

Born in 1925, Gerhard Nordström has taken a clear stand for much of his career against the abuse of power and the destruction of the environment. In his art he depicts in a direct and unavoidable way social injustices and the consequences of consumer society. He made his big public breakthrough in the early 1970s with a suite of paintings entitled *Sommaren 1970* (The Summer of 1970), which are now regarded as some of the most important examples of 20th-century Swedish art.

Nordström began his artistic career at a young age. As a fourteen-year-old he became a student, at Skånska Målarskolan in Malmö. Three years later he was accepted into the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, where he studied for several separate periods of time during the years 1943 to 1949. At the student exhibitions he was noticed and appreciated by critics, who regarded him as a young and talented painter. Despite his successes with painting, it was graphics that came to play a central role for Nordström during the 1950s and '60s. The 1950s' experiments with colour and form led him to eventually regard painting as empty stylising, with too narrow a focus on geometry and abstraction. His belief that painting was an insufficient form of expression caused him to experience an artistic crisis.

Graphics became the turning point Nordström needed to progress in his artistry by offering him a freer relationship with art. Instead of focusing on the set of problems associated with the act of painting, he could concentrate on the black-and-white colour scheme and the possibilities it offered for creating form and volume. During the 1950s, his graphic works featured a Cubist style, which gradually became more and more abstract. In the 1960s, the political message became increasingly prominent in his graphic works, and the contents became more important than the form. With pictures like *Hjälten* (The Hero), *Maktspelet* (The Power Game), *Konsumentupplysning* (Consumer Information), and *Kunskapens frukt* (The Fruits of Knowledge), Nordström depicts the brutal and meaningless aspects of military ideals and war. He does so as directly and plainly as Francisco Goya did 200 years earlier in his graphic works *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (The Disasters of War).

At the end of the 1960s, at the same time as he was working as a graphic artist, Nordström also began to use painting as a way to criticise war and its futility. To do this, he created anti-militaristic “wall charts”, whose clear, pedagogical imagery resembles that of the wall charts formerly used in schools. In his paintings he linked images with texts, such as quotations from military instruction manuals, to make his message even clearer. In this way he succeeded in conveying the total absurdity and inhumanity of all forms of warfare.

Nordström's anti-militaristic message recurs even more strongly in his suite of paintings entitled *Sommaren 1970*. Moved by images from the American Life magazine's reportage on the Vietnam

War and the Song My massacre in 1968, he decided to depict such ruthless violence in a way Swedes had not previously experienced. War and its terrible consequences have never been so present to us as in these paintings, set in an environment we recognise. At the heart of the idyllic Swedish summer landscape we see mutilated bodies, dead women and children – the result of completely incomprehensible cruelty and violence.

Nordström's political and social commitment is also reflected in works that depict our environment and mankind's impact on it. Whilst these works are not as direct in their criticism as those in which he depicts war and cruelty, they take a clear stand against the environmental destruction and wastefulness that threaten our natural world. These works include a series of paintings in which he depicts one of the most crucial prerequisites for our survival – the soil.

Gerhard Nordström was born in 1925 and lives and works in Ystad. He taught at the Forum art school in Malmö from 1964 to 1987.

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