

KAMILLA TALBOT *My Scandinavia*

Essay by Valerie Cornell

Even if you have never seen a painting of Kamilla Talbot's before, you may feel, looking at the 22 works on paper and seven oil paintings in the show called "My Scandinavia," a quickening of energy and a subtle constraint of beauty the independent life of which can only mean breakthrough from what has come earlier. Whether it's possible to read the source of this newness out of the paintings is a mystery with some depth. A skillful and dogged landscape painter, Kamilla Talbot has always allowed her work, like the rocky Nordic hillsides that have sometimes been her subject, to reflect both the wild and the apparently composed. Future critics might compare her to her great-grandfather, Johannes Larsen (1867-1961), the painter of nature whose luminous stippled blue and gold seascapes and finely observed paintings of birds (as well as his workman's ethic and understated manner) endeared him to his native Denmark—though it isn't necessary to invoke Johannes Larsen to appreciate Kamilla Talbot's Nordic roots and American difference, or the precision of her stance toward the natural world. Her paintings to date—of Catskills trees, tides in and out, raw winter coastlines—feel expressively truthful, and the occasional awkward element—an overlarge shape or sulfurous color, alerting us to her intelligent eye—fails to challenge their pleasingness. We could expect Talbot—born in 1968, she's barely into mid-career—to forge a lifelong style out of just this, the intelligently, skillfully lovely.

Or not. We are in a boat, in the middle of it, with slate-gray water rising to make a high horizon and a sail, or two sails, wrung and twisting and pushing the canvas into taut abstract divisions by force of a hard sea wind that's not only implied but felt, withstood. The deck is a light maroon. Smaller triangles are formed by rigging and a negative space of sky at the center of the painting. Without any doubt the artist, invisible but as close as a ghost and whose point of view we take, has dipped her brush in seawater. There is a dark spot like an eye marking the depths just off the boat at the painting's left edge. The sensation is of shock, tilting.

This watercolor's title, *Rylen: Foresail Set*, in fact refers to the Danish boat *Rylen*, on which Kamilla Talbot sailed and painted for five days last summer at the invitation of the Johannes Larsen Museum in Kerteminde on the island of Funen. Built in 1895 for herring fishing, the small wooden *Rylen* was early on converted to an expedition boat, and in the 1920s it was Johannes Larsen who sailed on it during several summers, making hundreds of drawings that were later collected in a popular book about the Danish islands. What is now the museum was the Larsen family home, and *Rylen* nowadays takes artists through the Kattegat (the sea depicted in many of Talbot's paintings) and connecting waterways, visiting islands and encouraging conservation of the coastline that still looks much as it did in Johannes Larsen's time. Talbot, who grew up spending summers in Kerteminde, obviously belongs on this boat. At the same time, what an awkward, unpredictable, constricting home it is, and what curious and not immediately readable paintings have come out of it! Forced by circumstance, views are close up, and calculations of distance, water, sky are all ambiguous. Images repeat, with implosive differences. There is the *Rylen* series of watercolors with their defining twisted sails. The boat is also a setting for figures, mostly painted in gray tones while the details of boat and sea are in color, so that while we recognize that this is the skipper or a passenger, we aren't fully convinced; it might be a figurehead (if *Rylen* had one) or a semi-shrouded character from Norse mythology. In several of the paintings it is a bit of the curved boat edge, unobtrusive yet commanding at the lower corner, that sets the language of abstraction for the rectangle. In *Kattegat* birds lift off from water and as if embossed on the picture plane unite the painting's upper and lower halves. When there is beauty, and there certainly is, as in the Japanese-looking *Pink Surface*, the fullness of its serenity, and the ominous tangle of orange rope at the bottom right, make it beauty that knows it is new.

“My Scandinavia” is the felicitous title Kamilla Talbot has given to this show of new paintings (including scenes of Icelandic rocks and Norwegian skerries); it refers to her own artistic perspective on the region as well as the fact that what she’s seen, felt and painted is freshly of the moment: it is her Denmark, her Kattegat, her Mariager Fjord, and not that of her great-grandparents—though of course it is theirs, too, layered in and blowing through the spaces in her work. More encompassingly, and what we can intuit from immersing ourselves in the paintings, “My Scandinavia” is a kind of mental weather, whipped up for the artist out of the conundrum of the ancestral and the new, of being American and Scandinavian in competing measure—weather in the sense of energy, the exciting atmospheric action that precipitates one thing, not forever but thoroughly now, into another. Almost two decades of hard work have brought Talbot here; there is a painterly coalescence into new form—but it is the unexpectedness, the unprojectableness of what “now” looks like—that solves the mystery (riddle is a better word) of what’s happening in this bracing, generous show. Put differently, there are some places you can only get to by boat.

And what is it like, most deeply, to paint in a boat, sometimes calm, admiring the wake, sometimes captive, as if lashed to the mast? It is like painting now, in 2015 or 2016, hewing to the caring to do so, in the midst of everything changing. The paintings in Kamilla Talbot’s “My Scandinavia,” in the Trygve Lie Gallery in the Norwegian Seamen’s Church under the aegis of the American Scandinavian Society, are, out of all proportion to their specificity, a light in a global storm.

— *Valerie Cornell*