

The Life and Times of Kristina Drottning told through 'Fitting images'

It is hard to make out these images through the reflective surface of the glass case in which they are housed. But I am not as far removed from the original of this painting as these pictures and the accompanying objects are from their subject: there is nothing of the woman Kristina here. Just these images and these objects, symbols of her reign: a sword, a cloth, a jewelled box. The heartfelt, streaky brushwork reminds me of scenery in a school play; this and the carefully calligraphed labels indicating dates are reminiscent of a provincial museum where the intention might be one of historical instruction, but the result is folksy familiarity: and so the symbols of Kristina's reign begin to seem more like props to me.

Melissa Gordon made this painting in response to a piece of writing produced by Gunnhildur Hauksdottir at Gordon's invitation. Asked to write about a woman who had influenced her working practice, Hauksdottir wrote about Queen Kristina of Sweden, whose life story she became acquainted with during a visit to the museum at the Royal Palace in Stockholm. Hauksdottir tells us what she remembers of Kristina's life: Kristina's ascension to the throne aged six after her father's death when she was presented with his heart; the intellectually liberated young "Girl King" who invited Descartes to teach her, the mature queen who renounced her throne after embracing Catholicism and her spiritual independence. Kristina understood power, it seems, and in particular, how wielding it had come to oppress her.

To look at this painting is to stand before that original museum exhibit alongside Hauksdottir. Hauksdottir as a little girl, perhaps, but more likely, Hauksdottir as a teenager: in the piece which inspired this painting, she writes of how thrilling she found the Palace museum and its stories of murder and drama and glamour. You can see how Kristina's story would fascinate a young girl. Kristina is like Pippi Longstocking, another Swedish girl-hero, who could lift a horse in one hand and lived alone, off trunkfuls of pirate treasure. A story of a girl being brave and bold and feared, able to climb trees and beat the boys, before puberty has kicked in and suddenly what was once feared – invisibility, powerlessness – is almost desired.

Yes, the symbols of her reign presented here are the props which disguised Kristina the woman, transforming her into Kristina the Girl King: the most powerful symbol of transformation, the jewelled box in which she kept her father's heart. Did she ever open that box? She would have had to have done so in secret, so as not to acknowledge in public the truth of her own mortality. She would have looked at it only when she was truly alone. Queens are rarely left truly alone. But perhaps, in the early hours of the morning, when one of the many

lovers she frustrated with her elusiveness had withdrawn from her, having been dismissed from her bedchamber (I'd imagine her lovers were never invited to stay the night) only then would she roll over in bed to the nightstand and, in a puddle of candlelight, open the box up a crack and look inside to remind herself of what she'd lost and what she would become.

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