

**Anna Bjerger
Angels In Your Beer**





Front cover
Ute Geweniger
 2003, oil on board, 30x40cm.

Back cover
Lightning
 2003, oil on board, 30x40cm.

Above
R. S. Bell
 2003, 30x40cm.

Introduction

by Hannah Firth, Visual Arts Programmer, Chapter

Chapter is delighted to present 'Angels In Your Beer', a solo exhibition of paintings by Anna Bjerger. The show can be seen as representative of Bjerger's practice over the past eighteen months, focusing on her presentations of small groups of themed paintings such as her recent series of works inspired by the Guinness Book of Records.

These paintings, with their persistent groupings, are oddly familiar looking, as if they occupy some collective memory or emotional bank from which we can all draw when needed.

They are sourced from hundreds of found pictures – recognisable images of holiday snapshots, of people at parties, pictures from discarded books; family groups, proud winners, and of ordinary people doing extraordinary things. They are full of memories and traces of lives lived, and remain both distant and instantly accessible.

The awkwardly mawkish exhibition title, 'Angels In Your Beer', was also found in an unwanted book, in a charity shop. The words could be taken as throwaway and humorous, but are also despondent and downhearted. This distance between two related points is where Bjerger's work operates. She has a relentless ability to amplify the anonymity of these found images into a complex collection of paintings that manage to contain both joy and celebration alongside dejection and melancholy.

Chapter would like to thank the artist and critic Martin Herbert for his passionate and illuminating essay on Bjerger's work, and Soraya Rodriguez at MW Projects for her support towards the show. Most of all we would like to thank Anna for her ongoing enthusiasm and commitment to both the exhibition and to this publication.

'Angels In Your Beer' tours to Oriol Mwldan in Cardigan between 26 April and 23 May, and to additional venues in the UK throughout 2004.

Angels In Your Beer

Text by Martin Herbert

'We tell ourselves stories in order to live.'
– Joan Didion, *The White Album* (1979)

It's a proud moment. Caught, nervous and blinking in the klieg light of micro-celebrity, the man has stepped up to the podium to receive his honorarium and his prize, bearing under his right arm the wondrous object that made it all possible: his huge – record-breakingly huge – leek. Hours of care, worry, feeding, nurturing, studying, aren't exactly etched on his handsome and fine-boned face but we can dream them there anyway, if we choose. Uninvited, we've joined the action at a distance, just as the press photographer trips the flash.

Later, the resultant photo appeared and disappeared – like so many before and after it – when it was published in a dusty reference book, seen (but not really *seen*) by thousands; widely forgotten, only to be picked out, years, decades after, by this roving disembodied eye, Anna Bjerger. An eye less concerned about where her chosen images are found than that the ones she uses, transmutes into paintings, have some kind of electrical charge that inheres them, after a confirming delay, permanently to her memory bank. This picture – sweet, comic, sad – does; at least its iris-widening visuality does, though perhaps not its meaning. And so she passes that visuality on, painting it wet-in-wet, enhancing its solemnity and ridiculousness

simply by her choice of materials – for a painting, compared to a snapshot, is a historically serious thing and something of that gravity dogs it even now. What we're looking at – here and in pretty much all her paintings no matter what their imagistic provenance – is a moment that legitimately mattered to someone, once; plus a condensed and intense period that mattered to someone else some time later (ie Bjerger's highly specific painted redaction of the scene) combining into an aesthetic spider-web, a portal, a snare: an artefact that coerces us to tell ourselves stories about it in order to live; to uncover what are the master narratives we habitually bring to bear on the unknown.

Bjerger's a connoisseur of the lingering quality of images; of the aftertaste, if you like (she herself has compared her chosen scenes to pervasive scents). She consumes photographs, old and recent, personal and found – from family snapshots, to films, to a book she found in a Swedish junk shop entitled *129 Swedes* – the latter inspiring a series of portraits in 2002 – seeking captivating fault lines, inexplicable awkwardness and destabilising emotional echoes, and monitoring the fade-rate of the psychic imprints they leave upon her. She puts pictures on probation, a pragmatic approach for a painter: if there are already enough, too many, images in the world, and you work with visual material (something not all painters seem to remember, sadly), then by all means test the potency of

what you work with. Now, the nerve to arbitrate the world's extant image-hoard is a given if one chooses such a fragile profession in the first place; less certain is that the painter will have the ability to convey what she glimpsed via the mechanics of her medium. Analysing Bjerger's work purely in terms of its iconography – discussing it, in other words, as if it merely carried over the plaintive qualities of the snapshot – isn't apt since her work is medium-specific. It's about what the alchemical process of painting can do to our reception of an image that already had some kind of potential. It's about how the haloing of paint's slips, dribbles and generalised ambiguities can push it into another register.

“...so deftly does her work oscillate between raw materiality and figuration that one imagines what it would feel like to be made of the same stuff as the painting: to be that provisional and loosely outlined...”

Looking at some of Bjerger's works, for instance those in her 2002 series of *White Paintings* that feature snow-strewn or light-bleached images – including views of deserted caravans and houses glimpsed from a defining distance – one doesn't instinctively compensate for the watery, deceptively offhand paint strokes by trying to resolve the image into what it would be if it were photographic. Rather, so deftly does her work oscillate between raw materiality and figuration (and make this seem like a normal and balanced state of affairs) that one imagines what it would feel like to be made of the same stuff as the painting: to be that provisional and loosely outlined, so that one could go there. Not just into the past – although there's a nostalgic tenor to the *White Paintings* in particular – but into the fluent parallel dimension of the painterly. (In this regard it seems decisive that Bjerger creates her images in one fell swoop after a process of consideration, an all-or-nothing whirl of activity reminiscent of traditional Japanese painters' assaying paper with an

ink brush after an endlessly poised period of considering the next stroke. It's vaguely related, also, to action painting, yet couldn't have less to do with asserting the artist's own personality, being entirely in the services of conveying an integrity of response and of image that generously creates a psychological proscenium space for the viewer's mental tourism, speculations and fantasies.)

“It's about what the alchemical process of painting can do to our reception of an image that already had some kind of potential...”

Yet one painting alone couldn't do this to you; it takes the three-dimensional, highly articulated experience that viewing a number of Bjerger's images from the same series can engender; and these paintings are, no question, designed to be seen in groups. For such is her way of emphasising particular aspects from a naturally heterogenous flux of imagery, and of imposing some kind of reasonable order on her deliquescence of pictures. The *White Paintings* – whose other images range from full-frontal shots of birthday cakes to badly framed views of gambolling pets, to comical mini-essays on 1970s fashion – are full of bell-like tones redolent of childhood's purity and imminent (now-past) loss; a cluster of images from 2003, several of them originating in an antique manual of photographic techniques, organises itself around briefly defining moments – a man being fired out of a cannon, the word 'Bang' flaring up in joyous fireworks against inky blackness, a surfer riding a wave that's shot through and made goldenly transparent by the light of a setting sun – that seem to recede into the past while maintaining some flickering glory, a glory that the painting aims to provide. Thematics, anyway, that allow one to parse what might otherwise be a bewilderingly heterogenous spread of images which, and not necessarily on the level of subject matter, happened to send synapses sparking, neurons forming, in Bjerger's brain. On occasion this is extended by deep focus, as when Bjerger created multiple paintings, on successive days, based on one image of a man wearing clown makeup. Similar but different and ranging in tone from

benign to menacing, these works added up – in theory – to a layered meditation on the vicissitudes of mediation; what came across more strongly, though, was a sense of ineffable strangeness that seemed both to echo and magnify the sense of oddity Bjerger must have perceived in the original image.

“Which aspect seems ultimately to prevail, transitory mortal success or eternal cosmic meaninglessness, depends on how you tell yourself stories and whether they usually have happy endings.”

Consider that series one aspect of a cosmology built through steady production; a quiet and many-chambered vessel. The chambers end up having defining moods, albeit moods occasionally shaken by a deliberate, complacency-disrupting dissonance such as the landscapes inserted into her series of new works – paintings of which our aforementioned image of a prize-winning leek cultivator is one – pulled from an old volume of the *Guinness Book of Records*. What comes across most strongly from this series, the unifying principle, is a sense of small triumph vibrating in a field of vast indifference. *Guinness Book* winners are marvellous and mundane at the same time: yes, some pub genius had to be better than anyone else at balancing more stacked copper coins on one larger coin resting on its side; someone had to be the world’s longest whistler (or loudest whistler, or more tuneless, or whatever it was that this man with fingers clapped to his mouth before a swirling sky, like a comical version of Munch’s *The Scream*, happened to be fêted for). Which aspect seems ultimately to prevail, transitory mortal success or eternal cosmic meaninglessness, depends on how you tell yourself stories and whether they usually have happy endings. This is no small thing, in the context of a life lived according to perception of reality, and it’s a useful thing to know about oneself.

Yet any such extrapolation of Bjerger’s recent works is based on prior knowledge of sources: not a guaranteed luxury, nor even necessarily much of an advantage. The *Guinness Book* series drops a few strong hints as to what it’s about – there’s a gymnast with arms raised in celebratory fashion, for instance, and a man with strikingly long fingernails – yet it is also a series of windows on unknowable but immediately absorbable faces, alien life choices, and ciphers whose immediate pasts and futures seem accessible, guessable to us because of the very mobility of Bjerger’s paint – they seem to be sliding straight out of their last moments into their next via this one, which we just happened to come along and catch. The punctum that originally drew Bjerger’s attention to the image in question may have been entirely different – one recent painting was, she says, begun because she wanted to capture a particular coat’s texture – yet it’s the willed animism of paint that makes her paintings come alive.

“...it’s only partly possible to explain why an image that’s not realistic in a photographic sense can be more alive than one that is...”

And this is at the heart of a lasting mystery of making and of looking that rumbles within Bjerger’s work, this little miracle – a created entity that seems to have an interior existence of its own – that you can’t anticipate but can merely try and put yourself in the zone to capture. As a painter, that kind of living, breathing density of affect is what you strive for; as a viewer, you know it when you see it but you can’t explain it – it won’t break down into formulae and, on a more prosaic level, it’s only partly possible to explain why an image that’s not realistic in a photographic sense can be more alive than one that is, and why one that trails a dusty photographic spectre may feel realer still. We’re currently wired so that painting which does this, which comes across like a pale stranger in a bar who asks us to guess his or her life story and ends up telling us our own, feels true no matter what it depicts. And the only proof that Bjerger understands it any better than we do is that she’s able to do it over and again.



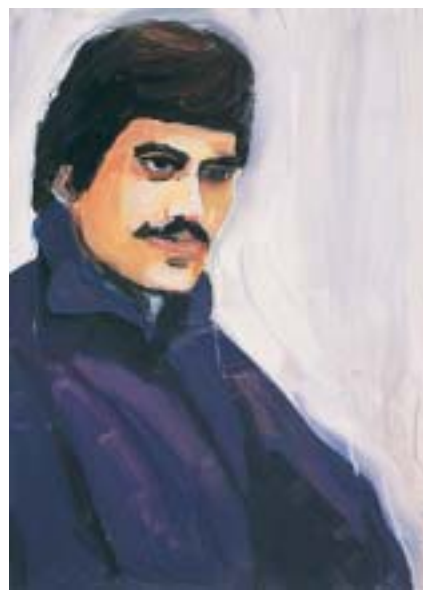
Top right
Mrs Madge Colenso
2003, oil on board, 30x40cm.



Left
Romesh Sharma
2003, 30x40cm.

Bottom left
Mark Spitz
2003, oil on board, 30x40cm.

Bottom right
Georgia Sebrantke
2003, oil on board, 30x40cm.



Left
Christmas Tree
2003, 30x40cm.

Top right
George Ancil
2003, oil on board, 30x40cm.

Above
175 Coins
2003, oil on board, 30x40cm.



Opposing page

Bather

2003, oil on board, 30x40cm.

Below

Beauty Queen

2003, oil on board, 40x30cm.





Above
White Paintings
 Installation at MW Projects, 2002.

Right
White Painting #21
 Oil on board, 40x26cm, 2002.



Top
White Painting #24
 Oil on board, 40x26cm, 2002.

Left
White Painting #43
 Oil on board, 36x29cm, 2002.

Right
White Painting #27
 Oil on board, 36x29cm, 2002.

Anna Bjerger

Biography

Born in Sweden, lives and works in London.

Education

1999-2001 Royal College of Art, London
MA Painting

1994-1997 Central St Martins
School of Art and Design, London
BA (Hons) Fine Art

Solo Exhibitions

2004 'Angels In Your Beer',
Chapter, Cardiff, UK. Touring to Oriol
Mwldan, Cardigan and other venues
in the UK (tbc)

2002 'White Paintings'
MW Projects, London, UK

1998 Lithuanian Artist Association,
Vilnius, Lithuania

Group Exhibitions

2003 'The Rocca Pistola Collection',
The New Inn Yard, London, UK

'Draw to be Alive',
Hales Gallery, London, UK

'Selected Paintings',
MW Projects, London, UK

2002 'Immediate Gesture',
Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York, USA

'Love', curated by David Risley
at 14 Wharf Rd, London, UK

'Neon Shop',
London, UK

'Giardino',
Museo d'Arte Contemporaneo,
Sassuolo, Italy

'Galerie RM Art', Essen, Germany

2000 'Lost in Space',
Farg Fabriken, Stockholm, Sweden

'Ouvre d'etre', Temple Gallery, Rome, Italy

'Palace', Lock Up Gallery, London, UK

'Homage to the Budokan',
Foyles Gallery, London, UK

1999 Guest Artist at the British School
in Rome, Rome, Italy

'ALDRIDGE BJERGER JOFFE',
Equilibri Precari, Rome, Italy

Anna Bjerger is represented by MW Projects, London
www.mwprojects.net

Angels In Your Beer

Credits

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