As the sun bursts through

Faroes – the islands where you can do anything

By Alexandre Crochet

Le Bicolore

Maison du Danemark

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The Faroes are a chain of eighteen medium-sized islands far out in the Atlantic Ocean, battered by wind and rain. Almost “a thousand miles from any inhabited region”, as Saint-Exupéry would put it. Copenhagen, the capital of the Kingdom of Denmark, which includes the Faroe Islands, is more than a thousand kilometres away. Less than half that distance away, Iceland and the northern coast of Scotland stretch out their arms towards the Faroes, which are more or less equidistant from them. Almost everywhere else is so far away... From this world’s end on the very edge of Scandinavia, which forces you to reframe your thinking, you no longer see the rest of the planet - or life - in the same way.

In times past, few dared to pit themselves against the raging swell and inhospitable terrain of the Faroes - only intrepid Vikings or fishermen, or the pastor in *Barbara*, who dutifully sets off in a rowing boat for the island of Mykines, where only a few families live, and is delayed there by a storm. When he returns home, he finds that his free-spirited wife Barbara has not waited for him. Tales and mysteries easily attach themselves to these coasts with their sheer, dark basalt cliffs, these barren heaths, these rocky little mountains, often concealed by clinging fog. Even the nearest island may already be another world. For a long time, getting from one island to another was virtually an adventure in itself. Throughout autumn and winter, water streams down the mountainsides in a myriad torrents that hurtle down the slopes to the sea, where they turn into waterfalls, cascading into the ocean in a ceaseless outpouring.

There are more edenic islands than these. The Faroes are nothing like Gauguin’s Tahiti, with its languid Polynesian beauties, warm lagoons and exotic trees. Although snow and ice rarely linger here in winter, summer is brief and cool in the Faroe Islands. Yet their inhabitants continue to live there and like it, despite the siren calls of civilization and big cities. That is miracle number one. Nowadays, people come from far away to rove its permanently green moorlands, to marvel at birds in flight and the sight of the changing sky, to brave the wind and walk for hours without seeing a living soul except for sheep - pitting themselves against a magnificent, rugged, pristine natural environment, against this primitive world that impels one to fall silent and contemplate. Once they do so, visitors sated with big cities and crowds cannot help being stirred and moved by this unexpected northern Arcadia... “In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1836 essay *Nature*. In a way, it is this unusual island landscape and their personal relationship with nature that the artists in the exhibition “As the sun bursts through” question directly or obliquely. For, despite the Faroes’ population of only 56,000, scattered throughout the islands, the Faroese art scene is a tangible reality. The capital, Tórshavn, harbours a little artistic ecosystem with artists’ studios, the major lithography workshop Steinprent, the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands, a Nordic arts centre - a more recent arrival - and a bank that has long been

amassing a vast collection of works by local artists, who are also very actively supported by the inhabitants. That is miracle number two. In these autonomous islands, a very long way from Denmark, albeit linked to it by an invisible but ever-present thread, the inhabitants are Danish-speakers, but chiefly speak Faroese, a language related to Old Norse and Icelandic - a circumstance that surely reinforces their sense of belonging in a world that is uniquely their own, since not even the Danes can understand them.

Do Faroese painters too have a language of their own? At all events, they have the same physical landscape - the same untamed island scenery - in mind, even when they subsequently go elsewhere. “A landscape is the background in the picture of human life,” remarks Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who happens to be the author of *Paul et Virginie*, an 18th-century fable about two adolescents who grow up on an island preserved from worldly influences. The Faroe Islands are not Skagen - the colony of artists who came to the Danish peninsula to paint the changing light and the sea in about 1900 and turned it into a locus of art history. Ingálvur av Reyni, Zacharias Heinesen, Hansina Iversen and Rannvá Kunoy – to list them in order of generations – are themselves from the Faroes – islands that are by definition both closed in on themselves, in that they are surrounded by water, and open to infinity. The 16th-century writer Thomas More chose an island setting for his Utopia - the world that can never be found - and from Kirkjubøur and its old whitewashed church at the water’s edge, directly conversant with the elements, to modern Tórshavn, there is indeed something Utopia-like about the Faroes, where artists help shape identity, design postage-stamps or - like Hansina Iversen - decorate the facades of Parliament.

Even half a century earlier, everything would still have been complicated, and the arts would probably not have had so much space to flourish. But now the islands are connected by underwater tunnels and there are scheduled flights to and from Nordic countries and more distant places. The Faroes may be geographically peripheral, but they are no longer artistically peripheral. Ingálvur av Reyni, who died in 2005, is the tutelary figure of Faroese art. He paved the way for modernity and spent several stays in Paris from the 1950s onwards. Now in his eighties, Zacharias Heinesen is a graduate of Reykjavík School of Visual Arts, in Iceland, and the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen.
The two youngest, Hansina Iversen and Rannvá Kunoy, have probably had the most international careers. Iversen studied at Reykjavík School of Visual Arts in the late 1980s and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki, in Finland, in the 1990s. For a long time, she lived and worked in Copenhagen, the Danish capital. Then she came back to live in Tórshavn, like a return to Ithaca. The youngest, Rannvá Kunoy, was born in the 1970s and studied at the Royal College of Arts, in London, where she settled, becoming one of the high-profile artists championed by the Saatchi Gallery. Nowadays, these artists belong in several places. They look towards Denmark, where they have work in many of the major museums, and are in contact with other countries in the great Nordic historical and cultural family and outside it. But their roots are definitely in the Faroes.

“In winter, it’s like being in a cave. You want to sleep. You’re in the dark, far out in the Atlantic. Whereas in Copenhagen, everywhere is lit with electric light,” says Hansina Iversen. The dialogue between dark and light is almost a spiritual struggle. “The Faroes are the place where you can do anything. Darkness is the best way of foregrounding light,” explains Kinna Poulsen, the curator of the exhibition, also a Faroe Islander. But it is light, the sun, spring and summer that she has chosen to celebrate via the artworks on show at the Maison du Danemark, in which each artist seems to pass the baton to the next. Light is an eminently Scandinavian theme. The Incas and the Chinese used to worship the sun, and so do the Scandinavians, through rituals such as St Lucy’s Day in December, a celebration of light during the darkest time of year, and Midsummer’s Eve in June, near the longest day of the year. Imagine what it must be like to wait for the return of the sun on an utterly remote island, like a fisherman’s wife waiting for her husband to come home from the sea. The topos of the unique, magical “northern light” has been widely explored by museums in Paris and the rest of France during the last few decades, in particular via the fecund period around 1900. But this exhibition embraces modernity, moving the temporal cursor forward and altering the focus.

For a long time, painting in the Faroes was imprisoned by tradition and hindered by the need to put practical, subsistence-related tasks first, so it only really goes back a hundred years. Sámal Joensen-Mikines (1908-1979) paved the way by modernizing his treatment of landscape, which he painted constantly. Just as Van Gogh began painting in brighter colours when he discovered Paris and the Impressionists, when Ingálvur av Reyni encountered Paris, his splendid palette of greys evolved into a brighter, more expressionistic spectrum. Zacharias Heinesen went a step closer to abstraction. Juxtaposing flat blocks of colour, he proffered his own vision of the same landscapes, allowing the sun to burst through above the green roofs (the roofs of houses are traditionally covered with grass in the Faroes), the rocks and the slate-coloured water, in a very fine composition, or to fragment a sublime blue. There is an obvious kinship with Nicolas de Staël in terms of painting technique as well as in the way he gradually moves away from figuration.

Can one ever completely get away from the splendid scenery that has been visited and revisited by so many artists? The two women artists in the exhibition have relationships with it that are sometimes more ambiguous. Hansina Iversen says she has detached herself from landscape. A stay in New York and American abstract expressionism left their mark on her: she paints in oils without making preparatory sketches, directly on the canvas, using big brushstrokes and layering paint to create effects of transparency. Her work is reminiscent of Mark Rothko’s explorations. In her words, “I set out to bring the variations in light throughout the day together on the canvas.” This ode to the sun is dominated by warm yellows and reds. Delacroix used to say everyone knows that yellow, orange and red inspire and represent ideas of joy.

Iversen’s intense use of colour lends her painting a spiritual dimension. “Colour is the key-board. The eye is the hammer, while the soul is a piano of many strings,” writes Kandinsky in *On the Spiritual in Art*[1]. Rannvá Kunoy references Dan Flavin for her work on light and Lucio Fontana for her spatial explorations. In her work, the echoes of the Faroese landscapes seem to be more internalized. She uses graphic line drawings to explore movement, cramming the surface with lyrical abstract drawings, allowing colour, as in a monochrome, to play a major part in disseminating light, the leitmotiv of the artistic emancipation of the Faroese.

Until now, the precious light and sun of the Faroe Islands had never come to Paris in the depths of winter. Now they have done so, thanks to this exhibition.

[1] *On the Spiritual in Art,* Wassily Kandinsky, edited by Hilla Rebay, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York 1946.

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