

Wall texts, *Almost There*. Maria Friberg

Entrance hall, introduction

Almost There. Maria Friberg

16 September 2023 – 3 March 2024

The Thiel Gallery has invited the artist Maria Friberg, one of Sweden's most internationally successful artists, to a dialogue between her practice and the Gallery's collection. Friberg has chosen works from the collection created by Ernest and Signe Thiel around the previous turn of the century and mirrors them in a selection of her own photographs and video works.

Almost There shows the gap between past and present. We think we understand history, and yet we don't. So much has changed, but a lot is the same. In this interaction, Maria Friberg and the collection take turns: her art offers new perspectives on the works of the Thiel Gallery, but also gives us a deeper understanding of the themes in her own artistic practice.

In a collection dominated by male artists, it is vital to redirect our vision, as Maria Friberg does. In her art, men often assume traditionally female poses; passive, vulnerable, lost, and pleasing to the eye. The assumption that male and female are opposites is challenged.

Nature is another link between Maria Friberg and the Thiel Gallery. The building contains many paintings of atmospheric landscapes, where water is a prominent element, one that has also fascinated Friberg in her explorations of simple dichotomies such as nature/culture.

The ability to portray men in alternative ways, beyond power, control and self-confidence, strikes an interesting note in the Gallery's history. The ambivalence that Maria Friberg identifies in the traditional male role was also characteristic of the banker and investor Ernest Thiel, one of Sweden's richest men in the early 1900s. Thiel was reluctant to shoulder the prevailing bourgeois conventions. He longed for liberation and intellectual inspiration, wasn't content with being just a banker but also wanted to write poetry and collect art.

Almost There taps into this tentative, unstable, fluid state, where things are in flux before almost reaching the destination.

Room 1

Maria Friberg

Throughout her practice, Maria Friberg (b. 1966) has focused on men and male conventions. Her staged scenes present men who are challenged by unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations. Sometimes, we find them in nature – in forests, deserts or rapids, or in settings such as swimming pools or scrap heaps. They often wear the official protective gear, a suit, but to little or no avail. On the contrary. These symbols of power simply emphasise their helplessness. In the video work *Matador* (2017), projected in the next room, a shirt floats off alone, and further along in the series *Handed* (2022), it is joined by a myriad of suitcases.

In nature, the men in suits are even more incongruous, and they seem to deal with this by merging with it and almost being neutralised. This state is captured in the series *Still Lives* (2003-2007), where the title suggests passivity. One work shows a man sitting and leaning against a tree, as if he were part of the root system; in another, a young man lies perfectly still on the shore of a dark lake. The references to John Bauer's famous illustration for the story of Tuvstarr and the classical myth of Narcissus are obvious.

In recent years, Maria Friberg has taken a deeper interest in nature in the Anthropocene, when nature is threatened by mankind rather than the other way round. Friberg's compelling images of youths in virgin forests or children on a mound of plastic toys look both back and ahead. Her choice of works from the Thiel collection in this room is influenced by her commitment to environmentalism, especially the fight for reindeer herding and Sami culture through her activism against mining in Gállok in Jokkmokk.

Room 3

Ernest Thiel

The discomfort and vulnerability that the men in Maria Friberg's works express were also characteristic of the banker Ernest Thiel. He detested the bourgeois lifestyle that his first marriage and working in the banking sector entailed and longed constantly to get away. His love for his second wife, Signe Maria, helped him to break free from the shackles of convention, Thiel's interests turned from money and inventions to art and philosophy. Together, the couple created the Thiel Gallery, a sanctuary for art and artists. This made Ernest an enigmatic character, as he himself explains in his memoirs: "I was something extremely astonishing and dangerous in my day: a thinking banker."

Ernest Thiel saw himself as a man of action rather than words: a description that is more in line with the traditional male genius – active and impervious. He found his role as a successful banker to be uncomfortably one-dimensional, as his tense face in Edvard Munch's unfinished portrait seems to suggest. A similar feeling is conveyed by Maria Friberg's man in a suit in the diptych *Confront Me Back* (1997), squeezed into the front seat of a car next to the gear shift. Was the suit too tight and the work too onerous? And what happened to the man at the junkyard in the adjacent work?

The Thiel couple's art collection is a cornucopia of male artists, portraits of men and male-coded motifs. Perhaps this testifies to the power of convention: imprisoned in the male role, Ernest Thiel sanctioned what he opposed. On the other hand, the collection has few portraits of the male ruling elite; instead, we find numerous unglamorous and searching self-portraits and friend portraits of artists and writers, as Maria Friberg's selection demonstrates.

Room 5

Almost There

The men in Maria Friberg's art remind us of the power of social rules, and how hard it is to break free. Destabilising the habitual opens up new perspectives and possible interpretations. In the series *Alongside Us* (2007), young men dressed in white lie spread out in defoliated willows here at Djurgården. Are they resting, roosting, or are they scattered among the branches? The same uncertainty is caused by the video *Calmation* (2012/2013): what is happening to the man in the rapids, is he being washed away, or is he riding the waves? For Friberg, it is not a question of either or, but of both.

This duality is also reflected in the works that Maria Friberg has selected from the Thiel collection. Alongside the portraits, she has focused on certain kinds of nature scenes, whose aesthetics and moods are as significant as the actual motif. New meanings are uncovered when Eugène Jansson's city view in the previous room is juxtaposed with the suited men floating in intensely blue water in the photo series *Almost There* (2000). Or when Gustaf Fjaestad's snowy landscape is placed next to *Blown Out* (1999), where an older man almost disappears in the frothy rapids. These works both challenge and acknowledge one another.

Almost There also shows how important art history is to Maria Friberg. In the permanent exhibition on the next floor, the dialogue between *Somewhere Else* (1998) and Vilhelm Hammershøi's *Five Portraits* (1901) is not just a visual bridge between the works but also a tribute to one of Friberg's most seminal influences. In the frozen moments of inexorable peace, we also sense a volatile state. There is a nerve here that intimates to us that change is still possible.

Quotes on the walls

"Jag har varit en sökare utan att finna, en försökare utan att fullborda."/

"I have been a searcher, and never found, have tried but never completed."

Ernest Thiel, 1946

"Inbillning är det att mannen står över kvinnan. Men vi män inbillar ju oss så gärna både ett och annat."/

"It is conceited to think that man is superior to woman. But then, we men do tend to be rather conceited."

Ernest Thiel, 1946