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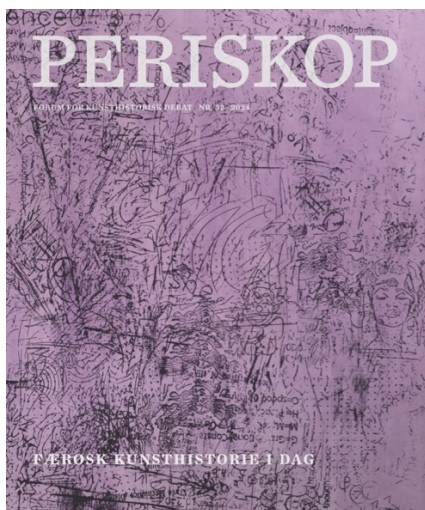
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Elinborg Lützen

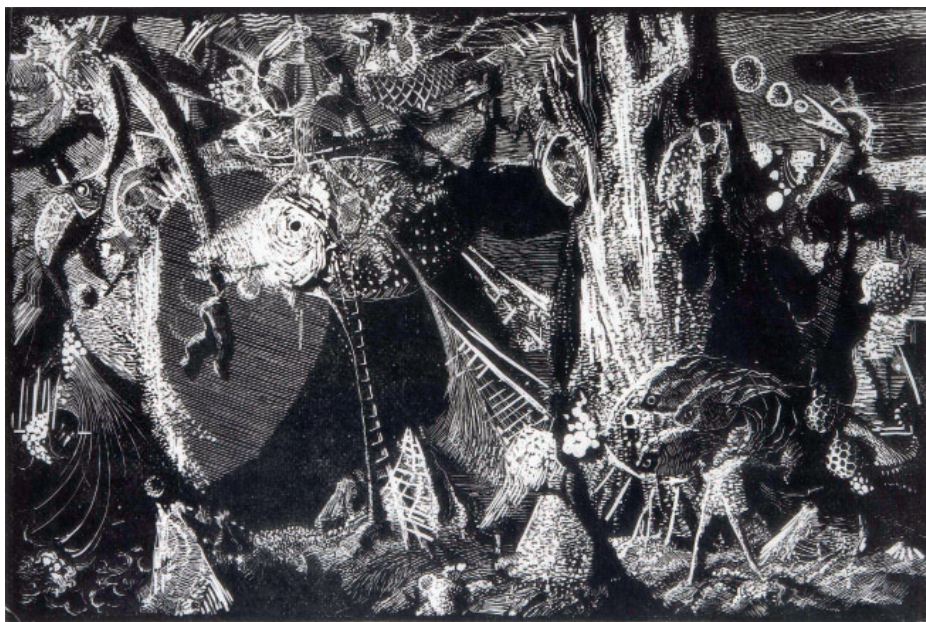
Subsea Dreamscapes

Elinborg Lützen (1919-95) was the first graphic artist from the Faroe Islands. Although she is a central figure in Faroese art history, there exists relatively little material and research on the artist, apart from the exhibition catalogue edited by Nils Ohrt (2021) and brief summaries on her work in surveys on Faroese art such as Mikael Wivel's *Century* (2011) and Bárður Jákupsson's *Myndlist í Føroyum* (2000). This essay aims to expand analyses of Lützen's work and, in particular, shed light on her linocuts of subsea scenes. In doing so, the essay discusses how Lützen's work breaks away from Faroese traditions and draws on ideas of surrealism.

Lützen was born in Klaksvík in the Faroe Islands in 1919 and moved to Copenhagen at the age of 18. In the years 1937-40 she was a student at *Tegne- og Kunstindustriskolen for Kvinder*, a school in Copenhagen which aimed to improve women's access to academic training in visual arts and handicrafts. Like many other people from the Faroe Islands, Lützen resided in Denmark during the Second World War, unable to move back to the Faroe Islands due to the occupation. It was here that she began her relationship with Sámal Joensen-Mikines, whom she was married to from 1941-52 (Jákupsson 2019). Several other Faroese artists such as Ingálvur av Reyni, Jóannis Kristiansen, Frimod Joensen, Janus Kamban, Ingolf Jacobsen, and Ruth Smith also lived and worked in Copenhagen at this time. It was also during this time

that these artists founded the Faroese art association, Listafelag Føroya, which is still active today and has held numerous important exhibitions showcasing Faroese art through the years. The association became a pillar within the Faroese art scene and also founded Listaskálin, the first proper exhibition space in the Faroe Islands, known today as the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands.

Although Lützen began her artistic studies already in 1937, it was not until more than twenty years later that she began working intensively in the medium that she is known for today, namely linocuts. In 1957-58, she was a student at *Kunsthåndverksskolen* in Bergen, Norway, where the prominent graphic artist Povl Christensen was her professor. In 1960, Lützen began working almost solely with linocuts, which she continued to do for the rest of her career (Jákupsson 2019, 14). Lützen's linocuts are predominantly landscapes and "fairy-tale pictures". While Lützen's prints and watercolours of landscapes often depict specific settlements and neighbourhoods in and around her hometown, Klaksvík, the fairy-tale pictures seem to be based on pure imagination. These pictures do not depict specifically Faroese motifs, but rather appear like surrealistic dreamscapes. Furthermore, Lützen has also illustrated numerous children's stories and fairy-tales in Faroese publications, the most popular being *Í skýmingini* by Sofía Petersen (1948).



[1] Elinborg Lützen: *Á havsins botni* (The Bottom of the Sea), undated. Linocut, 45 x 65 cm. The National Gallery of the Faroe Islands.

Subsea Worlds

Lützen's fantastical prints are arguably the artist's strongest work and stand out from the rest of Faroese art being made at the time. The best example, I would argue, of this type of work by Lützen are the two prints titled *The Bottom of the Sea* (undated) **[1]** and *Fairy-tale Picture II* (1973) **[2]**, which show surrealistic subsea scenes with strange creatures and shapes.

The two prints both depict a rather abstract scene from a sunken ship and large undersea rocks. Different kinds of fish, jellyfish and seashells populate the ocean, while tools and items such as fishing nets and rope ladders remind us of life on land (Jákupsson 2019). The tools such as the rope ladders also seem to indicate a more abstract link between different dimensions of life. A large bird is placed at the left top corner of the print, while small human-figures stand on the seabed. The human-figures are engaged in a range of curious activities. In the print titled *The Bottom of the Sea*, a man is defending himself from a swarm of large flatfish, and in *Fairy-tale Picture II*, two female figures have got their braids stuck in a large shell and appear

to be dragging it along the bottom of the ocean. In *Fairy-tale Picture*, what seems to be a pig's body with no head is floating around in the sea, while the skeleton of the large bird in the left corner is partly visible. These unsettling details serve as memento mori—a reminder of the inevitability of death—which Lützen frequently employed in her prints (another example is the print titled *Fairy-tale Picture* (1973) **[3]**, where three hooded skeletons appear at the foot of a mountain). Along with their surrealistic motifs, the dimensions of the figures in the subsea prints further strengthen the sense of surrealism. While the bird and certain fish are enormous and take up a lot of space in the print, the human-figures are dwarfed and at times difficult to spot. Furthermore, many completely abstract shapes appear in the prints, making the works somewhat difficult to decode. Although it is impossible to see exactly what all the shapes and figures in these two prints are, they convey an unnerving and dream-like atmosphere.

With the exception of a few prints from the 1970s which were multi-coloured, Lützen's prints are solely black and white. She is best known for her very dark

[2] Elinborg Lützen: *Ævintýrmynd II* (Fairy-tale Picture II), 1973. Linocut, 42 x 63 cm. The National Gallery of the Faroe Islands.



prints, where she uses little to no shading, which also can make her prints difficult to understand or decipher at times. This adds to the inscrutability of her prints and their surrealistic effect. In many of her prints, Lützen would use only a small amount of ink in order to make the prints grey instead of completely black. This effect is further enhanced by Lützen using a spoon made out of horn in order to carefully transfer the print onto paper, instead of using a printing press. Her technique made the printing process long and arduous, resulting in the prints being printed in limited editions of most often 10-20 copies (Jákupsson 2019, 14). It is worth mentioning that Lützen's spoon, along with most of her other printing tools as well as several linoleum blocks, sketchbooks, and notebooks, were donated to the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands by the artist's family and can be found in the museum's archives.

Lützen in “the Space of the Unconscious”

The existing scholarship on Lützen is, unfortunately, quite limited, and most of the texts written about the artist fail

to examine her work in depth due to their biographical focus. In his survey on Faroese art, *Century*, Mikael Wivel (2011, 420) briefly discusses Lützen's fairy-tale images. Wivel (2011, 422) states that Lützen is the “most amazing storyteller in Faroese art” and compares her to Pieter Breughel and Hieronymus Bosch, as her depictions fall “midway between the surreal and the realistic”. Wivel (2011, 422) writes as follows about Lützen's subsea prints:

Here she has two approaches. Either she gives it the character of magic and has the most remarkable creatures appearing side by side with fish and clams—or else she lets it all rip in a kind of insane turbulence that puts any attempt to identify the subject to shame.

While Wivel splits Lützen's undersea prints into two distinct groups, I argue that her prints encompass both approaches, which are not as separate as Wivel suggests. Both *Fairy-tale Picture II* and *The Bottom of the Sea* depict highly detailed creatures and items, but when you look more closely, they also contain abstract elements which

are impossible to identify. This combination of recognizable motifs and abstract shapes, along with the absurd scenarios and figures, as well as the size ratio of the different creatures give the prints surrealistic attributes that are unusual in Faroese art, which is often perceived as being focused on landscapes.

In his essay in the exhibition catalogue on Elinborg Lützen, artist and former director of the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands Bárður Jákupsson (2019, 18) states that: “[Lützen] steps into the space of the unconscious, although we ought not call her a surrealist”. Unfortunately, Jákupsson does not reason or explain this statement further. It is possible that Jákupsson refers to the fact that a large part of Lützen’s oeuvre consists of prints of landscapes and settlements. Although Lützen did not work solely with surrealism, it is evident that many of her works explore the ideas and possibilities of the surrealist approach.

Surrealism was a twentieth-century artistic movement which explored the mind, focusing on the unconscious and dreams. Surrealist artists were often focused on the beauty that was found in the “unexpected and

the uncanny, the disregarded and the unconventional” (TATE, n.d.). In his *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), André Breton (2010, 477) defines Surrealism as a:

Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

Using Breton’s definition, one cannot call Lützen a surrealist, as she did not to our knowledge work with automatism in her work, and her prints are not “exempt from any aesthetic concern”. However, regarding surrealism as not only a twentieth-century movement but also as a transhistorical artistic approach or style allows us to see and read Lützen’s work through a surrealist lens. For instance, it is clear that Lützen was focused on the unconscious and dreams. This is not only visible in her image-subjects, but also in her titles, which sometimes refer to dreams (Ohrt 2019, 53), such as the print *Subsea Dream*



[3] Elinborg Lützen: *Ævintýrmynd* (Fairy-tale Picture), 1973. Linocut, 42 x 63 cm. The National Gallery of the Faroe Islands

Image (undated), which depicts a similar subsea scene to the two I have discussed earlier in the essay. This focus on the unconscious, along with Lützen's depiction of strange creatures and uncanny settings, clearly demonstrates that she was working with the surreal in her art.

Although subsea landscapes are not a common surrealist setting, several surrealistic paintings include water in the form of the ocean, lakes or rivers. For instance, Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1500), where strange animals, human-like figures, mermaids and other creatures are engaged in strange activities in a garden with rivers and a large lake. In Salvador Dalí's painting *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* (1952), we see both above and under the sea, where three clocks appear to be melting, one large fish is swimming, and abstract shapes similar to bricks and missiles seem to be floating in the water. One can imagine that Lützen has seen these famous paintings and has been inspired by them, as important elements from both works are also present in Lützen's subsea prints. Moreover, Lützen was from Klaksvík, the "fishing capital" of the Faroe Islands, so it is likely that her fascination with the aquatic is further strengthened due to her own surroundings.

While landscape painting had been a longstanding tradition in Faroese art and abstract painting was developing quickly in the mid twentieth century, mythical surrealistic art was more or less non-existent in the Faroe Islands in Lützen's time. One of Lützen's only contemporaries to dabble in the field of surrealism was the author and visual artist William Heinesen (1900-1991), whose images often depicted fantastical creatures, trolls, and other charac-

ters from Faroese sagas. However, while Heinesen's work most often revolves around Faroese culture and society, Lützen's subsea prints do not refer to anything specifically Faroese. Nor are they abstract (although they do contain some abstract elements such as different unidentifiable objects and strange shapes). In this way, Lützen's fairy-tale images are distinct from the work of her contemporaries in the Faroese art scene. Lützen's surrealistic dreamscapes hold a special place in Faroese art history, and their influence is arguably visible in the work of contemporary Faroese artists such as Silja Strøm (b. 1987), Sigrun Gunnarsdóttir (b. 1950), and Edward Fuglø (b. 1965), whose paintings often portray peculiar creatures, odd size ratios and other surrealistic elements reminiscent of Lützen's dreamscapes.

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