

AXEL RÍOS | FUTURE SPECIES

The World in an Instant

Progress has been synonymous with speed and social good in our modern era. At a time when we are spinning too fast to even notice how fast we are going, or even recognise where we are headed, is there a potential to pull the brake? To get a sense of the direction we are going to in this multifarious network of realities, we need to get off the carousel and take a look around to assess directions, reasons, and see if we have already gone too far. The artist Axel Rios attempts to pull us and slow down the velocity of progress to unveil, through a series of works, the current predicament of man.

Rios, currently based in the west coast of Norway, has been exposed to this new reality in the pastoral landscapes of Haugalandet. The region is scarcely populated, with small towns and villages in the fjords. Sounds idyllic. Farming and fishing have been very important to the people who have inhabited the dramatic landscapes of western Norway for hundreds of years, and it has been necessary for the farmers and fishermen to develop new methods to keep up with the acceleration of society and the demands of modernity. A small farm that was sustainable some decades ago, either has to expand or disappear: what this means for the livestock and the environment is dire. In his large scale paintings of animals, Rios does not make any direct reference to the environmental issues or the changes in agriculture, but focuses instead in representing an isolated individual, in this case a cow or a group of birds. Rios's highly skilled painting technique produces a realistic and natural reproduction of an animal, but he uses painting to question the information we have about the animal and its status. Each painting is echoed on another canvas, where the animals seem to be stuck in some sort of transformative status.

Even though Norway is one of the richest countries in the world, with over 1 trillion US dollars in assets, that has not always been the case. The country –with a population of only 5 million inhabitants– has undergone huge transformations in the last few decades. Norway itself was not a sovereign nation until 1905, having been a colony of Denmark and been in a union with Sweden for over 500 years. The country had to rebuild itself as a nation, using art and folklore, amongst other things, to carve out an identity different to that of the colonisers. This process had been building up before the union of Sweden was dissolved, and was bolstered by other movements across Europe and other parts of the world, that cried out for revolution and change. It was not until the late 1960s, when the natural resources of oil and gas were discovered, that the foundation for the current social democratic state, –which Rios now calls home– was cemented. Norway went from rags to riches in an instant, at least in the grand scheme of things, and this sudden snap has led to a country that has changed so fast it was described as 'historyless' by the American artist Martha Rosler. Without history as an anchor, we are lost at sea drifting aimlessly. And even though most countries in the world are not as rich and privileged as Norway, we are all adrift. This is something Rios shows us in the collages *El mundo al instante* in the present exhibition. The maps he has used for the collages, culled from old atlases, outline national borders and sovereign territories that might not match with our current territorial markings due to changes in colonial powers and renaming of states, but most have remained due to the complexities inherent in creating a new country or territory. In Rios's work they become the canvas for mapping a virtual migration and reassembling borders, colliding nations to construct new images; a haunting skull, a memento mori, or a mapping of migration.

Even though history does exist as a concept, it is moored in books, culture, and in people themselves. That is how history gains its powers, through retelling fixed narratives in old media. The changes the world has been through in the past decades have come fast and furious, and the mono-narratives –or the fixed narratives of history– have been slipping. This means that each nation has been unmoored to a certain degree, and free to be attached to different stories. Many countries are currently experiencing an attempt to reattach themselves to this fixed narrative, often constructed over the course of centuries, after being unmoored by the multitude of narratives provided by new media. This despair for the old stories and fixed narratives can be seen in the recent elections of right wing parties to power across the world. They promise to 'Make America Great Again' and to bring that specific culture into a safe harbour, shielded from the real and metaphorical storms that are sweeping the world.

These true cultures are only 'true,' as the definitions are mostly based on fictions and an outdated mode of thinking about the world and nations. The current migration crisis, seen across the globe, accentuates this, and becomes an easy target for this fixed narrative. It is, however, just a symptom of the recent breakdown of financial markets, as in 2008-2009 and 2014, when wars and other destabilising forces made the narrative of the nation state stutter and shake. But its instability is built into the nation. It is not something new. For

example, many Norwegians feel an affinity towards the United States, which, to make it clear, is not Norway. We have perhaps adopted many stories and lifestyles from this country, changed our perception to match that of another. This has happened through exposure to media, such as radio and TV. The multitude of histories that can be attached to a culture has expanded, and I would argue that this is the 'fault' of media and culture. When Norway became sovereign in 1905, it was important for the new ruling class and creators of the country to generate a singular myth about the nation, to find its essence. This came through the construction of identity, an identity that was not natural in any way, but crafted through research and analysis. The national costume, for instance, which is used for special occasions and the celebration of the national holiday of Norway, was made up in the late 19th century. The true Norwegian language, *Nynorsk*, free of influences from English, Danish or German, is a construct, spoken by no one, but used as an official language by the state. This essentialism has been with us for centuries, and can be found in many other myths than the Norwegian one as each nation state around the world, old and new, have had the need to define their identities, which most often is part of a fictitious narrative, reduced to an 'us' versus 'them' scenario. Rios reminds us of this in his approach and usage of different materials, and in his status as an outsider, as a foreigner in Norway. This is a tricky position to navigate, but Rios uses his works of art to tell us about this, and to retell his own narrative.

What is the status of this essentialist dream today? It has probably been squashed by new media, and we are seemingly left to our own devices to structure our own narratives. Is this freedom? This new state of being is not the opposite of essentialism, but a new way of constructing identity. This happens through a fast consumption of information from a variety of media. The media sources have been expanding while we have been speeding up. As religion and nation states once ruled the land, old media was replaced by new. Religion was spread by the book and the spoken and written word, which was conquered by newspapers, which was besieged by TV and radio. Today, we can access countless groups, brands, companies and lifestyles online. We have gone from one source, the national one, or the religious one, to thousands of sources. But we are still simple creatures.

Our mental capacity might be enjoying the thrilling ride that so many sources and new media can offer us. We can salivate over conspiracy theories and narratives that are fiction, but feel oh so real. We can be delirious over the new virtual communities we can access through internet and our devices. But what is real anymore? The multitude of realities we can access with our mind is not matched by our physical bodies. Rios evokes both angles in his work, where the work suggests a change in the animals he is portraying. He is interested in suggesting that the possibilities offered by our speeding up and the delirious addiction to progress blurs our vision and lets us not see what is really going on. With progress we are able to create new creatures, and imagine new ways of not only putting our mind and senses together, but also putting bodies together in a new way... But are we just recreating the myth of Dr Frankenstein and his monster? Who is really the monster here?

The contemporary stories and challenges of Norwegian agriculture has mythological parallels beyond Frankenstein, and Rios himself has been inspired by the rich myth of Icarus. Icarus' father, Daedalus, fashioned wings out of feathers and wax for himself and his son to escape Crete. Daedalus warned his son not to fly too high or too low. We all know Icarus flew too close to the sun, and he fell into the ocean. The idea of progress within industrialised agriculture is definitely flying too close to the sun, and recently a warning was given by over 15.000 scientists (BioScience Volume 67, Issue 12 from December 2017), about man's hubris and its devastating effects on our ecosystem. The art world has also been concerned with the environmental changes, especially the theory of Anthropocene, a proposed term for a geological era noting humanity's impact on Earth. Rios is making his choices in the paintings, conveying his impression of these challenging moments. No one knows what the future holds, but it is up to us, and artists, to offer alternative ways of seeing the world, and our status as future species. Otherwise we will be extinct

An accelerated future is upon us, but we are not sure why we are spinning so fast. This solo exhibition by Axel Rios gives us a glimpse of contemporary issues pertaining to human relations to animals, agriculture, and the changing perceptions on these relationships. Is it too late to stop or are we so addicted to the velocity of change and the seeming beauty of progress that we forgot where we started?

- Geir Haraldseth