



BRIGITTE SORENSEN:

Absent without Leave

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I check my email one last time before heading out for my morning interview with the local artist Brigette Sorensen, to find a desperate message from her at the top of my inbox. She has just arrived back in Newtown after almost a year's absence in Norway and realizes that she needs more time to prepare her studio, which was winterized during her absence: "I went in yesterday for the first time, and there's a dead bird in the middle of the floor," she explains. "I didn't realize that returning after a year away would be so overwhelming. A lot of mental manipulation and adjusting,...then physical evidence like the studio. ...It's a dead zone. Perhaps you want the gritty edge. ...I didn't think about this from my comfortable homestead in Norway. Please call me right away."

When I arrive for the rescheduled interview later the same day, I walk into an artist's studio that looks as though it has been prepared by the team at *House Beautiful*. Fresh blue hydrangeas bloom on a shabby- chic table, classical music plays, natural light floods in through double French doors, and the converted white barn somehow manages to exude both classic elegance and rustic idiosyncrasy—the perfect reflection of Brigette Sorensen herself. A brief look around the artist's studio reveals a mannequin draped in furs, a wagon wheel, a wind vane, dried dragonflies, a collection of feathers, a stuffed goose, and a life-sized pig.

Brigette sweeps into the room, impeccably put together in a chic, yet earthy, summer dress and designer shoes, and greets me warmly, like an old friend. We have been communicating via email for weeks while she has been preparing to leave Norway to summer in Newtown. I learn that her mother, detecting a tomboy in her at an early age, recommended that Brigette always wear a dress to keep in touch with her femininity. While posing for photographs, she comments on her strong, Norwegian farmer's hands. She notes that her own art, like traditional Norwegian art, is characterized by a rugged masculinity. Yet Brigette is a rare beauty who has a background in film and modeling. (She even turned down working with a younger Mel Gibson on *The Man Without a Face*.) It seems no coincidence she was named after Brigitte Bardot.

Brigette's mother, also an artist, was born in Norway; she migrated to the United States with her family and settled in New Jersey. Brigette's husband, Herlof, is also a Norwegian native. But despite this abundance of Norwegian heritage, what prompts a Newtowner to pack up and leave her home for ten months a year to live in her

mother's vintage homestead, without modern-day conveniences, on an isolated island off the coast of Norway, through some of the world's harshest winters?

During a Christmas visit to Norway two years ago, Herlof's family urged them to consider relocating permanently to Norway. Reluctant at first, Brigette was persuaded by her five children, who range in age from seven to eighteen, to accept the adventure, at least on a trial basis: "I thought if I don't do it now...as you get older you start to become set. It was a little bit scary—taking all the kids to a new country, a new language. It was a big, giant step for me. It sounded exciting, and I knew it was going to be a great experience for the children."

Things became more complicated when it became apparent that Herlof would not be able to join them as originally planned, due to unforeseen business commitments: "Living apart as a married couple is not what it's cracked up to be," recounts Brigette. "It's an odd kind of living. I have a big room to work in on an island with a bridge that looks identical to the one Munch



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painted. The island is called Jomfruholmen, which means Virgin Island. It certainly fits me, since my husband is hardly ever here!"

During the depths of winter, when all the summer visitors return to the mainland, Brigitte and her children are the only residents left on the island: "There is no one to help shovel snow—this is an adventure all my very own." The children attend an English-language International School forty minutes away. Although Brigitte is of Norwegian heritage, she does not speak the language: "This year I am considering sending my two youngest children to Norwegian schools to help them learn the language, make Norwegian friends, and fit better into the culture."

Before this recent Norwegian adventure, Brigitte lived in Newtown with her husband and children for almost twenty years. Although both she and Herlof were raised by the sea, they were drawn to Newtown from lower Fairfield County when looking for land and space. Brigitte dreamed of raising a family in a farmlike setting where she could cultivate a vegetable garden and raise sheep (and perhaps even a pig), as her Norwegian grandmother did before her. Speak to anyone involved

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in the arts in Newtown, and they will describe Brigitte as "a force of nature."

She spent ten years fiercely advocating for the establishment of the Newtown Cultural Arts Commission. Highly involved in the planning of Newtown's tercentennial celebration, Brigitte contributed to the design of the memorial now gracing the public space in front of the Edmond Town Hall. She also designed the covers for Justin Scott's Newbury mysteries, set in a fictional version of Newtown. With roots deep in the arts and cultural community of Newtown, how difficult was it to relocate to a place as different as Norway?

"There are parts of me that are not satisfied here," Brigitte admits. "On the island I sense my forefathers that lived there before me, that stared at the same island I do. Generations later I am there looking at that same island. After about six months there, I suddenly felt that the island was speaking back to me, saying, 'You know, I was here when your ancestors first looked at me.'"

Brigitte seems to take on a different identity when living in Norway; she even uses a different name, Gigi: "I have fully nurtured myself—being alone. That really has been a gift to me as an artist. Being married, but being able to do what I'm doing—it's living out an artist's dream to nurture your inspirations. On the island there is so much quiet and tranquility; that creates a lot of mental space to work. There is not a lot of clutter in my head. There is time to slow down and really appreciate the smaller details. And there is something about the Norwegian short winter days and long summer days that nurtures something within me."

Yet the title of Brigitte's first international art installation, to be exhibited in Arendal, Norway, this year, reflects some ambiguity about her sense of place and home. The installation is entitled *AWOL—Absent Without Leave*. As she explains: "My first installation was called *Writings on the Wall*. It was inspired both by my family life, where I wrote reminders on the wall for my children, and also by the phenomenon of Facebook, where people began communicating with each other by writing on a wall. The title of this installation also contains a reference to *a wall* in the similar sound created when you pronounce *AWOL*. But more importantly, this project is called *AWOL* because I left this area during the period of time that this body of work was created."

Although the art works will be created and exhibited entirely in Norway, essential elements come directly from Newtown. The three-dimensional installation begins with a foundation wall made entirely from over one hundred aluminum plates that were originally used to print the *Newtown Bee*. Brigitte explains: "I use components, such as these plates, that are clearly marked 'Newtown' to serve as my canvas in a multilayered fabric of creative metaphors. The ink left on the plates serves as a material as important as the information on them. I hand-select plates that I match up to the printed newspaper. I then manipulate the paper into a sculptural form or pin an art object onto the aluminum plate that I duplicate as a 3D sculptural piece."

There is another detailed and layered work of art that Brigitte is eager to show me. She has brought it with her from Norway, a stunningly detailed regional Norwegian costume, called a bunad, that is custom-made for each individual according to her regional heritage.

Another component of the installation is the fleece of a sheep that Brigitte raised on her property in Newtown. (One can only imagine how difficult it was to get *that* through customs!) Not only did she raise the sheep, but she also hand-processed the fibers. The fleece is used in a relief of a central female figure who expresses the feminine divine in Brigitte's work.

Brigitte knew from an early age that she did not want to limit herself to two-dimensional art: "I remember being four years old and creating mixed-media paintings of ice skaters on a pond using pastels, paint, and sparkly sprinkles. I have never been completely satisfied working within just a flat medium. It's part of the visual stimulation I need."

It is not only Brigitte's installation work that is multidimensional and layered. There is another detailed and layered work of art that Brigitte is eager to show me. She brought it with her from Norway, a stunningly detailed regional Norwegian costume, called a bunad, which is custom-made for each individual according to her regional heritage. It takes over twenty minutes for Brigitte to dress in the multiple layers and attach each item of jewelry. Every item is symbolic, and much of it originates in either Christianity or Norse mythology. The most prominent piece is a gold brooch called a seljord. Surrounded by small gold cups, it is pinned to the blouse of the traditional costume so that the cups tilt upward to catch the golden tears that fell from a Norse goddess.

It is a strange juxtaposition to see this particular Norwegian goddess in full national dress posing outside a quintessentially New England barn in Newtown, Connecticut. And yet the image seems to perfectly represent the two spiritual homes that continue to influence and form the life and art of Brigitte Sorensen. •

For more information about the artist, including how to commission or purchase artworks, contact the artist at bridgettesorensen@gmail.com.