

KURT TRAMPEDACH

1943–2013

121. *Portrait III*

(*Portræt III*)

Serigraphy/oil on canvas, 66¾ x 46¾ in. (170 x 119 cm)

Signed on right side: Trampedach

PROVENANCE: Galerie Asbæk, Copenhagen 1983.

EXHIBITED: The American Scandinavian Society of New York at Privatbanken Gallery, *Selections of Contemporary Danish Art*, 1989, no. 3.

In November/December 1980, the Galerie Asbæk in Copenhagen mounted its second exhibition of Kurt Trampedach's works, this time a group of autobiographical drawings titled *Pays Basques*. Two years before this, the artist had left Denmark and isolated himself in a house on a mountainside in a desolate area of the Pyrenees close to the Spanish border. Here, during the dark hours of the night, he executed a series of carefully planned, self-revelatory examinations of the mirror image of his own face. This process was an act of purification, a kind of catharsis meant to renounce doubt and angst, an almost hateful but necessary self-recognition from which he had long drawn back.

The manner of *Portrait III* is far removed from the brutal sensitivity characterizing these drawings, but the young woman's face, with wild hair and a dark, intense stare, has been brought to the very front of the picture plane in the same way as the self-portraits from the Basque country. She is glaring at the artist and herself¹ as though she were a reflection of his soul, and we suspect that she belongs to the demons in his mind.

While the Loeb collection portrait of a woman stands as a muted echo of the drawings from the Basque Country, we cannot exclude the possibility that this pretty girl is intended to be a specific artistic identity. One's first response to this picture may be that what we see is an exploration of the borderland between kitsch and art. But looking more deeply, behind the woman's apparently flawless appearance we can see the embers of a deeper, archetypal motif similar to that often manifested in the great Norwegian painter Edvard Munch's (1863–1944) love-hate relationship with women. Munch's famous erotically charged portrayals of the dualism between prostitute and madonna might have inspired Trampedach.

The art historian Rolf Læssøe has demonstrated that in several of his self-portraits Kurt Trampedach combines his own face with Medusa's ghastly head. According to Greek myth, Medusa was a beautiful young woman famed for her long silken hair. But because she committed adultery in one of Athena's temples, the goddess punished her by changing her magnificent hair into a terrifying confusion of live snakes. Medusa was transformed into a horrific monster whose eyes turned to stone anyone who looked into them. Only by holding up a mirror to Medusa's face could the evil from her eyes be neutralized. This is what the hero Perseus did with the help of the goddess Athena, who lifted her highly polished shield up in front of the monster. By looking only at the mirrored image on Athena's shield, Perseus was able to cut off Medusa's head. The image became permanently etched on Athena's shield. From Medusa's blood arose the beautiful winged horse Pegasus—in more recent times the symbol of poetical inspiration.

Both the symbol of Medusa and the Pegasus figuration often appear in Trampedach's work. Medusa's staring eyes lost their dangerous power in the reflection, and her severed head was transformed into an instrument to keep evil at bay. Perhaps, like the drawings from the Basque country, *Portrait III* can be interpreted as yet another artistic self-portrait, this time in the shape of a woman.

In Frederiksborg Castle in Hillerød, Trampedach's native town, there is a fire screen well known in the history of Danish art decorated with a painting from 1785 titled *Lykkens Tempel (The Temple of Happiness)*, executed by the painter Nicolai Abildgaard. As the only decoration in the semicircular top of the screen, Medusa's head can be seen with a half-open mouth and a piercing look, encircled by snakes and crowned with the wings of Pegasus.

S.L.

¹Here I compare the portrait of the young girl with Trampedach's self-portraits, and it is natural to think of her/him looking at her/his own face in the mirror.