

## Heart Of Steel by Miriam Kongstad

A heart of steel is something of a paradox. The beating heart is fleshy and warm – it aches, pines and breaks, it overflows with emotion. This outpouring has been associated with a feminine sensibility and, in its extreme, with female hysteria. By comparison, a heart made of steel and the ability to feel nothing at all is regularly seen as masculine – the beating heart made impenetrable, hard and cold. Yet steel is a material that is willing to be shaped; it is far from rigid and unfeeling. To suggest that materials possess qualities that reflect a strict gender binary is limiting. Miriam Kongstad is more interested in the ambiguities that lie in-between, as in the history of steel. Through the industrial boom of the nineteenth century, the production of steel and other materials might have brought women into the workplace, but with progress comes the danger of regression – the resurgence of conservative values after a liberal leap forward. A growing female presence highlighted the disparities between men and women, and their different treatments in the workforce, which remains visible today.

In Miriam Kongstad's exhibition at gas9gallery, the heart appears throughout the space, suspended from sculptures and scratched or emblazoned in fluorescent yellow and pink in a new series of paintings. For Kongstad, the heart is a natural and instinctive motif that speaks to the ceremonial displays of emotion we permit ourselves in public. The heart is carved into the foundation of her paintings, recognisable beneath attacks of crowbars, brushes, drills, paint and chemicals. The symbol of love and affection lingers as a reminder of the emotions that we all share.

Kongstad views the world through the lens of choreography and her movements in painting are indebted to her training in dance and performance. Having long relied upon the body, Kongstad now explores the effects of a static medium that does not change from one day to the next. Kongstad is lightly dressed as she tackles the metallic surface, but her nakedness is not erotic. Instead, it invites a tactile and intimate relationship between body and painting, which is essential to the authenticity that drives Kongstad. The body and the metal are exposed to the same fate – both are made vulnerable to the attack and scrutiny of others.

In his acclaimed television series, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), the British art historian John Berger considered this judgement of the female body and the desirous male gaze within the framework of western art history. Kongstad mirrors the languorous nudes of great masters, now rising up from their repose and striking back at the canvas. They refuse to be governed. They are beyond domination. Berger describes the nude as a uniform which cannot be discarded and the awareness of women as they are observed. Kongstad plays into this charged account of the nude and the performative nature of sexuality and gender, even in private. In much the same way, her own painterly movements are rehearsed and performed. These defiant movements inscribe the female body into the metallic surface, as if to carve out a space in which women can exist on their own terms. They appear in the roles of porn star, pin-up and bodybuilder, caught in the midst of giving birth, pleasuring themselves and peeing standing up.

In Kongstad's sculptures, raw crystals, glass and stones are welded together with steel hearts and forms that resemble armour, weapons or jewellery. They appear in equal parts dangerous and beautiful, practical and decorative. They speak to a supposed dichotomy, in which jewellery are desirable objects of beauty, like the female nude in the history of painting, and armour and weapons are masculine tools of combat and violence.

The metal surface of Kongstad's paintings is transformed by both aggressive and compassionate actions – punching, bending, scraping and caressing. The cathartic release of this immersive process might be likened to the machismo of Abstract Expressionist painting. Yet Kongstad does not work against the surface. She embraces the material and its making through the noise and dirt of the metal workshop and intermingles its energy with her own. The body remains at the centre of her work, through corporeal welded forms and barbed protrusions that might yet pierce the skin, and the heart.

Written by Alice Godwin  
Art critic and writer

## Biography

Miriam Kongstad (b. 1991) originally trained as a choreographer at Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz Berlin (HZT) and subsequently completed an MFA in Fine Arts from the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam in 2020. Kongstad has exhibited and performed internationally, most recently at Glyptoteket (DK), Bergen Kunsthall (NO), Het Hem (NL), Kunsthall Charlottenborg (DK), KØS - Museum of Art in Public Spaces (DK), Kunsthall Aarhus (DK), MMAG Foundation (JO), Fundación Botín (ES), Hamburger Bahnhof (DE), PPL (USA) and Sophiensaele (DE). In 2022 and 2023, Kongstad's works were acquired by The National Gallery of Denmark (SMK) and in October 2023, she will premiere a newly commissioned performance at The Centre Pompidou in Paris.