

Someone Told Me That I Was Very Brave...

Interview with Lisbeth Lunda

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Lisbeth Lunda with her paintings Denial and Father, ph, Irene Kukota

To coincide with the Frieze art fair, taking part in London, MA Gallery mounted *Conversation* - the debut show featuring Lisbeth Lunda's paintings in South Kensington.

When one looks at Lisbeth Lunda's works, one has the feeling of being out of this time and space, perhaps facing something reminiscent of the Medieval sacred art or Magical Realism. Lunda decidedly has her own style and speaks to the viewer in her own idiom steeped in personal experience and her own philosophy. She has developed her own system of symbols based on European and other artistic traditions. It is quite remarkable how she blends them in her art: a butterfly is a symbol of resurrection, but zebra may refer to a Norwegian NET Cancer foundation and the tragic story of Lunda's close friend. Sometimes animals may have a human head as a sign of their empathy and humanity. Each painting is a poetic labyrinth, a journey accompanied by a poem which may provide the key to understanding the work's meaning. Her works are arresting, mysterious, naïve and moving, if not tragic at times. She introduces herself as an existential artist – the one who grapples with these eternal “cursed questions”, as Dostoevsky once put it. And these are the questions of human mortality, angst, sadness, hope, love, joy, fear, broken illusions and searching for profound answers to one's dilemmas and life crises. She refers to Christian theology, psychology and philosophy, the choice between good and evil, and to the experiences that shape our humanity. At the same time she generously invites into her world and shares the treasures of her heart.

It probably will not be an exaggeration to name her art “the map of her soul”: the artist herself calls her painting practice “100 per cent therapeutic”. As a person, she is warm, as an artist she is open and candid about sharing her life story, and this is why her art evokes strong responses.

Lisbeth, what did you do before you started painting?

I graduated with qualifications of an Art Director and a graphic designer from The Danish DRB Advertising University. I had worked for 30 years in commercial advertising business as an art director and a graphic designer before I chose to switch to be an artist in 2017. It was not an easy decision, as I was in top echelon in my field but I also felt that I could not go on this way.

And at that point my husband looked at me and said: “You like painting and writing, don’t you? So, chose what you like to concentrate on and do it well, and I will support you”. And this is how my new life began.

Your paintings sometimes look like mysterious riddles one has to unravel. What are they mostly about? And why do you call yourself an existentialist artist?

Since I was a little girl, people would say I was thinking too much. I was brought up in the family of Seventh Day Adventists and religion was a significant part of my background.

I was a loner who constantly felt isolated. And one of the paintings, called *Invisible* is exactly about this: it tells about this teenage girl who is coping with shame, feels lonely and alienated. She complains of being invisible, of not being noticed. I think a lot of teenagers do that. In my case, my parents led a very busy life when I was growing up, which also intensified my feelings of being alone and abandoned.

From early on, children who were around me were not the children I went to school with. Perhaps, this is why I was spending most time outdoors, in the open. Forests, fields and beaches gave me the peace of mind I needed. I spent a lot of time with animals like horses and dogs. They were my friends! Perhaps, this explains why I often catch myself thinking that I prefer the company of animals to the society of people. Please, do not misunderstand me: I enjoy being among people but I also need to alternate communication with being on my own, between being active and introspective. My inner thoughts and conversations are the foundation of my work.

Religious communities to which you used to belong are usually very tightly knit. How did you manage to break away from their influence?

In fact, my parents did this first. I was around 13-14 years old when my parents decided to leave the community. And then they let me break out. However, for a while they were keeping up appearances, which meant a lot of lying. We needed to keep up appearances before my father’s family because they were very religious people. This situation created a split and a big conflict within me: I was brought up believing that lying is one of the biggest sins, and then we had to feign a lot. And this is one of the reasons why today people call me too honest: I cannot lie. I am really bad at it.

Eventually, in my teenage years I became averse to religion. As an Adventist, you are supposed to get baptised once you turn 16-17 years old. I refused to do that. I went through a long phase when I became an atheist and did not believe in anything. When people would ask me what I was believing in, I would reply: “the good in mankind”. And this phase lasted a long time but then I began studying various religions and philosophical systems. Nature also played a great role in my life: I spent hours in the forest with my horse and my dogs.

After I reached 45, I decided to get baptised as Christian in the church nearby (the national Church in Denmark, not Adventist). After all, I realised that religion was still a big part of my life. I went to the preacher and said to him: “I was thinking about being baptised, but we need to talk first. I do not believe in all these old dogmas. I believe in love of the Universe. I believe in something greater than us. And he said that he never had a conversation like this with an adult before but thought it was a great idea. And we had a wonderful conversation and agreed that one can call same phenomena different names but they are still the same phenomena. This pastor is one of my best friends today, but I am not an avid church-goer, though.

So, where does your inspiration comes from?

From being alone in nature or with animals. I retreat and refuel with wildlife, my closest friends and family. Even though I am enjoying being in company I feel tired afterwards.

Well, decidedly animals play a great role in your life and there is a distinct presence of animals in your work. Does it signify anything?

Yes, in *Farewell*, I painted my Boston terrier. She had a tumour which turned out to be cancerous. And the reason why the dog has a human face is that she had more personality and more empathy than the most people I knew. For me she was a friend. Of course, it is easier to love an animal than a person. When you love a dog it loves you back. To love another person one has to surrender oneself, and to me that was the hardest thing I have ever done. And this is what my painting “Surrender” is about – it expresses my love to my husband. He is the only person who made this possible.

Also, in my paintings I feature endangered species like bees or salamanders. For me it is an opportunity to draw attention to them: unfortunately, I feel there are too many *homo sapiens* in the world who are destroying the planet and the animal kingdom.

And zebra in *The Inevitable*” symbolises NET cancer (the zebra is a symbol for the NET (neuroendocrine) Cancer worldwide). I did this painting as a tribute to a very dear friend who fell victim to the disease.

Actually, you do a lot of charity work. You have been donating proceeds from the sales of your paintings to the NET Cancer Foundation Norway and the Danish Society for Nature Conservation. How did you start doing this?

I simply want to contribute, to be a good person. A gallery in Copenhagen invited me to participate in the *Fight Cancer* exhibition in 2018. The moment I received the invitation I instantly agreed to take part in it and offered my painting for the charity auction. The proceeds from the sale went to the exhibition, and to the research foundation studying this form of cancer. I donated the money in the name of my friend.

Also, environmental issues are very close to my heart: formerly, I had the freedom to travel with my husband, but I am no longer fond of it, as airplanes harm the environment. I cycle instead of driving a car. I try to recycle as much as I can, I repair instead of throwing away, I buy mostly second-hand clothes. We do not eat lots of meat, but if we do, we make sure that it is organic and free range. I hate wasting food. We are obviously concerned about the impending climate crisis.

How did you start combining poems with your paintings?

I have been always collecting words, I love words! I love their meaning; I love their melody. There is a passion in the paintings and in the poems, they relate.

I have a particular love for the English language - for example I can listen to *Harry Potter* read by Stephen Fry for hours! It sounds like music to my ears when he reads. As a collector of words, I feel inspired by them, sometimes they would strike you and set the imagination working, like the phrase "dancing in a starling sky". I think it is so beautiful. And when something strikes me, I am like a sponge, taking in every minute detail of what impresses me: colour, sound, mood.

And what is the process of painting for you?

It is quite therapeutic: my inner struggles come out through it. For example, some characters with closed eyes stand for an inner conversation and internal meditation-like dialogue. I often have inner conversations with my deceased father who committed suicide in March. The painting *Denial* is a conversation with him, which still continues.

And the paintings are more than just paintings - there is a connection between the image and the poem. I cannot paint until I have the poem first: I do not know what colour palette or mood the painting is going to have until there is a poem there. So, poetry and painting have a symbiotic relationship in my art practice. There is a piece of my soul and heart in each one of these poems, too. Often, people relate to that, recognising their own stories in my works, some even become very emotional. I had wonderful experience while dealing with people and their responses to my paintings. Someone told me that I was very brave in expressing all my pent-up emotions. I had some very rewarding conversations and was told amazing, unexpected and occasionally some very personal things. And this response, this feedback became a great motivation to me as an artist.

After your successful debut in London what happens next? Any new exhibitions and projects for us to look forward to?

Yes, definitely. On my return to Denmark I am starting a new collaboration with the popular Danish rock band Kashmir. They gave me permission to use their lyrics in my new upcoming series of paintings. Their verse is deep, existential, profound and I adore their songs. Several (up to four) paintings from that new series will be exhibited at Helligaandskirken (the Church of the Holy Spirit) in Copenhagen - one of the city's oldest and biggest churches - from 7th February 2020 onwards. I am looking very much forward to this new show!

It will be followed by an exhibition in Gallery Saphere Aude (the gallery which represents me in Denmark) opening with the performance of Kashmir, which is going to be their first reunion performance in 10 years!

I am also currently working on my book *Conversation*, featuring paintings and poetry from the eponymous series and provided with some stories as background for my works. Hopefully, I will complete the book by Christmas. Finally, I am preparing an exhibition which addresses my concern about the treatment of animals, especially by the food producing industries. I hope to

return to London with this exhibition next year. I am open to the possibilities of working with London galleries and hope that they will take interest in my projects and ideas". Meanwhile, MA Gallery that represents me in London, will always have some of my artworks available for viewing, or one can take a [virtual tour](#) of my exhibition in London.

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Shares



Irene Kukota

London-based freelance journalist and curator. I spent my childhood in Moscow and then lived in Oxford and London, which makes me constantly think about the dialogue and clash of various cultures and mentalities. This is how I consider myself both, Russian and British. I am interested in exploring how cultures can grow and develop through contact and exchange. After all, everything is interconnected in this world, even if we pretend not to notice. So, I like to discover these hidden connections in art, history and life.

Author profile









- 1. Invisible, ph. courtesy@Lisbeth Lunda
- 2. Art critic Anthony Fawcett discusses Conversations with a guest at the opening preview, ph. courtesy@Lisbeth Lunda
- 3. Jantelaw, ph. courtesy@Lisbeth Lunda
- 4. Farewell, ph. courtesy@Lisbeth Lunda
- 5. Lisbeth Lunda, ph. courtesy@Lisbeth Lunda
- 6. Vystopia #1, ph. courtesy@Lisbeth Lunda

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