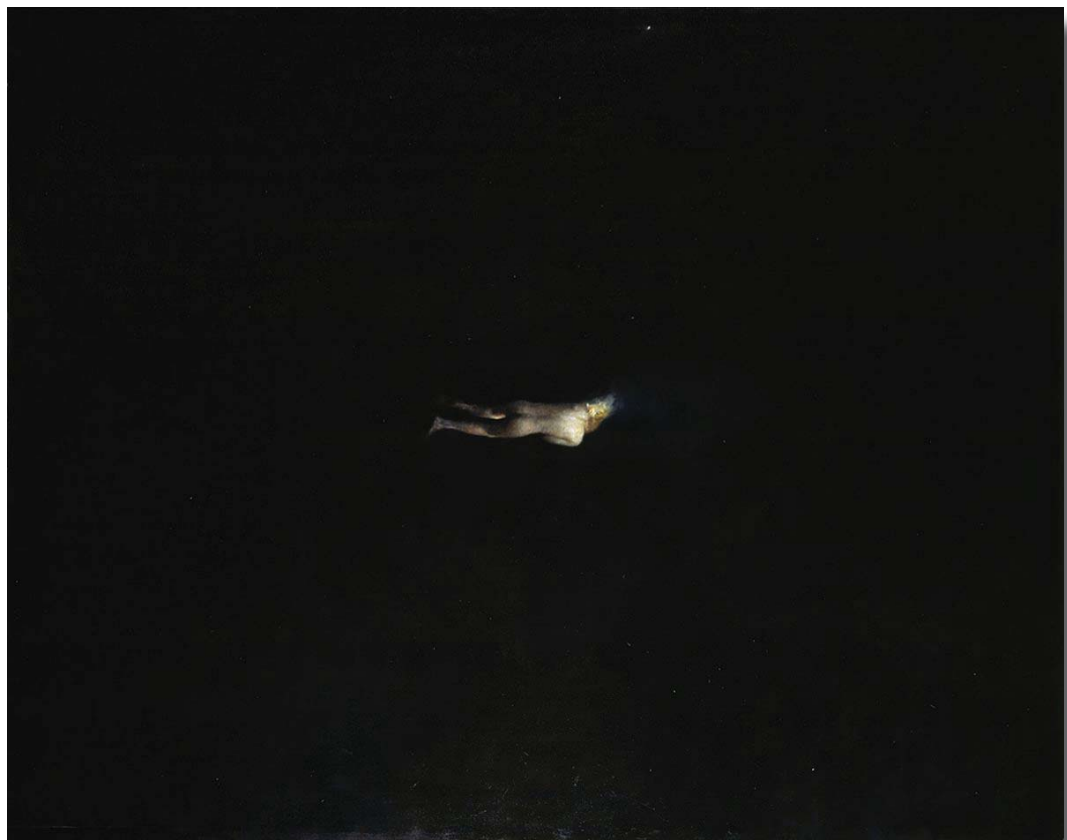
and the brutalities which we commit

against them. And our bodies are ourselves, for there is no soul but only the body and those brutalities are thus signs of our self-destructiveness. Some of the bodies seem radiantly warm, some are in the midst of decay, others seem to fight the current. Some of the figures seem calm, others fearful, helpless, lost. The uppermost figure in *In Limbo* glances down as if she wants to unite or communicate with one of the other figures, but communication is impossible; everyone in this painting is isolated from everyone else, they are islands in the cosmos, visions of man adrift and apart. The distance of man from man is exemplified in space, but it is consciousness which creates the greatest space between us. Reason, instead of uniting us, isolates and separates us, and thinking, if all we do is think without continuing to live with our instincts, is a reduction of our wider circumferences, the enormity of our actual existence, whose scope is immeasurable. Man, as Nietzsche declared, was "*reduced* to thinking, inferring, reckoning, co-ordinating, cause and effect, these unfortunate creatures; they were *reduced* to their "consciousness," *their weakest and most fallible organ!* I believe there has never been such a feeling of misery on earth, such a leaden discomfort." Through forcing our instincts inward, through turning from what is most free in us, powerful, natural, cruel, we turn ourselves against ourselves and in that turning we gave birth to our most debilitating malady. Hopelessly divided, at war with his nature, man is now trapped in

consciousness, a pure realm he created to escape from a body he could never escape. Now it seems impossible to escape from consciousness; we may have left ourselves too far behind. It is our consciousness which propels us farther and farther from the real truth of ourselves. Man in space, the astronaut in space, is yet again the madly reasoning non-animal, non-mythic figure who is divorced from everything. In Nerdrum's paintings, space is space, but it is also *man's mind*; it is metaphoric of consciousness, and in the space of our minds, we are dead, our bodies perish and consciousness is the tomb which engulfs us and separates us from the world.

What Nerdrum knows is that "man will always be subject to his sex and his body, having to cope with this—being dependent on an earthbound body. To this I have always remained faithful." This kind of Dionysian faith is in many cultures uncommon, but, as far as Nerdrum is concerned, beyond matter, beyond this world and this earth, there is no spiritual dimension. Whatever there is that is sacred must sprout from matter itself, from the realm in which we live and nothing else. This is it. And to think with the body is vital for Nerdrum; it is through the "earthbound body" that we remain faithful to the earth. When Zarathustra dares us to believe even in our entrails, he is declaring that one must think with the body, too; that the voices of our bodies are as crucial as the voices of our minds, but only the truly courageous are capable of believing even in their entrails. Yet, all of us must struggle to do so; if we do not, we will continue along the apocalyptic road that we have

Odd Nerdrum, *Burning*
Oil on canvas, 80 3/8 x 102 inches
© Odd Nerdrum, Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York



Odd Nerdrum, *Void*
Oil on canvas, 69 1/4 x 103 inches
© Odd Nerdrum, Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

measured out for ourselves and in measuring out this road we are measuring *against* ourselves. For Nerdrum, “in the long run, nature always wins,” and that is the reality which he depicts—in all of these paintings, man is at the mercy of nature, which is the enormity of space, and man himself. Nature is the adversary man cannot conquer, despite the enormity of his audacity. When we destroy the illusion of absolute originality and dance together before the fire, we return to our most fruitful roots and are rejuvenated. As Shakespeare wrote in *Troilus and Cressida*, “one touch of nature makes the whole world kin”—that is a Dionysian truth and Nerdrum wrestles to depict that truth in images, giving us back the reality we have lost, or revealing in our bodies how we have lost that reality. To go with the Lotus Eaters is to go with our humanity, with the humanity that is instinctual, with our infallible drives, to risk our consciousness in favor of our indisputable truths. It is our only hope.

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