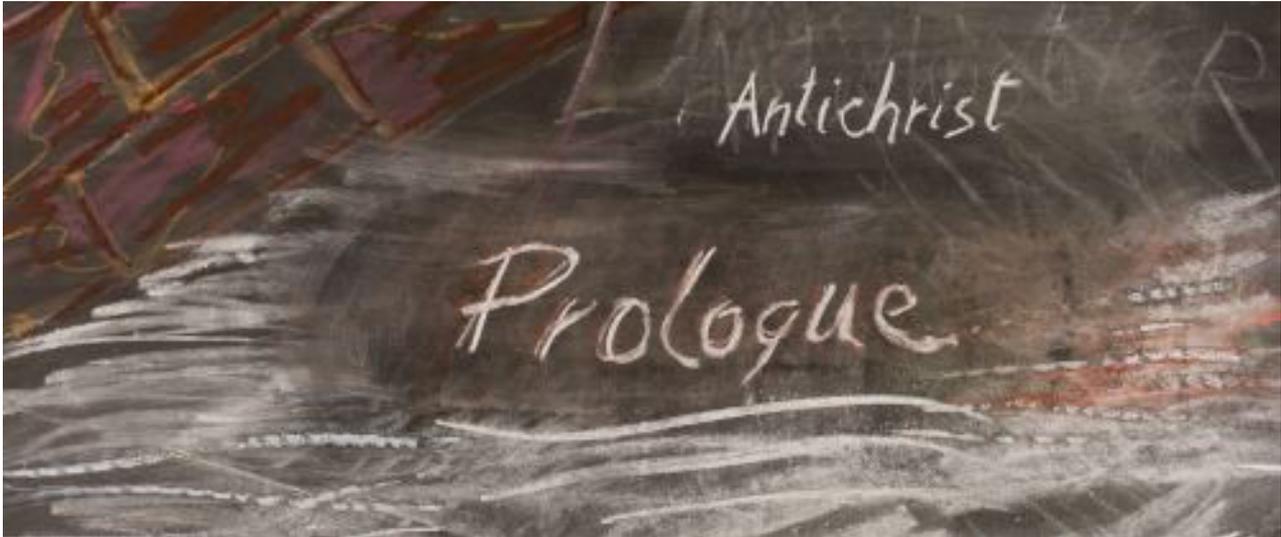


Artist Per Kirkeby discusses painting, critics and 'Antichrist'



In his native Denmark, Per Kirkeby is regarded as something of a national treasure, an artist of exceptional talent whose intense and moody work is said to embody the spirit of the country.

For those of us in the U.S., he remains a somewhat obscure art-world figure, familiar mostly to curators, critics and Scandinavian connoisseurs.

Still, you've seen his work if you've seen the Lars von Trier films «Breaking the Waves,» «Dancer in the Dark» or the new «Antichrist.» Kirkeby created art for all three of these cinematic assaults, lending his monumental creative vision to Von Trier's unforgiving world.

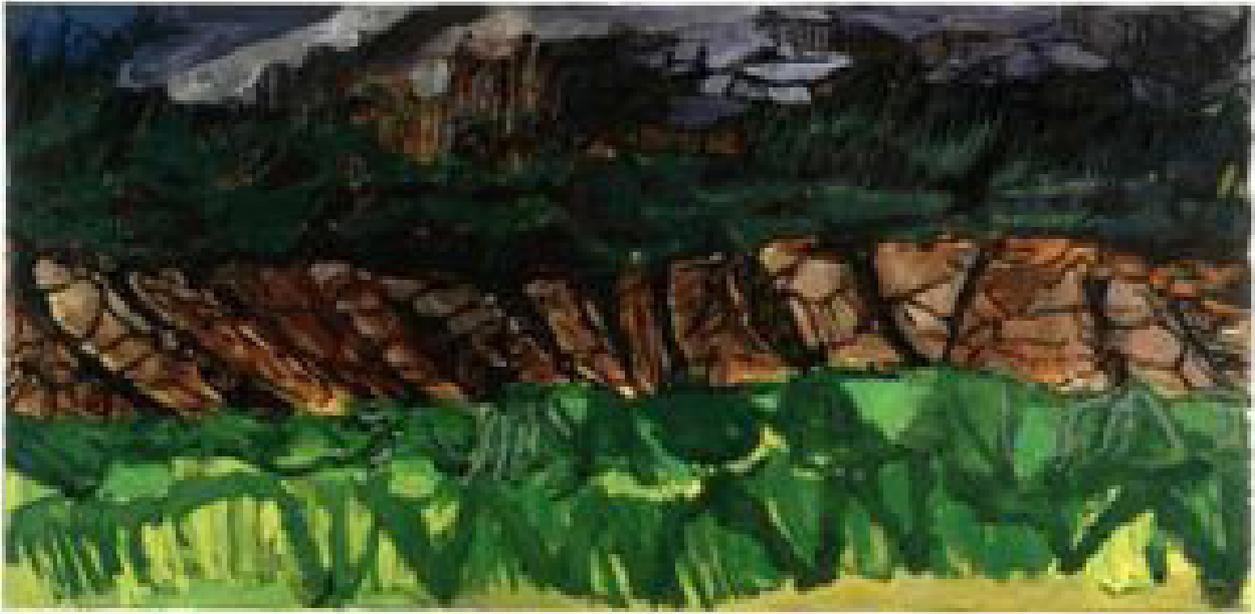
Kirkeby For «Antichrist,» which opens in the U.S. this week, Kirkeby created the designs for the title cards that divide the film into chapters. The designs suggest the scrawls of a psychologically disturbed mind, perhaps belonging to either of the two main characters, a husband and wife violently coming apart at the seams played by Willem Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg.

This summer, the Tate Modern in London honored Kirkeby with a retrospective featuring paintings, works on paper, sculpture and more from his nearly 40-year career. The retrospective is now running at the Museum Kunst Palast in Dusseldorf, Germany, through January.

So who is Per Kirkeby? The artist, who was born in 1938 and lives in the Copenhagen area, agreed to an interview with The Times via fax (though his responses eventually arrived via e-mail). L.A. Louver, his main gallery on the West Coast, agreed to coordinate the communication...

Kirkeby2 A geologist by training, Kirkeby likes to depict geological formations in his paintings -- forests, rocks, landscapes -- though it's often difficult to say exactly what they are. His art seems to straddle the border between abstract expressionism and impressionism.

Speaking about his current retrospective, the artist said, «The most surprising observation for me is how consistent my work has been. ... I don't know if this is good or bad, certainly not a special virtue, but this is the way it is. In a way I have been an old-fashioned artist right from the beginning. ... I have never adopted to fashion, and this has certainly not helped my career.»



Kirkeby has had at least two exhibitions in Southern California, at L.A. Louver in Venice in 1997 and 2005. During the first exhibition, a reviewer for The Times wrote that his paintings and sculptures «evoke geological processes whose time spans and scales are so far beyond human scale that they're almost inconceivable.»

On the subject of cinema, Kirkeby said he and Von Trier, a fellow Dane, are «kind of friends,» adding that he values their collaborations over the years.

«Me being so much older [than Von Trier] makes a lot of joking and teasing a great part of the conversation,» the artist said. «For me it is play. Not that I am not serious, but I feel absolutely free. But I always see my work as serving the movie and not as a work of art in its own right. But I use the experience that I have gained from my work as a painter.»

Kirkeby was once married to Vibeke Windeløv, who has served as a producer on a number of Von Trier's films.

An interdisciplinary artist, Kirkeby has written books, designed sets and even directed films. «I have always been an outsider,» he said. «But now it seems it might not have been so bad. I also always thought that an artist should not be easy to 'catch,' to 'put in a box.'»

On the subject of art critics, Kirkeby said, «If I get a review, I read it but I don't care. Only if it is very aggressive and insulting I like it. In a way it is a sign of still being alive. And a real harsh review forces you to define your own values. To test them.»

He recalled a conversation he had with the New York City Ballet's Peter Martins while working as a set and costume designer for the company. «I said to him: If we do this right, we will get bad reviews. And we did, but what we created is still alive.»

-- David Ng