

CASTLES IN THE SAND

Video and photography by Thyra Hilden

Freud once wrote that the most shocking experience for a human being was to feel that its well-known surroundings were growing alien before its very eyes.

"Das unheimliche" – the "un-homely" – signals an existential breaking point in the relationship between the I and its surroundings. An existential feeling of suspense. Thyra Hilden's universe is based on this acknowledgement of "das unheimliche" as a basic, yet often repressed, premise for the human condition.

Playgrounds bathed in the red light of a night vision camera suddenly appear as crime scenes for heinous acts. Toys lying as strange sculptures dressed in ice crystals at the water's edge. Castles of sand as grandiose monuments on an abandoned beach. Have these things just been left for the night by playful children or are they the tragic remnants of disaster? Watching Hilden's photo series "Castles in the Sand" and "Playground" is like being invited to a kaleidoscopic peep-show about a world we think that we know so well, yet which we suddenly come to doubt that we can decipher the meaning from at all. A world always about to transmute, mutate and break loose just below the surface of human reason.

Taking stands: Thyra Hilden's photographic and video work seems very "un-Danish" with its distinct lack of irony. It can be seen as a statement seeking to negate the common perception that irony is a sophisticated way of relating to one's surroundings. In Hilden's universe, irony to a far larger degree becomes nothing but a way to retract from taking firm stands and from being the subject of public criticism. Her work functions as a denial of the assumption that Danes are so quick to draw - that "pathos" necessarily rhymes with "pathetic" and that seriousness is in natural league with self-righteousness.

Also on a formal level, Hilden's work in its technical perfection elegantly detaches itself from the grainy everyday "dogma"-realism that characterized much of the Scandinavian video and photography in the 1990s. There is no mediating amateurism in Hilden's universe, no studied attempt at diminishing the distance between viewer and artist with the help of a shaky video camera or unfocused polaroid photos.

A multi-layered experience of the Real

A feeling of isolation penetrates Hilden's universe. The meeting with the world is a basic shaking and stirring of the self. Still, it is not a celebration of loneliness that is Hilden's hallmark. On the contrary, she names her works "a drive towards community" – invitations to break out from the isolation ironically induced upon us by the cultural claim that we live in a common reality. Instead we are offered a defence for a multi-layered experience of the real that leaves room for the individual's dreams and hopes. In this there is a latent cultural criticism in Hilden's works – a criticism both of an art world that denies its social responsibility, and a media reality that tyrannizes us with its claim of one truth and one truth only. In Hilden's universe the unmistakably staged photography is more honest and truthful than the photography that claims the role of neutral fly on the wall.

Witnessing the human condition

It is tempting to view Hilden's work in an art historical perspective, as her works are obviously related to many of the nature themes that run through the Romanticist period

of the late 18th and early 19th century. Romanticist thought operated with a notion of the landscape as being endowed with spirit. With a notion of nature as a reflexion of the inner dramas and existential anxiety of human life. The world as we know it is threatening and dark, and the individual, as presented in Casper David Friedrich's famous painting "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog" is fragile in the face of the violent impact of the world. He is fumbling his way as a blind man with only the light of his mind to guide him. In Hilden's universe, nature is always intruded upon – always animated, always in relation to the human mind. A sharp flash or the eerie glow of the night camera always bears witness to a human presence in the scenery. The idyllic picture of nature implodes when man sees himself unable to reach something "original" or "authentic" untainted by the human hand, a theme thoroughly explored in Hilden's work since her collaboration with Danish writer Tomas Thøfner in the book "The Synchronic" from 2000.

Isolation and community

In a more contemporary, but still related, perspective, it is interesting to note that the Finnish photographer Ehija Liisa Ahtila calls her enormous panoramic images of Finnish forest landscapes void of human life "human dramas." The same could be said about Hilden's photo series "Playground." In her obsession with the symbolic imagery of childhood – playgrounds, toys, and sand castles - we see a melancholy or maybe even nostalgic scrutiny of a child's frail scheme of things. The nostalgic atmosphere is immediately torn apart by the almost cynical registration of the scenario, though. The loss of innocence that is implicated in the use of toys as a means to "civilize" the child becomes apparent in all of its dread under a glaring flash or a video-loop that never ends. It is worth noting that "nostalgia" etymologically means "longing for home." In Hilden's works longing for a home, for a community thus meets with "das unheimliche" – the un-homely isolation from community as a basic existential fear. The interesting thing is that in Hilden's work isolation and community always appear to be interchangeable.

The desire of the eye

Voyeurism – the desire of the eye to simultaneously love and dominate its subject – is another recurrent theme which Hilden shares with some of our times' most renowned female photographers. From Sophie Calle's narcissist love stories to Cindy Sherman's visual studies of the woman as the prime object of mass cultural fetish. The feeling of the "forbidden," of the crossing of interpersonal thresholds, of intrusion as always lying below the surface of love. Hilden's universe is likewise not rid of disturbing erotic overtones of assault. Violence and eroticism as inseparable is a theme, which, especially in Hilden's videos such as the literally gun-loving piece "Mind Tricker" from 2003, and "Loaded" from 2002 exploding in a painfully beauty orgy of violence, becomes apparent. Everything is just below the surface, and the border between assault and intimacy is fragile.

Memento mori

"Castles in the Sand" – the photo series for the first time presented in its entirety on this show - presents the same schism between the loving care needed to craft sand, this fleeting material, into immaculate sculptures, and the basic violence of the elements that irrevocably tears them down. Already with the melancholy title of the works, we become aware of the resident vanitas-theme, which seems to become increasingly apparent in Hilden's works. Vanitas, meaning "vanity," is in art history a term that is normally associated with the still life paintings of the Baroque. Their pictorial meditations over peeled fruit, blown-out candles, and insect-filled half-eaten dinner plates were meant to serve the onlooker as allegories of "memento mori" – as reminders of the futility of all

human endeavours in the face of the great inevitable - death.

“Death is watching you from the wing of the butterfly”, as Danish author Inger Christensen writes in her renowned poetry cycle “Valley of the Butterflies.” Sand castles have destruction as a premise for their existence, but yet they can be seen as heroic tributes to human efforts in a violent world. Thus the allegorical element in Hilden’s work, the pointing out that all pictorial elements have multiple layers of reference, continually deconstructs the notion of photography as a narrative illusion.

Gallery Tom Christoffersen is pleased to present “Castles in the Sand” – a pictorially tranquil, yet immensely suspenseful and dramatic meditation upon the dialectical play between inner and outer, reality and fiction, subject and object, isolation and community.

Merete Jankowski