

## *Per Kirkeby: Paintings and Sculpture*

### **AUDIO TOUR STOP 1**

#### *Fram* (1982)

The Danish artist Per Kirkeby is universally considered a painter's painter, the most painterly artist among his peers, and a painter most admired by other artists. He has written profusely about painting in general and published numerous books on artists from the past and present. But he has stubbornly refused to speak about his own paintings. He once wrote: "I am a painter and I have painted a painting. And really, I don't want to say anything more about it. A picture is not decided by title or explanation—one has look at it."

It is good to keep these words in mind when looking at a painting such as *Fram* (1982). Like most of Kirkeby's paintings, *Fram* is filled with references to both art history and science. Much of its composition is based on *The Sea of Ice*, a well-known painting by the nineteenth-century German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, which depicts a wrecked ship on the heaped masses of polar ice. The title of the painting refers to the name of the ship used by the Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansens and translates as "forward."

Kirkeby himself participated in several polar expeditions during the time he studied geology at the university in Copenhagen. But such references form only one of the many layers that make the totality of his paintings.

### **AUDIO TOUR STOP 2**

#### *Untitled* (2009)

This monumental untitled painting is one of Kirkeby's most recent works and it is one of two paintings in the exhibition that depict horses. On his own account, Kirkeby has long avoided painting horses, perhaps because they have been such a popular subject throughout the history of art. He was inspired to paint horses by the sixteenth-century woodcuts of the German artist Hans Baldung Grien. In a conversation with our director, Dorothy Kosinski, which is published in the catalogue to the exhibition, Kirkeby explained that the woodcuts which he found in a book given to him as a birthday present by his son, provided him with a "kind of borrowed structure": "Woodcuts are very clearly defined with lines. So from them I have a starting point . . . I don't need a real horse. I need the lines that pretend to be a horse."

### **AUDTIO TOUR STOP 3**

#### Early Paintings: *Regicide at Finderup Barn* (1967)

From the late 1960s through the 1970s Kirkeby produced pictures on serially arranged square Masonite panels. Repeating motifs such as cabins, caves, and Mayan ruins transform natural

associations into more real or historical landscape paintings, as in *Dark Cave, A Picture of Yucatan*, and *Regicide at Finderup Barn*, whose title references the murder of Eric V, who was King of Denmark from 1259 to 1286. There is a short poem by Kirkeby that speaks to the continuous and unbounded connection between art and geology in his visual world: “Through science I have constructed a cave. From the cave I look out onto canvas table brushes . . .”

#### **AUDTIO TOUR STOP 4**

Blackboards: *Untitled* (1982)

All of Kirkeby's paintings seem to have one foot in abstraction and the other in figuration, with some paintings being more overtly figurative, and others more resistant to interpretation. Yet Kirkeby insists that “purely abstract picture does not exist. . . . One must always look closely.” Nowhere is this more evident than in Kirkeby's so-called Blackboards, an ongoing series of drawing-like paintings on square pieces of Masonite that have been coated with black paint. These works have a special significance for Kirkeby. It is in these works that he is most experimental. The blackboards are as much about erasure than about building layers. All painting is about adding layers upon layers. Most paintings are built of synchronous layers, where all layers strive towards the same image.

Most of Kirkeby paintings, however, are made up of non-synchronous layers. Like geological strata, each layer constitutes a new picture, and while the deeper layers may be invisible, or as in these Blackboards, literally erased, they nevertheless exert a “subliminal” effect on the visible layers.

#### **AUDTIO TOUR STOP 5**

*Inventory XX* (2002)

Sculpture has been an important part of Per Kirkeby's work throughout his career. We've included three large bronzes and a number of small bronze models in our exhibition. He has also executed larger works including simple houselike structures constructed of brick.

This massive sculpture is inscrutable. It is an amalgam of heavy structural elements—a cube or box, vertical bars somehow amalgamated with mysterious fragments suggesting timber, spines, tree stumps and feet of a crouching figure.

There is a fundamental tension between the luscious licks of the once soft plaster and the boxy geometric shape. There is a tension, too, between the implied liveliness of the application of the plaster and the stony mass of the plaster then hardened and eventually, this bronze. This is a conflict between gesture and structure. There is also a pull between “figurative elements” and background or surrounding . . . a quality that one finds in Kirkeby's paintings, as well.

## AUDIO TOUR STOP 6

### *Large Head* (1984)

Kirkeby writes extensively about the great sculptor, Auguste Rodin, in particular about the massive *Gates*. In one text he notes architectonic elements that are chopped-up and fragmented, rent by a “tectonic drama,” a sense of “great and eternal movement,” comparable to “fractures . . . what geologists read as faults.”

In another text about Rodin, Kirkeby addresses the “problem of contour.” He writes, “Where does the flesh meet the surrounding world? When does it begin to dissolve into the surroundings? . . . Can the body be limited when one really looks at it?” Kirkeby discusses the “incomprehensibility of the body as a sliding structure”; perhaps these perceptive comments elucidate in some oblique way our understanding of the mysterious forms in his impenetrable sculptures.