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Helene Schjerfbeck and the Darkness in her Paintings: From *The Door* to *Three Pears on a Plate*

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In 1884 Helene Schjerfbeck painted *The Door*, the intensely black and definitely closed door in the Chapelle de Trémalo, half a kilometre up the valley from the fishing village of Pont-Aven, in Brittany.¹ In this painting streams of light press their way through the tiny gaps around the door, and at the bottom of it, a strong yellow-orange streak appears in an otherwise seemingly grey space. There are no people to be seen. It is a '*valeur*' painting. Schjerfbeck had learned the technique from her first teacher in Paris in 1880, Léon Bonnat. In 1883 she went to Pont-Aven, staying at the Hôtel des Voyageurs until May 1884. It would be two years before Paul Gauguin discovered this village in 1886. He stayed in Pension Gloanec, which became the focal point for the Pont-Aven School.

What is blackness? It is often described as the absence of colour, a lack of pigment. It is the colour of the unknown. Black is your dark friend who conceals you and protects you from all the dangers lurking in the forest. Black is the illuminating companion of all colours, so often used by artists. Did Schjerfbeck here use intensive black tones to depict life's contrasts, or was she simply exploring the genre of *valeur* painting?

Schjerfbeck was not unaffected by Symbolism. She had read Charles Baudelaire, and one of her teachers was the Symbolist artist Puvis de Chavannes. Perhaps *The Door* is a metaphor for a self-portrait of loneliness. At the time she was painting it, Schjerfbeck was 22 years old, in love and engaged. Perhaps she dreamed of marriage – in those days wedding dresses were traditionally black – but was at the same time fearful of what it might bring.

Many artists, such as Goya, and even the Impressionists Renoir and Rouault, as well as post-war artists such as Bacon, are known for their use of the colour black in achieving powerful effects. Schjerfbeck's name can be added to the list of painters who emphasised black, albeit in a more calm way than, say, Bacon used it.

The Door is not a genre painting in the usual sense of the word. It is an interior, but can also be seen as a still life – it exudes the stillness and emptiness of *nature morte*. There are many kinds of still-life paintings: those that simply reproduce a bit of reality and those that attempt to do more. Schjerfbeck preferred to do more.

In the early 1880s, Schjerfbeck viewed nature and her surroundings with a figure-less eye – she wanted to be alone with the motif, and so these paintings are unpeopled. She depicted nature in the form of still life and *The Door* followed that spirit. It is a kind of monologue that everyone can take in and listen to, as opposed to the dialogues prompted in her portraits.² Was that also how she felt, when in her eighties, she painted *Three Pears on a Plate* (1945)? A painting of wonder at the process of nature; she saw the beauty in the darkness, developing a deeper blackish green tone in one of the pears, as in a *vanitas* motif. She was closing the life of hers, still figure-less.

¹ Helene Schjerfbeck. Ateneum. Helsinki, 1992 and 2012.

² Sariola, Helmiriitta. 'Nature Morte' in Helene Schjerfbeck. Ateneum. Helsinki 1992, 83.