

JAN VALENTIN SÆTHER

OBJEKTER



GALLERI AZUR

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... the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependant on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition – and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives: to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain.

JOSEPH CONRAD 1898

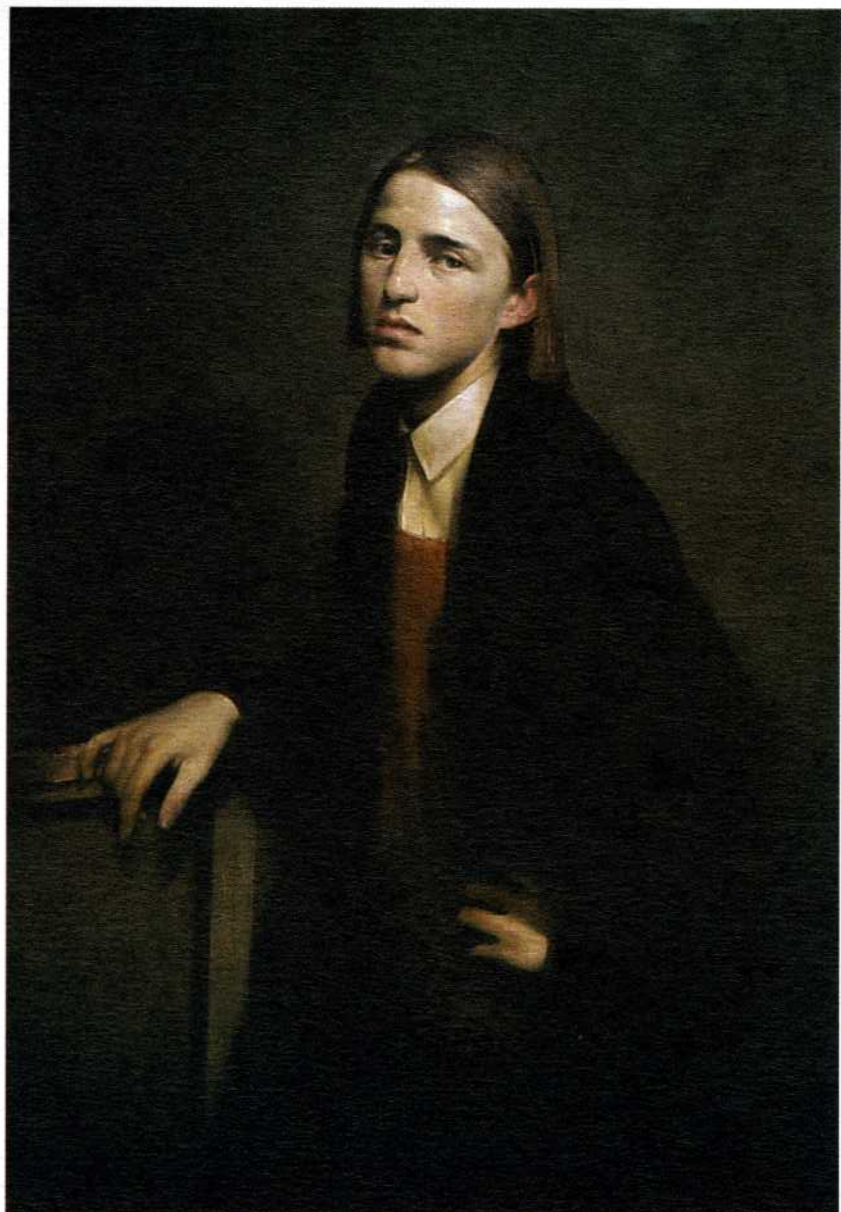
Paradoxical beauty speaks from within the paintings of Jan Valentin Sæther. Understanding how gifted Jan is at what he does, and how he is able to accomplish with such apparent ease, requires an exploration of the realm of his talent. Having gained the ability to represent landscapes, both real and imagined; to create narratives rich in allegory; to render the model on the stand. Jan uses his platform of talent as a launching point from which he suffuses his paintings with his gift for poetry, his practice of Gnosis, his incredible sensitivity as both observer and seer. He has long been respected in both Europe and in the United States as a major talent in the ever-shrinking world of significant figurative painters and teachers of representational art. Even in the 1970's and 80's, when few artists had the courage to speak for and paint the figure, he was a quiet pioneer. He created major canvases distinctly out of synchronisation with the times but acknowledged as successful statements by those critics and collectors who were uncommitted to current trends.

When Sæther left California to assume his present post in Norway, he left a climate more conducive to conceptual art, art more deconstructive, more performance/photography/personal

agenda motivated. Galleries were limiting exhibition space to raw, bold, controversial commentary, and interest in representational art was negligible. In the past two years, almost as a symptom or signal of anxiety at the close of the century, there is emerging a strong re-evaluation and respect for craftsmanship, for the evidence of skills, for art history. Most importantly, the Figure has stepped back on the stand and is being viewed with all the intellectual and emotional value which placed it in the abyss after abstraction. Humanism re-emerges and with it the fearless use of laudatory response so absent in writings about art during the past fifty years. With this new body of art, *Objekter*, Jan Valentin Sæther is assuredly in the forefront with other important painters of the figure.

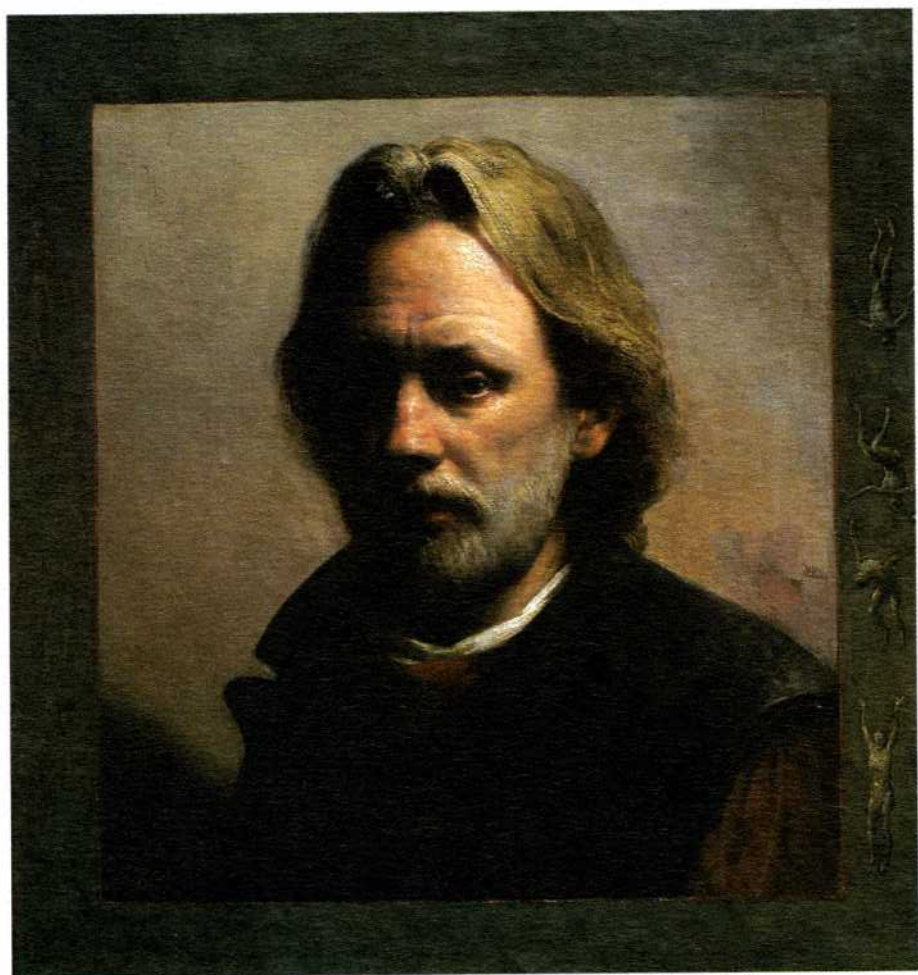
If praise for his previous work was based on his enigmatic narratives, current plaudits must now find another origin. Not that Sæther will ever completely forego his stories, allegories, or metaphors within a painting, but this current body of works depart from the need for narrative to carry a painting. Past preoccupations with boxes, static and falling, previous illusionary corridors of shadowed spaces, suggestions of visual spiritual images – all appear to have served their purpose. While other figurative painters seek a plateau of commentary where they are comfortable and can lock the viewing public into that place, Sæther is painting and presenting the figure as object – standing alone on its own merit, freed from the traditional constrictions of seeing. Perhaps his return to his native Norway is partially responsible for the subtle but sure changes in Sæther's paintings. Perhaps Sæther's own spiritual and creative journey has edited his view of the composition of his canvases.

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Whatever the etiologies may be that help us understand the paintings he is creating now, certain technical aspects responsible for the growth are subtly apparent. Sæther has altered his palette from the green/grey/blue pigments which tend to recede paintings into the background, a means of retreating or distancing the viewer, preventing emotional involvement in the subject, playing to the cerebral more than the visceral. From that past palette he has shifted toward red/grey/white/ivory, and the emotional response these warm tones convey to our senses brings the subject to the foreground, closer in relationship to us. His concern for the quality and the source of light is far more dramatic and warm. His surfaces bear new evidence of honest brushstroke and generosity.

Emphasis on the figure now predominates. Although the expressive figures feel real and show evidence of passion, they are no longer constructs of composition; the figure is now the painting. Gone are the extraneous accompanying still lifes, recreated African masks, specific attention to furniture and boxes. Sæther has been there and may even in some point of time elect to return to the operatic narrative used by other painters of the figure. But for now, for this selection of paintings, he has brought a tender focus on the humanity of his figures.

In the hushed moments in *Nattvåke* our attention is drawn to the purity of the infant's gaze. Swaddled in red bunting and a collar rendered with pleated light and shadow, the infant's eyes hold our gaze inviting us to see his supporting mother bathed in the same shaft of golden light. The shadows behind this madonna-image reveal the sleeping father, enhancing the human-

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