

Per Kirkeby – Natures mortes
Galerie Michael Werner, Berlin

In the mid-1970s Per Kirkeby (1938 – 2018) broke the oath he had sworn in his youth to champion the avant-garde, Action Art, Fluxus, Constructivism, and Pop Art. He instead opted to set himself new goals with oil painting. The Scandinavian found allies for his cause in Germany. Unlike almost anywhere else, painting, which most people elsewhere proclaimed dead, demonstrated its will to survive there.

Per Kirkeby drew on a major Nordic tradition. When the 42-year-old relocated to Berlin for a year in 1982 he was following in the footsteps of Edvard Munch, who almost a century earlier had shaken German painting there out of its slumbers. In Berlin, he took a number of motives from the still lifes painted in the Golden Age of the Dutch Masters as a vehicle for his breakthrough as a painter. He juxtaposed this nostalgic momentum with a contemporary one that came from his scientific background. As a trained geologist, Kirkeby had travelled to Greenland on numerous expeditions and had encountered its vast expanses, a phenomenon that eluded any eye only conditioned in Europe. This experience shaped his relationship to abstraction and figuration. It reflects the scientific stance of the 20th century observer who moves in a zone between subjectivity and objectivity. Since Cézanne, Modernism had repeatedly explored this relationship in the genre of the *Natures mortes* but soon it was split between two extreme positions, object art and non-figurative painting. It is Kirkeby who reintroduces the synthesis by transmitting the quality of a nature observer onto the viewer of his paintings. By inviting the spectator to „sense” the work in front of him, Kirkeby circumvents not only the civilized gaze but also the scientific and mystical views. The delayed evocation of the paintings’ motives, as they are gradually revealed by the abstract color structures, is breathtaking and soon became known as the “Kirkeby effect” (Peter Schjehldahl, „The Kirkeby Effect,” in: *Per Kirkeby*, exhibition catalogue, Mary Boone and Michael Werner Gallery, New York 1986).

This “Kirkeby effect” of observed observation can be found in his key painting “Fram”, on loan to Berlin from the collection of the Louisiana Museum, and in others of the *Natures mortes* he painted until 2012.

The exhibition *Per Kirkeby – Natures mortes* opens on Friday, September 13, 2024 from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. and will be on view at Galerie Michael Werner, Berlin, until November 9, 2024. On the occasion of the exhibition, a catalogue with essays by Siegfried Gohr and Fabrice Hergott will appear.