

Floating along with “20 Coastal Stations”

August 13, 2015 I was waiting at the airport of Bodø, a Norwegian coastal city north of the polar circle. I was to meet four artists from three different countries;

PICTURE 1

Bess Frimodig and Åsa Andersson from Sweden, Annu Vertaanen from Finland, and Katsutoshi Yuasa from Japan. They were here to join the project "20 Coastal Stations". A project Elisabet Alsos Strand and I, have been working on for over two years. An eighteen days' long voyage would take us along the Norwegian coast, starting in Bodø in the north, then towards Sogn og Fjordane and the island group Solund in Western Norway. Experiences of nature and culture would go hand in hand with the exploration of woodcut. We embarked on “20 Coastal Stations” to challenge ourselves and to reveal as well as trace unknown terrain and rare phenomena. "20 Coastal Stations" emerged from the international network of artists, craftsmen and theorists who work to preserve and further develop the vanishing Japanese woodcut.

PICTURE 2

"We live only for the moment, in which we admire the splendour of the moonlight, the snow the cherry blossom and the colours of the maple-leaves. We enjoy the day, warmed by wine, without allowing the poverty which stares us in the face to restore our sobriety in this drifting - like a pumpkin carried along by the current of the river - we do not allow ourselves to be discouraged for a moment. This is what is called the floating, fleeting world."

PICTURE 3

This passage is from - tales from the *Floating World of Pleasure*, written by Asai Ryoi in 1661

The Japanese woodcut artist Hiroshige (1797-1858) portrait a journey between Kyoto and Edo in the series "53 stations on the Tokaido road", inspired by this we have devised a sea trip of 20 stops along the Norwegian coast. Our cultures, that of Japan and Norway, share life by the sea as a common denominator.

In addition to drawing a picture of the trip, I reflect on how the project prompted unexpected encounters with the notions of 'the ancestral home ' and 'identity', and how the journey and the contrasts in this “floating world” we were confronted with, had impact on the work I produced for the exhibition. I recognize more and more the potential of woodcut to become a tool for contemporary, social commentary.

PICTURE 4

With the arrival of the plane carrying the artists, summer entered at last. We were in Northern Norway where the night was devoid of darkness. A landscape, magnificent and wide, unfolded beneath a never-ending dome of transparent blue-colored sky lit up by a

bright sunlight. My photos show a turquoise sea and an endless horizon and they look like travel magazine's advertisements. But - I could not 'land' in this landscape. Within myself a continuous tension rose forcing an unsettled body and soul. I wondered if it was the responsibility for all the, small organizational pieces that would need to be in place, that caused this tension?

PICTURE 5

After a week of exploring North of Norway we boarded Hurtigruten, a somewhat luxurious tourist ship

PICTURE 6

which travels along the coast of Norway to continue to the next stop. Hours slipped away while sitting in the

PICTURE 7

"Panoramic Room. The horizon slowly floating by, and occasionally, deserted stony islands broke its line.

PICTURE 8

After a while, we approached Western Norway and my home county Sogn og Fjordane. Barely perceptible, the physical presence around the ship changed. After having lived in constant light, the first raindrops alerted another landscape.

PICTURE 9

Heavy gray, formed clouds over the coastal town as the ship anchored by the docks. The dense green tinting the mountainsides promised a more humid climate. The wide landscape was replaced by enveloping mountains.

PICTURE 10

Something happened within me. That strong inner tension which I had known during the trip so far, evaporated. I was home.

The project "20 Coastal Stations" and the trip along the coast showed me how strongly I identify with the coastal landscape of Western Norway. Stronger than I thought. Solund (the island) and its nature and people makes my childhood paradise.

PICTURE 11

Dotted by islands Solund's landscape lies at the furthestmost tip of Western Norway. Steep mountains rise vertically from the sea.

PICTURE 12

All is weather torn and constructed from stone formations. It is a life between

PICTURE 13

sheep and fish in a forbidding landscape, where occasionally there is a green spot or a white wooden house.

PICTURE 14

Here my uncle Ingvald lived toiling on a coastal small hold.

To survive he had to develop an intuitive relationship with the landscape.

Japan has a long-standing tradition of intuitive learning. Through a prolonged observation of the teacher, or the landscape, one acquires new knowledge and skills without either knowing or recording.

I recall a primary school trip. We were four 10-year-olds who borrowed a rowboat. None of us could row. I placed myself strategically in the middle of the boat while the others enthusiastically grabbed hold of the oars. After many "oi" and "oooh no" and splashing we ended up in the middle of the bay. Panic replaced enthusiasm. I grabbed the oars and with steady pulls at the oars, I rowed the boat back to the pier. Knowing what to do came from having observed Uncle Ingvald all those years.

This insight gleaned from our adventure in the rowboat proved to me that I hold the Westland landscape in my bones.

In a global world I reflect upon: One can learn how to navigate in unknown terrain, but can one put down roots and transplant one's ancestral soil in an alien landscape?

PICTURE 15

October 6 2016 the exhibition "20 Coastal Stations" opened at the Sogn og Fjordane Museum of Fine Arts

PICTURE 16 PICTURE 17 PICTURE 18

There are two main approaches one can recognize in the new work developed during the project "20 Coastal Stations":

- Landscape as a tool to explore identity
- Mokuhanga print as a tool for social commentary

PICTURE 20

Prior to the arrival of the artists involved with '20 Coastal Stations' I cleared my family boathouse in Solund – on the West Coast of Norway. I found driftwood that my Uncle

PICTURE 19

Ingvald had collected living on a coastal small-hold. The driftwood was to be used as a firewood in the winter.

PICTURE 20

I brought back the driftwood weathered by seasons and seawater to my workshop. These were the traces revealing a fascinating wooden grain structure.

I decided to systematically catalogue the driftwood and in so doing, it led to a more conceptual art piece. With the title: **Old Traces in a New Era- A Timeline**

PICTURE 21

I used the rubbing technique called *Takuhon*. Thin paper is placed over moist wood pieces. With a stamp made from a fabric ball I push lightly and steadily with great care onto the paper. Gradually imprints emerge from within the wooden block, in dark and light nuances. Stone formations, lines of the horizon and a wider horizon beyond, pull together a timeline, in this moment. It is a timeline that reaches towards both the past and the present. Influenced by the water and the pressure of my hand, the paper makes an image. Eventually, it becomes a scroll that can be displayed and unrolled and then put away, for the next time.

PICTURE 22

On Hurtigruten I felt a great peace. I sat in the "panoramic room" with a view to the horizon and a *bokashi*-coloured sky. Suddenly I was challenged by contrasts in this "floating world". My computer threw news into my lap. Refugees fought against the waves at Lampedusa in the Mediterranean. This experience inspired me to inquire if a woodcut image of a landscape could become a topical social commentary.

PICTURE 23

I made an installation consisting of three small showcases and one animation. The animation is called - "Freedom? Raft? Flight?" The boxes have titles "Your own horizons", "Captured on film" and "Indigo - blue time".

In the installation, I explore the contrasts I experienced there and then. The beautiful – peace - war - flight. The animation shows one origami-crafted boat. I used woodcut to give the sheet a pattern. The paper boat gradually changes into a flat sheet of paper – a raft.

PICTURE 24

The size of the boxes is taken from a souvenir chocolate box. In two of the boxes I have used mirrors. The back is open and by holding a photo of a horizon in front, one can see the horizon as if one were at the sea. In one of the boxes, I attached a woodcut of an indigo sky.

The boxes are in some way a prototype for souvenirs. It is a portable horizon in a box- the horizon as a peep show. So you can Expand your horizon wherever you are...

PICTURE 25

Stone formations and mist - a journey through Solund

By using woodcut, I approached a familiar environment through a new analysis. Doing so I would like to arrive at a conscious understanding *why* Solund's landscape fascinates me.

I have reached new observation points in the landscape. A composition of a landscape is affected by its observation post. Changing this point brings new observations and points of view. I seek new views to develop these into abstracted expressions. Signs in the landscape can be read as nature's written language.

As a matter of fact, I still narrate my relationship with the landscape. Maybe my landscape can be opened to others?

Our digitized community provides increased availability, efficiency and flexibility for both work and privacy. Nature becomes an object through this development. Nevertheless, it is natural phenomena – take fog – that we cannot control. Dark shapes emerging in a fiery landscape may be graphic signs that can be read as omens and as reminders of nature's majestic stillness.

In the picture «Landmark» I have mounted a thin sheet to the print. On this thin sheet, I have printed details in dark tones that gives a physical deepening to the print.

PICTURE 26

Passing by, the sheet of paper shivers as a fog fading.

PICTURE 27

This series of three images in blue tones is called **«To the west», «Fjord» and «Havrand (or horizon) »**

Each print is a variation of the same section in my childhood's landscape - Solund. 1790 Xavier de Maistre wrote "Voyage autour de ma chambre". He investigated if it was possible to apply one's traveling mindset taking a trip around his bedroom. By using the method of Xavier the Maistre and the conscious shift of an observation point, I became entranced by the shapes in between the stone formations. I removed the stone formations which sculpts the landscape. By placing bits of landscapes of as remnants, dividing it into the elements, into a treasure hunt, I open a fresh synthesis of known elements.

Midwinter 2017 the floating world brought me to Oslo. I and two of the other participants in the project met at the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo. We were invited by Trine Nordkvelle, Research Resources Assistant, to look at *ukiyo-e* prints from the museum collection.

Guided past the guards we walked into a room furnished with a big table. The door was carefully locked and we were told that the bullet point pens and ink were banned in this room.

A sense of reverence descended as the first prints were laid out on the table. Free of glass and frame the images shimmered overwhelmingly in a glory of colors, lines, *bokashi karazuri* and delicate kimono patterns. We saw, amongst others, *Bijin-Ga* and *Surimono*. Fluttering by in the stream of images *one* startled me.

PICTURE 28

«Evening sun against the window lattice» (Magaki no sekishô.)

At first glance, the woodcut looks like one of the many that I associate with ukiyo-e. A woman sits on the floor in front of a wooden lattice. A broad black line edges the kimono of the woman and forms a central element in the image. Several long pins form a wreath around the head and her sculpted hair. Through this intimate meeting of eye and print the picture reveals other layers. I distinctly sense that there is a sinister undertow beneath its initial impression. The pattern in the kimono transmits unrest, several flame and spirit-like shapes spread across the fabric. The deep black bottom edge of the kimono imprisons the figure within the picture. Both kimono and hairpins seem to weigh down the figure of the woman curled on the floor. Grasping the wooden lattice with the right hand the figure is stuck in a grid. Her face is either painted white or free of make-up. More and more the figure reminds me of a caged bird with clipped wings.

The print is part of the series "Eight motifs that parody Yoshiwara round the clock" by Utigawa Kunisada. Utigawa Kunisada lived from 1786 - 1865 and is also known as Utigawa Toyokuni III. He was one of the most popular and productive *ukiyo-e* artists in 19th century Japan. In Europe, however, he was long regarded as an uninteresting representative of *ukiyo-e*. His prints were thought to be too complex, unclear and marred by an extravagant use of vulgar colors.

Yoshiwara was a famous and officially regulated brothel district in Edo (Tokyo). Poor families rarely had no other choices than selling their daughters to a brothel as maids. Sometimes they were trained in traditional Japanese arts such as the tea ceremony, calligraphy, ikebana flower arrangement, music and dance. More often, the girls ended up in the lowest rank of brothels, the so-called *ko-mise*. In these lowest-grade brothels, the girls were displayed behind a wooden lattice called *harimise*, a practice which finally vanished in 1916. The lives of the girls were brutal and short.

Confronted by the print "Evening sun against the window lattice" at the museum in Oslo unfolded the artistry of Utigawa Kunisada. I have been inspired by the beautiful light blue *bokashi* shapes in Hiroshige's woodcuts. Meeting this print I wondered if Utigawa Kunisada's image was a critical social commentary.

The project "20 Coastal Stations" brought me new tools. I applied Japanese woodcut in print and sculptural shapes, in showcases and animations. With mica, I found a new way of working with a surface, so that gray tones take on a shine. Topical social commentary,

identity and intuitive learning find their place in my creative landscape. We, the participating artists, still have contact and new ideas will arise.
So also after the exhibitions the journey continues.

Karen Helga Maurstig, 2017