

## Working in Frida's Garden

ESSAY for the catalogue *Hvordan Lage en Hage? Frida Hansen og samtidskunsten*

By *Hanne Beate Ueland, Director, Stavanger Art Museum*

Usually, artists who become significant for the artists that succeed them are of a particular kind. Often, these "artists' artists" are the most uncompromising ones who never reach a large audience in their lifetime. Frida Hansen does not fit this bill particularly well. Not only was she very successful, both artistically and commercially, but for a long time after her death, few, if any, remembered her art. Her name was usually mentioned merely as a weaver of Gerhard Munthe's tapestries. This year, 42 years have passed since her last major exhibition in Oslo. And even though her work is represented in a few Norwegian museums, her most central pieces are found in museums of decorative arts and design and collections all across Europe. Despite the large interest in craft, textiles and feminism over the last years, few have shown interest in her art and production. Maren Dagny Juell, Liv Tandrevold Eriksen and Ingrid Toogood, however, have found a mutual interest in and inspiration from Frida Hansen's life and art.

The three artists, all born in the same year, have worked together previously, despite choosing different artistic media. Their differences in techniques and methods have made possible a comprehensive thematization of the artist Frida Hansen and her works. Hansen's rich artistic production and interesting life have inspired Juell, Tandrevold Eriksen and Toogood to develop projects of their own related to their individual practices. Unlike the three young artists, Hansen had no formal schooling besides a few painting lessons during her youth and a residency in Cologne and Paris in 1895. Several decades before women were given general suffrage she travelled the world on her own, learning weaving and dyeing techniques before embarking on weaving and exhibiting her own tapestries. A few years later, she travelled to Kristiania (Oslo) and established a weaving studio at Tullinløkka, employing and training a number of women. Their work was commissioned by the middle class, the arts and crafts society, and Gerhard Munthe. Frida Hansen quickly became a central figure in the Norwegian weaving renaissance due to her technical skills. She also developed weaving with her very own transparent technique, which she also patented in 1897. This was an artist with a clear mission and an obvious talent for business who held her own when faced with male critics and museum directors. The story of the talented innovator is also the story of a visual artist weaving the most beautiful of motifs, filled to the brim with delicate flowers and fashionable female figures, as well as biblical and mythological topics, rich in literary references. Her sense of colour was unrivalled and from her loom emerged the most exquisite details, characterised by soft lines and high precision.

In *How to Make a Garden?*, the three artists have embraced the feminist aspect, the craftsmanship and unique techniques, as well as the almost ethereal beauty of her work. Maren Dagny Juell has approached Frida Hansen from an interest in her feminist perspectives. Frida Hansen never joined the Association for Women's Rights, but she was a close friend of several of the Association's founding members, such as Kitty Kielland and Randi Blehr, and she also created the tapestry *Løvetand (Dandelion)* for the 1893 Chicago World Exhibition on commission from The Norwegian Association for Women's Rights. She also employed women. It was women who wove and learned

her techniques and methods, and when she was building her house at Bestum in 1904, she selected the female architect Lilla Hansen, who was just starting out, for the job. A few years later she would become Norway's first female architect to have her own office.

When considering Frida Hansen's legacy and examining the artists who have since taken up the art of weaving, it becomes evident that for a long time, the textile field has been dominated by women. Juell has used the feminine environment of female weavers working for Frida Hansen as her starting point and has found a masculine equivalent in certain subcultures. The fear of the end of the world is expressed by so-called survivalists in their strong need to acquire a form of elementary fundamental knowledge. Craftsmanship is central here – the choice of the best and most sustainable materials and a detailed knowledge about execution and technique. Through her immersion into the need for knowledge transfer and the diligence and accuracy of these groups, Juell focuses on the value of the handiwork itself and the social context that it is part of. For the exhibition she has created a so-called "Ghillie suit", a form of camouflage suit used by the military, but also by civilians playing hide and seek in nature. The suit is made from detailed instructions available on the Internet. In a movie presented next to the suit we join the camera as it examines a grassy landscape in a search for people in camouflage. Juell's main work in the exhibition is a movie where we encounter three men who come together to create something with their hands. The dialogue is based on instructional videos available online, videos made in order to convey knowledge about techniques and materials that survivalists all across the world rely on. Thus, Juell is partly focusing on the physical labour and solidarity central to Frida Hansen's weaving studio, while also emphasizing the seriousness and gravity which are also part of Frida Hansen's and every artist's work.

A similar interest in the work and its different stages is found in Liv Tandrevold Eriksen's works. She has taken abstract fragments of Frida Hansen's tapestries as her starting point, drawn them digitally, enlarged them and then painted the enlarged lines as fragile, wide brush strokes of thin paint on almost unprocessed canvas. The paintings are the sketches, they are the starting point of a work moving from the computer generated painted lines of the canvas, via large fragile paper sculptures to detailed drawings. In these works, Tandrevold Eriksen thematizes the artistic process and the development from idea through sketch to finished work. She shifts the order of and emphasis on sketch and finished work. The drawing is Tandrevold Eriksen's medium, and the drawing, the traditional sketch, also turns out to be the last and conclusive link in these works. With painstaking accuracy she draws shapes and figures that she has previously created on canvas and as sculpture. The floating and fragile painted paper sculptures with their artistic and almost surreally light physicality, and the rigorous felt pen drawings that are calmly, diligently and accurately produced on the paper surface represent the extremities of her project. The links to the laborious process behind the large tapestries are obvious, even if the underlying interest in the different stages of the work might be the most interesting parallel between Tandrevold Eriksen's works and Hansen's artistic activity.

Ingrid Toogood lets her art encounter Hansen's artistic legacy based on an interest in the gaps and the evocative surfaces found in her woven fabric. The gaps are linked to the particular transparent technique that Hansen developed and employed in her drapes or room partitions. These beautiful and practical pieces were part of middle class interiors and were usually adapted to the generously

high ceilings of these affluent homes. Toogood shows a series of vertical paintings mounted on free-standing frames, allowing them to be placed freely on the floor. The pictures are placed in such a way that they let the onlooker move between them, thus experiencing both the front and back of the painting inside its canvas stretcher. The experience of the gaps between the canvases is underlined by a perforated mirror plate inserted into the row of paintings. This reflective surface with its perforated motif is taken from Frida Hansen's tapestry *Løvetand (Dandelion, 1893)*. Several of the paintings are also related to specific tapestries and transparencies. They all share an interest in the floating, in the water surface and the starry sky, the dark evocative surfaces found in several of Hansen's works. The poetic title *Sølvdråper på flytende bunn (Silver Drops on Liquid Base)* suggests an admiration for Hansen's ability to employ metal thread alongside wool in order to evoke certain atmospheric effects. Toogood, on her part, explores painting techniques in order to develop the expanse of the painting and evokes charged surfaces of her own.

Before she was given the opportunity to devote herself to the art of weaving, Frida Hansen was known in her home town of Stavanger for her wonderful garden. People came from far away to see her magnificent rose beds and beautifully arranged exotic plants. With this exhibition, Juell, Tandrevold Eriksen and Toogood have allowed themselves to keep working in Hansen's garden. Their three distinctive voices have contributed to developing the views of the artist, weaver, employer and feminist Frida Hansen. The strength of this exhibition is in their varied methods, processes and artistic expressions. Together they illuminate not only the legacy of one of the finest artists from the previous century; they have also created a group of works that live on with strong artistic qualities in their own right.

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