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The exhibition *North by New York: New Nordic Art* opened at Scandinavia House in April of 2011. A focused international loan exhibition that explored important trends and issues in contemporary Nordic art, the exhibition was the second in a series of programs celebrating the centennial of the American-Scandinavian Foundation.

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Organized by ASF and selected by renowned curator and critic Robert Storr, with independent scholar and curator Francesca Pietropaolo, the exhibition encompassed video, performance, and installation art, as well as photography, painting, and drawing, and offered a concise and engaging glimpse of many of the principal themes and approaches shared by Nordic artists.

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Presented on the anniversary of ASF's inaugural, historic exhibition of work by such canonical masters of Nordic art as Edvard Munch, Carl Larsson, and Anders Zorn, the exhibition highlighted how the Nordic countries — and what it means to be Scandinavian — have changed over the past 100 years, while continuing to foster some of the most compelling and original artists.

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With fifteen artists from each of the Nordic countries — Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden — including eight female artists and seven male artists, the works on view exemplified the extraordinary diversity of media, content, and artistic vision informing art within the Nordic region.

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Several of the works on view reflected the long-standing reverence for untamed nature found within Nordic art. One such work was a 2009 painting by artist Per Kirkeby, known as one of the “old masters” of Danish contemporary art, whose interests in geology and nature deeply influenced many of his artistic expressions.

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A boldly painted canvas of forest green and inky blacks, the painting typified many of Kirkeby's works at that time while also recalling the moody landscapes of Edvard Munch.

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Norwegian artist Marte Aas also explored the Nordic landscape in her 2008 book *Torhovtoppen*, comprised with photographs of an overgrown park in Oselo, a once-beloved urban oasis that was later purchased and fenced off by developers.

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Presented in a format similar to that of lifestyle magazines and real-estate brochures, and published in a soft-format book that visitors were invited to leaf through, the book thereby implicated viewers to the transactional nature in which plots are subjected.

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Multidisciplinary Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson frequently draws upon historical and cultural references in his performance works, with characteristic themes of irony and pathos.

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For his 2006 performance work *Scandinavian Pain*, Kjartansson brought a somewhat tongue-in-cheek take to the stereotype of angst-ridden Nordic artists living in rural isolation, by performing organ music in an abandoned rural barn alone for several days.

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The Nordic region's ancient and intimate link to the sea was also reprised and updated in Danish artist Henrik Lund Jørgenson's video *Friends He Lost at Sea*. A scene of sailors on a stormy beach, pulling their boat to safety as they anxiously gazing back out to sea, the work is closely based on the popular 19<sup>th</sup> century nautical paintings of Danish artist Michael Ancher.

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In contrast to the earlier paintings, Jørgenson's work used men of various races and ethnicities, referencing the Nordic region's more increasingly multicultural character while reminding of its traditions of tolerance and hospitality.

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Another longstanding tradition in Nordic painting, domestic interiors and scenes of everyday life also figure prominently into contemporary Nordic art, such as in the works of Swedish artist Gunnel Wåhlstrand, whose meticulous and hyper-realistic ink-wash drawings are based on old family photos.

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In her 2004 work *The Desk*, a uniform-clad young boy dutifully studies at a Swedish Modern desk, conveying a preternatural stillness as well as a careful order that suggests underlying tension and discord.

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A similar sense of mystery and unquiet stillness informs many of the works of Swedish artist Karin Mamma Andersson, such as her 2010 painting *Who is Sleeping on My Pillow*, in which a young man sprawls face-down amid bedclothes and comic books.

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In the figurative paintings of Swedish artist Sara-Vide Ericson, tension and quiet suspense suggest a more overly sinister mood, such as in her 2010 painting *Liar VII*, in which a hooded figure straddles and appears to strangle a young woman as she stares defiantly at the viewer.

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Finnish photographer Marja Viitahuhta's 2003 video *99 Years of My Life* confronts timeless issues of identity and the role of self-portraiture in art with disarming originality and humor, through a fictional biography depicted from life to death based on the lives of four women of different ages.

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Allusions to the nature of time, memory, and cultural history are often present in the work of Swedish multi-media artist Cecilia Edefalk. The exhibition featured two very different works by the artist, both of which pay homage to avant-garde Swedish writer August Strindberg.

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In her video installation *Histories for the Future*, short cryptic sentences quickly flash by in an imagined conversation with Strindberg from beyond the grave, while her 2008 tempera-on-linen painting *Ande Auguste* visualizes him in ethereal form.

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Several other works in the exhibition explored themes of social injustice and political commentary. Collaborative artists Ólafur Ólafsson and Libia Castro often bring a cross-cultural and socio-critical approach to their works, which encompass a wide variety of media, genres, and disciplines, as in their 2009 video *Lobbyists*, which presents footage of lobbyists at work in and around European Parliament through a satirical documentary form.

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Danish-Israeli artist Tal R's painting *People from Clock* references photographs taken by 19<sup>th</sup>-century Danish-American photojournalist Jacob Riis, who captured the once-notorious section of New York City known as "Bandit's Roost" in a series that exposed the grim realities of mass migration to America.

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In contrast to the black-and-white images of the ominous neighborhood, Tal R renders the scene in vivid primary colors and flattened shapes, reminiscent of a child's coloring book.

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Finnish photographer Saana Wang's 2008 series *Hujjalou*, named after a working-class neighborhood in Beijing, featured female figures posed in bleak and dated apartment interiors, wearing painted masks evocative of Beijing Opera performers, highlighting the tension between tradition and the contemporary with a poignant and surreal effect.

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Norwegian-born artist Gardar Eide Einarsson, who lives in New York and Tokyo, is known for politically charged works in a variety of formats. Created for this exhibition, an 8x8-foot banner rendered the word "anger" in Japanese characters.

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Perhaps the most original expression of Scandinavian creativity was presented in a 2010 video work by Finland's Mieskuoro Huutajat, or Screaming Men's Choir. Wearing signature black ties from rubber ties, this male choral group directed by Petri Sirviö shouts, rather than sings, their musical lyrics.

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In *Sorry Speech*, a performance presented on three monitors, the choir satirizes the rhetoric of Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 speech apologizing for the country's treatment of its aboriginal people.

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As curator Robert Storr said of the exhibition, "Our aim in *North by New York* has been to focus on artists and works of merit and distinction that also reveal the multiplicity and complexity of content and form that characterize contemporary Nordic art. Indeed, the proliferation of new art by Scandinavian artists in recent years highlights the fact that the Nordic countries today are as pluralistic as anyplace else in the world."

