

modern girl smoking,
texting with the midriff out

mother's ruin - dangerous obsessions and the culture of excess

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Margrét H. Blöndal. **Who nurtures whom.** 2005. Photograph, disks, pink sculpture
Nina Canell. **Lasse.** 2004 DVD 19:54 mins. (edition of 3)
Ciaran Murphy. **Cliff and Moon.** 2006. Oil on stretched paper (diptych)

RUINED CONVERSATION

Q: In your opinion, what is the meaning of modern art?

A: Modern art to me is nothing more than the expression of contemporary aims of the age that we're living in.

Q: Did the classical artists have a way of expressing their age?

A: Yes they did. All cultures have had means and techniques of expressing their immediate aims. The thing that interests me is that today artists do not have to go to a subject matter outside of themselves. Most modern artists work from a different source.

Q: Would you say that the modern artist has more or less isolated the quality that made classical works of art valuable?

A: Oh yes, the good ones have.

Q: There is a good deal of controversy regarding your methods. Is there something you'd like to tell us about that?

A: My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. Each age finds its own technique.

Q: Which would mean that the layman and the critic would have to develop their ability to interpret the new techniques?

A: Yes. That always follows somehow. I mean, the strangeness will wear off and I think we will discover deeper meanings.

Q: How should we learn to appreciate modern art?

A: I think they should not look for, but look passively and try to receive what the art has on offer and not bring the subject matter or preconceived ideas of what they are to be looking for.

Q: How do you interpret the role of the artist in society?

A: It's a role everyone has. We know so little. In fact, every piece of art is an analogy. I want to avoid every kind of aesthetics, in order not to have obstacles in my way and not to have the problem of people thinking that this is how I see the world. This is interpretation.

Q: Would it be true to say that art comes from the unconsciousness? Do you think it is a form of therapy?

A: I don't think so. I feel miserable or happy either way. I guess I have always liked the idea of being an artist.

Q: Are you interested in success?

A: No, not at all. That is why I have lasted so long. I have ridden out my success because it was not really the purpose of my work to be successful. My work will outlive its success, be more enduring and stronger than success. I was never disappointed when I never had success, which is why I never destroyed any of my work. Many artists destroy their work not because it is bad, but because it is not successful, because other people aren't interested in it.

Q: How do you see yourself in the history of modern art?



David Sherry. **The Ravages**. 2005. DVD (8:46mins), edition of 20
Not a clue. 2006. Ink on paper, 29 x 20cm
More normal clothing. 2006. Ink on paper, 29 x 20cm
Modern girl smoking. 2006. Ink on paper, 20 x 12cm

A: I am not interested in art history, in the academics of style, or a succession of fads. Art is not about art. Art is about life, and that sums it up.

Q: And also people are trying to collapse art and life?

A: Who cares, they have always been the same.

Q: How do you create immediacy in your work?

A: By not making my mind up before going to do it. It has to be immediate if you don't know what you are doing. And you take the chance and it's all very embarrassing. Sometimes you succeed, sometimes you don't. You don't always have security.

Q: Do you plan your pieces?

A: No, I have discipline. I work everyday and I never know what I am doing. If you know something you have a responsibility. I don't think any honest artist sets out to make art. You love art. You live art. You are art. But you're just doing something. You're doing what no one can stop you from doing.

Q: When you deal with things in the world, social attitudes are connected to them, aren't they?

A: Basically artists work out of rather stupid impulses and then the work is done. After that the work is used. In terms of comment, the work probably has it, some aspect which resembles language. Publicly a work becomes not just an intention, but the way it is used. If an artist makes something, or if you make chewing gum and everybody ends up using it as glue, whoever made it is given the responsibility of making glue, even if what was really intended was chewing gum. You can't control that kind of thing. As far as beginning to make a work, one can only do it for one reason.

Q: Should an artist accept suggestions, or his environment, so easily?

A: I think that's basically a false way of thinking. Accept or reject, where's the ease or the difficulty in that? I don't put a value on a kind of thinking that puts limits on things. I prefer an artist that just does what has to be done. I would encourage everybody to do more rather than less.

Q: But what is the meaning of a picture?

A: What it means? It seems very clear what it means. I can't say it but the art makes it clear. If I don't know, then it's not working. It seems right to me, then it has a meaning, but I can't tell you what meaning. I can't be more specific than that. It works when it means something, when I don't question it anymore.

These questions and answers were taken from several interviews with artists, not from those participating in the Mother's Ruin exhibition, but from artists speaking about their practice in the 1970's. These include such luminaries as Jackson Pollock, Gerhard Richter, David Hockney, Louise Bourgeois, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Joan Mitchell. The comments do not necessarily match with any of the artists in the exhibition, and indeed there are no absolute correlations, intended or otherwise, between the two groups in terms of artistic output. The similarity that does exist, however, is the intentionality behind the process of art, or more crudely, that the reasons for making art have not changed much over the years. Just because



Margrét H. Blöndal. **Who nurtures whom.** 2005. Photograph, disks, pink sculpture (detail)

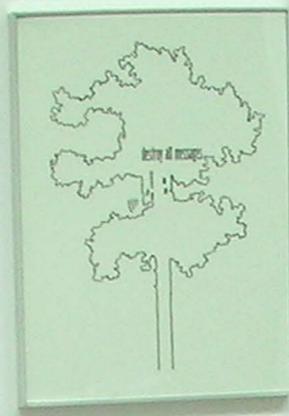
the passions of the 'modern artist' have shifted past the prefixes of 'late', 'post' and beyond does not mean that what was said is now unfamiliar or no longer true in some part.

To misquote and offer little or no context for the questions and answers mirrors the way conflicting personalities have to co-exist in any group show dynamic. Mother's Ruin was the first assembly of gallery artists in exhibition and as a diverse group of individuals, any thematic construction around the different artworks should be problematic. An exhibition of gallery artists is a challenging thing to interpret, and can rarely be seen holistically or even logically. The gallery itself has to provide some interpretative glue, not just as a brand to make meaning adhere. The exhibition subtitle – dangerous obsessions and the culture of excess – asks the audience instead to consider popular misconceptions about the excessive lifestyles and working habits of artists. But if there are myths about artistic creativity, then the artists have no one but themselves to blame. The range of subjects and subjectivities within this group of artists deny much compliance with normal behaviour, which itself is an artificial construction. There will always be identity fantasists, reclusive bricoleurs, self-obsessed jokers, bombastic agents of change, youth purloiners, tech wizards, and the psychologically tortured. We expect nothing less from art and artists. This is not so much a ruined conversation, but the beginning of a more complex one.

Alan Phelan



Nina Canell. **Lasse.** 2004 DVD 19:54 mins. (edition of 3)



Alan Phelan. **Fino's RS 2 exhaust blended-in as a branch.** 2006. Wood and metal. 194 x 60 x 25cm
Destroy all messages. 2006. Toner on paper. 50 x 70 cm