

PERISKOP

FORUM FOR KUNSTHISTORISK DEBAT

Periskop: Forum for kunsthistorisk debat

Nr. 32, 2024

“Færøsk kunsthistorie i dag”

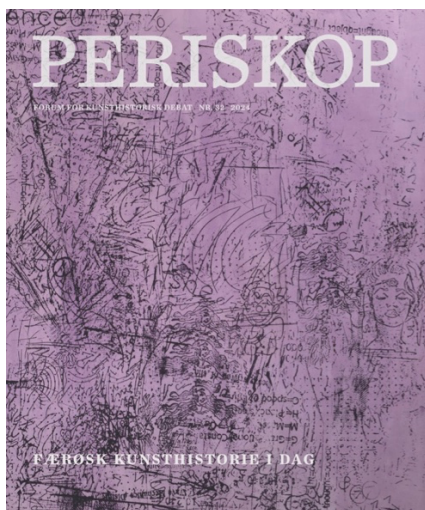
Titel: “Landscapes Envisaged: Ruth Smith’s (Self)Portraiture”

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Sidetal: 58-65

Dato: 31.10.2024

DOI: 10.7146/periskop.v2024i32.150338



Landscapes Envisaged

Ruth Smith's (Self)Portraiture

*Skundmiklu hendur tínar
royndu at binda hana í myndum:
oyðudæmda landið
á glið móti havindum
móti veldiga einseminum -
sama yvirbrá sum í andliti tínum,
eisni tað myndað við skundmiklum hondum.*

*Your deft hands
tried to capture it in pictures:
the desolate land
gliding towards the sea
towards the vast loneliness –
bearing the same countenance as your face,
that, too, pictured with deft hands.*

-Karsten Hoydal, "Til Ruth / To Ruth," 1972¹

I first encountered Ruth Smith's (1913-1958) work in 2016 during a tour of Listasavn Føroya in Tórshavn. I rounded a white-walled corner and there was *Andlitsmynd, Leif/Nes (Portrait, Leif/Nes, 1957-1958)* [1], with its energetic brush strokes, rich color, and Nes' cluster of seaside houses – all, I would learn later, characteristic of Smith's work. The painting was hung in landscape orientation, despite its title claiming it primarily as a portrait.² What initially drew me to the painting was the portrait of Leif,

Smith's son and the painting's eponymous subject. His bust emerges out of the lower-right edge of the work, appearing like a reflection in a body of water, perhaps a lake, as a rough grayish-blue background halos his shoulders and head, meeting ripples of blues and peachy yellows. The scale of this supposed reflection seemed surreal. And upon closer inspection, I could make out the road running under Leif's left shoulder and across, or behind, his torso, the fence that borders the upper corner of his lake-like backdrop and the beginning of an ocean landscape with clouds over the horizon. This was no reflection, at least not in the naturalist sense, but a meeting and merging of landscapes and portrait.

Following my 2016 introduction, Smith's work remained a fascination for me. When invited to contribute to this collection, I knew I wanted to write about her work as it remains little discussed outside of Faroese and West Nordic art circles. Revisiting her catalog, this puzzling meeting of portraiture and landscape came to the fore in a way I had previously failed to recognize. In the scholarship on Smith, it is often repeated (almost as some kind of apologia for her perceived failure to stay in one genre)³ that she lacked resources, including a wealth of supplies, and thus often resorted to reusing canvases (cf. Warming 2007, 81-82). Nils Ohrt (2015, 135) attributes her genre blurring as a characteristically fluid boundary between sketches and finished works. Ohrt (2021, 242-3)



[1] Ruth Smith:
Andlitsmynd Leif/Nes
 (Portrait Leif/Nes),
 1957-8. Oil on canvas,
 70 x 79cm. Listasavn
 Føroya, Tórshavn.

specifically discusses *Andlitsmynd, Leif/Nes* as unfinished in his 2021 work *Mellem Færøerne og maleriet*, due to “its three separate motifs in various angles [...]. Smith’s original intention was to paint the view of Nes [...then] came the ocean view and then Leif, so that the painting appears as a bulletin board with three pictures”. While these explanations are plausible, they have never fully satisfied my sense of Smith’s work. As I reviewed Smith’s catalog, those explanations became less and less compelling.

While Smith’s portrait of her son Leif ignited my initial fascination with the artist, for the rest of this essay I examine Smith’s self-portraiture in particular as it engages with, or meets, or becomes, landscape. Consider Smith’s *Landslag málað út yvir sjálvsmynd, Landscape over self-portrait* from 1957 [2]. Two of Smith’s central motifs are

on display here: the self-portrait and the Nes landscape. Smith’s self-portrait, painted first, has the subject’s bust facing the viewer directly, sans glasses, and clothed in red (a common feature of Smith’s self-portraiture). A yellow wall and shelves of books can be made out in the background. The figure is partially obscured with greens and browns of Nes’ hillside cutting diagonally across the face, just below the eyes. The blue-gray-black houses of the town emerge, perched on the figure’s chin still slightly visible beneath the greenery. The steep hills cover the figure’s bust, with red arms and chest peeking through the clouds and mountainside. This work is presented landscape-side-up in the catalog of Smith’s work in Dagmar Warming’s foundational 2007 text on the artist, *Ruth Smith: Lív og verk*. However, in a recent post by Sirið Sten-



[2] Ruth Smith: *Landslag málað út yvir sjálvsmynd* (Landscape over self-portrait), 1957. Oil on hardboard, 61.5 x 52cm. Ruth Smith Savnið, Vágur.

berg (2023), Minister of Social Affairs and Culture, on the Ruth Smith Savnið's (the museum dedicated to the artist in Vágur) Facebook page, this work is presented portrait-side-up, with the caption noting that it "can be turned both ways". While it is certainly possible that Smith might have continued to paint Nes over her face, it is hard to imagine that her visage would not continue to bleed

through. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that this would be how one would effectively "re-use" a canvas.

Traces of the merging of portrait and landscape, however, go back further in Smith's oeuvre. *Sjálvsmynd* (*Self-portrait*) from 1956 [3], which closely resembles a similar portrait from 1955, depicts the half-length subject in three-quarter view, positioned in an open doorway with

[3] Ruth Smith: *Sjálvsmynd* (Self-portrait), 1956. Oil on canvas, 78 x 58cm. Listasavn Føroya, Tórshavn.



the landscape of Nes in frame. The background is almost split in two, the light blue of the door and its yellow threshold meet the blue, greys, and greens of Nes' familiar coastline. Similarly to *Andlitsmynd, Leif/Nes*, I misread this image initially – the door frame was the frame of a painting, the outdoors a painted landscape. Instead, Smith has brought the landscape of Nes into the frame of

her own self-portrait – no possible interpretation of indecision or re-using a canvas here. While the portrait takes up a common motif for women's self-portraits, that of the artist at work with palette in hand (Calabrese 2006, 223), it also shows hints of Smith's interest in place – the left edge of the palette even seems to meld into the landscape. The subject's characteristic red shirt visually centers the

two worlds of her art, the meeting of her palette: the interior of her home and the landscape of Nes. Ohrt (2015, 148) views the palette here as functioning like a shield, comparing the subject to a European “painter prince,” but it can also be a symbol of transformation, echoing the threshold of the doorway, a space where landscape becomes portrait, portrait becomes landscape.

An earlier portrait from 1939, *Sjálvsmynd* (*Self-portrait*), has a similar composition. The half-length subject also has palette and brush in hand, though Smith’s familiar red pigment is limited to a bright collar peeking out from underneath a green jacket and a daub of crimson paint ready to be mixed. The 1939 portrait differs from the two from the 1950s in that the background is not split between

outdoors and doorframe. Instead, the white doorframe borders the right edge of the image, with the light green and yellows of the landscape dominating the rest of the background. Regarding another of Smith’s self-portraits, this one with an abstract background in various shades of blue (*Sjálvsmynd*, 1950), Warming (2007, 94) writes,

it does not seem as if the figure comes out of the blue colour, but as if she is in it. There is no actual space behind the figure, just the colour blue and the hint of a horizontal line to the left of the figure, such that one senses the sea and the sky. The blue of the sea closes up around her, fatefully surrounding her [... she is] in the colour blue’s embrace.



[4] Ruth Smith: *Sjálvsmynd* (Self-portrait), ca. 1958. Oil on wood, 50 x 53.5cm. Ruth Smith Savnið, Vágur.

I've come to view the 1939 and 1950s self-portraits similarly. Nes isn't out through the door, mere steps away, rather it is here already, in Smith's home, surrounding her/the subject.

If some of Smith's self-portraits feature the landscape enveloping the subject, *Sjálvsmynd (Self-portrait, ca. 1958)* [4] has her likeness threatening to dissolve into the landscape. As in *Andlitsmynd Leif/Nes* [1], the figure's scale is at play here with the subject's bust dominating the length of the canvas. The form of Nes' houses almost flickers behind Smith's face, gray shadows behind her eyes and cheeks. The bright greens of the hillside contrast with the rough and decisive red strokes that indicate a familiar jacket. The wavy grey and charcoal strands of hair meet a similarly colored shifting sky. The two motifs are clear, but like *Landslag málað út yvir sjálvsmynd 1957* [2], their separateness is not. Approaching Smith's collected works in this way, attuned to the face and body in her landscapes and the landscapes in her self-portraits, you start to see hints of merging everywhere. Finger-like sea green forms emerge between houses and grassy foregrounds are populated with tufts that echo the turn of a nose. A subject's face lined with age suggests diagonal hillsides and lively backgrounds mimic ocean waves. This dynamic blurring further complicates the separation of Smith's genres.

The fragile separation is nigh obliterated in *Landslag málað út yvir sjálvsmynd (Landscape over self-portrait, undated)* [5] and *Kvøldarskíggj yvir sjálvsmynd (Evening sky over a self-portrait, 1957)*. The names of these two works give the trick away, as both can be deceptive in their subject matter. *Landslag málað út yvir sjálvsmynd* [5] features a dark, sketchy cluster of black houses nestled into a foreground of bright yellows, greens, and blues with a textured black and yellow mass in the lower right corner. These forms meet transparent streaks of a white, red, and blue ocean, under a warm cloudy sky. Visible under the water are the features of Smith's face: her dark hair rises out of the left end of town, a dark eye floats over one of the houses' chimneys, and the hints of

nose and mouth align with a pale line (perhaps previously a shelf or window ledge?) that makes its way up through the central cloud and middle of the painting. The collar of the figure's red shirt and slope of her top shoulder can be made out through the water and sky. The yellow-black mass becomes recognizable as the other half of her torso and shoulder. *Kvøldarskíggj yvir sjálvsmynd* similarly features Smith peering out from a landscape, as half of her oversized face and bust appears to rest on a bank of clouds floating over the ocean. In the latter painting, light pinks, purples, and greens wash over the sky, making the tans, oranges, and whites of her figure even harder to discern. While the titles of these two pieces (as well as *Landslag málað út yvir sjálvsmynd 1957* [2]) aim at description, i.e. these are paintings where a portrait was painted followed by a landscape over top, in their adherence to temporal order they also imply an, arguably unnecessary, orientation to these works. The works become landscapes, albeit with an interesting back story, but remain landscapes nonetheless. Just as *Andlitsmynd Leif/Nes* becomes primarily a "portrait," the works themselves seem to push at the limits of these categories.

And this category trouble perhaps explains the apologetics that haunts scholarship on Smith's work. Warming's and Ohrt's repeated acknowledgements that Smith's work does not always appear finished, that multiple motifs meet in one canvas, and that she did not have enough resources all feel oddly confessional and often unnecessary. At times, they themselves seem to recognize the limits of this view. Warming (2007, 82) notes that through conserving Smith's work she has realized that "the restless, unfinished and nervous in her works [...] actually very intentional. It is not an expression of indecision but a constant search for a truth, with a sure and serious work technique". And Ohrt (2021, 179), writing on one painting, notes that "even though the picture is unfinished, it is a complete work of art, and it is difficult to imagine it more finished". That said, this issue of "unfinished-ness" still seems to haunt Smith's reception. For these works to be unfinished implies that an end goal for these pieces was



[5] Ruth Smith: *Landslag málað út yvir sjálvsmynd* (Landscape over self-portrait), undated. Oil on canvas, 54 x 64.5cm. Ruth Smith Savnið, Vágur.

not reached, that the “truth” of these paintings is different than what we have before us.⁴ That a landscape really is not a portrait, and a portrait really is not a landscape, they are just not finished yet. The claim that Smith’s works are unfinished is often seemingly used to idealize works into pieces that simply do not and will not exist and to diminish the works that do.

Smith’s tendency to think portrait and landscape together is, as I hope I have demonstrated, a strong thread throughout her collection. And while I hesitate to describe all the pieces discussed in this essay as simply portraits, we might see traces of modern portraiture and the anti-portrait in her work. Omar Calabrese (2006, 24) places the twentieth century as the time of “the negation or even destruction of the self-portrait”. This sentiment is echoed by Tomáš Jirsa (2016, 13), who, writing on portraiture in the twentieth century and beyond, notes that “scratched, smudged or blurred faces do not make the subject present, rather capturing its identity in the pro-

cess between appearing and disappearing”. Similarly, Judith Weiss (2013, 135, 140) discusses forms of modern portraiture “that privilege the disappearance, slipping away, revocation and obliteration of the face” asking “how much face is needed to represent it as such?” These conceptions all find resonance with Smith’s landscape/portraits, where the figure’s face and identity resist stability and are often in flux. Johnstone and Imber’s (2021, 1) definition of the anti-portrait is even broad enough to potentially encompass Smith’s “landscapes,” as the anti-portrait “resists or disrupts the received art-historical conventions of its genre [...and] embodies the compulsion to cross borderlines and sully ‘pure’ genres, even while paradoxically reflecting on and regulating the margins of its own”. I offer these expansive readings of portraiture to suggest that perhaps we need not fret about Smith’s demonstrated interest in ignoring genre boundaries and producing works with an air of irresolution or ambivalence. Instead, I hope this essay has succeeded in suggesting that Smith’s landscape/portrait hybrids are rich, intentional explorations into emotional and subjective expression that warrant further scholarly investigation.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Warming 2007, translated by Kai Nieminen. All other translations mine unless otherwise noted.
- 2 This painting was presented in portrait orientation at Ruth Smith’s funeral, where it was displayed next to her open casket. On this occasion, Nils Ohrt likens the work to a kind of epitaph (2021, 242).
- 3 There also exists in the scholarship another apparent apologia regarding the wealth of self-portraits Smith created. All caution that this trend should not be read as evidence of narcissism or excessive self occupation, but rather as necessity because the only model Smith had at hand was herself (for example: Ohrt 2021, 219; Warming 2007, 42). This seems unnecessary and gendered.
- 4 Smith’s abrupt death in 1958 at the age of 45 has surely contributed to this feeling that she, and relatedly we spectators, have been robbed of what could have been.

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