

FREDRIK VÆRSLEV

It Girl

Opening: June 5th, 5-8 pm

Exhibition period ends: July 12th

Gallery opening hours: Wednesday-Friday 12-5.30 pm, Saturday 12-4 pm

Usually I wouldn't write what I'm about to. But Fredrik told me his exhibition at Johan Berggren Gallery (his third solo show there) is an homage to his and his mom's dog, Tærtitta, who passed away last year. So I'm going to try to set this up in a way that's fitting: I (who have never owned a pet) recently came across an article on nymag.com in support of Miley Cyrus as she mourned the death of her dog, Floyd. (She'd been tweeting about it.) As the author explained, not only can the death of a pet be as traumatic as the death of a family member, but the grieving pet owner might feel a complicated sense of guilt for grieving more intensely or longer than they think is normal. The article was a response to the perceived taboo of mourning the loss of a pet publicly – just like it's essentially taboo for me to be writing about Miley Cyrus, or for a contemporary abstract painter to make a show (another show, following the 2013 group exhibition *Get Out of Town*, at Johan Berggren Gallery) about his dog.

Fredrik's mom, Anne Britt Værslev, started making outfits for Tærtitta in 2004; she continued when Fredrik asked her if he could include some of them in this show (a wedding dress, Cowboy and Indian costumes – eight outfits in all, two for each season). He and she started working on this project in 2009. And he made the five garden paintings found in the show back in 2011, by dipping Tærtitta in non-toxic paint, throwing BBQ chicken on the surface to be painted, and letting her slide around on them. (This makes me think of the paintings by Reena Spaulings where art history PhD student Michael Sanchez served as a living paintbrush à la Yves Klein.) This exhibition also includes a marble catwalk made for a dog. (It's a recreation of the spot where Fredrik would find Tærtitta sitting, waiting for him, when he'd come to spend the weekend at his mom's house, just outside Oslo.) Now it's a display for four new terrazzo paintings, one for each season. (Some of Fredrik's earlier terrazzo paintings apparently got their signature patina from lying outside in his mom's backyard for the winter.) A lot of these works were made collaboratively. They take his paintings' reference to nature ('the seasons') as a pun on fashion. And they're about Tærtitta.

Of course, all of this is a little awkward, since Johan Berggren is such a smart gallery, and since Fredrik's paintings have become quite popular recently. This is no doubt thanks to their tasteful styling (sober, sentimental, inoffensive) and the charming Romanticism of his production (he lives in rural Norway, so his paintings must be 'authentic', the result of his confrontation with nature and 'existence'). *It Girl* isn't in good taste; but then, Fredrik is well aware of that. He's both acknowledging the fact that his recent work is in fashion and admitting that he's conflicted about that. (From this point on, it only either stays in fashion or goes out of fashion.) In this exhibition, he's showing 'fashion', sure, but the antithesis of haute couture: dog fashion.

--John Beeson