



Michael Kvium

The Danish visual artist Michael Kvium (b. 1955) was born and raised in Horsens, Denmark. He began his artistic career as an illustrator for *Horsens Folkeblad*, where he worked for six years. He later studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen from 1979 to 1985 and achieved his artistic breakthrough in the mid-1980s. Throughout his career, Michael Kvium has produced countless paintings and exhibited at museums and galleries both in Denmark and internationally. He is also known for his collaboration with the performance group *Værst*, which included fellow artists Sonny Tronborg, Ingunn Jørgstad, and Christian Lemmerz. Several of his earlier works are rooted in these artistic projects, which encompassed performance art and film.

Throughout Michael Kvium's oeuvre, one finds a strong commitment to the human figure as a subject, particularly through depictions of the grotesque body. His works are instantly recognizable—painterly beautiful, challenging, and unsettling all at once. His paintings, drawings, watercolors, and graphic works often emerge from a surreal and abject universe. Over the course of his artistic career, Kvium has drawn inspiration from some of art history's great masters, including Caravaggio (1571–1610), Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), Rembrandt (1606–1669), and Francisco Goya (1746–1828).

In Michael Kvium's artistic production from the 1980s to the present day, one can observe a highly personal visual language characterized by a continuous exploration of absurd and taboo subjects—though never without Kvium's distinctive sense of humor and morbidity. His imagery invites viewers into the darker, more primitive corners of the human psyche. Audiences also frequently encounter a peculiar and macabre cast of characters featuring androgynous and mutated beings. Kvium employs a recurring iconographic symbolism that includes the circle, the stage, the curtain, the egg, the lemon, the sausage, bandages, brain matter, and more.

Michael Kvium is renowned for confronting his audience with precisely those aspects of life that we would rather turn away from and suppress. His work embodies a kind of transgressive aesthetic, expressed through accessible motifs and a realistic visual language. His art revolves around the fundamental conditions of human existence—the experience of being alive, in both its positive and negative dimensions. Thematically, his work often draws on oppositions such as the repulsive and the alluring, order and chaos, reality and fantasy, and life and death.

Michael Kvium is one of the central artists represented by Horsens Art Museum. In the summer of 2017, the museum

The Act, 1992

The Heirloom Paintings (Arvtagerbilleder) was an exhibition created by Michael Kvium in 1992. Building on his work with the Chorós paintings, Kvium explored the question: "What is the most important thing we, as human beings, inherit or learn from history?" In his search for an answer, a series of fundamental images emerged:

"These are images that can be passed on. The images I consider most important to convey must be found beyond angry outbursts or cheerful messages; they should be questions rather than answers. Why?"

In *The Act*, a naked man wearing a modern wristwatch sits in a strange, crooked, grey room. The watch appears both alien and familiar at the same time, linking the scene to our own world and reality. A mirror hangs on the wall, yet it does not truly reflect.

With his back turned to the viewer, the man pours a glass of wine into another glass. The wine transforms into water.

Like a modern-day Jesus, he does not turn water into wine, but wine into water.

Four medallions are attached to the frame, each depicting a fetus—the ultimate image of the seed of life. Yet the umbilical cord is connected not to a life-giving source, but to itself. The germ of life is thus condemned to consume itself.

Life and death. Great themes. In principle, they are banalized, but only in order to reach simplicity; for it is from simplicity that the great questions can arise. From generalization, we are inclined to develop simplification.



The act, 1992

Oli on canvas

189,5 x 165,0 cm

Gift november 28.1992 from Tagarno / by Eli & Benedicte Tømmergaard, Horsens

God's Devious Trick, 1991

God's Devious Trick (Guds Krigslist) was part of the exhibition Chorós (Chorus) at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen in 1991. In addition to this work, the exhibition included three other paintings of the same format, as well as sixty smaller works displayed together as a single piece entitled Academy. The title Chorós refers to the commenting chorus of ancient Greek tragedy.

In the monumental work God's Devious Trick, Michael Kvium returns to literary figurative painting. We encounter ten naked, bald women walking through a desolate landscape toward the viewer. They leap from skull to skull. Resting on their shoulders are their offspring—infants—each carrying a silver platter laden with fresh fruit.

In God's Devious Trick, we find ourselves in an indefinable world that can best be understood as a nightmare vision of our future—a future that may become reality if humanity does not pause and reassess its relationship with the world's resources. The central motif is enclosed by a painted frame that evokes the image of the human brain.

The frame is black, but in each of the four corners something resembling brain matter protrudes in reddish hues. In conjunction with the fresh fruit, these forms may suggest that all hope is not yet lost. We are accustomed to seeing ourselves at the top of the "planetary pyramid," as rulers of nature, almost as divine beings. In God's Devious Trick, Michael Kvium turns this notion completely upside down—and the consequences are catastrophic.



Guds Krigslist, 1991
Oli on canvas
275 x 400 cm
Bought June 12th 2003 with support

The Conqueror, 2024

The Conqueror is a monumental painting created as a paraphrase of Caspar David Friedrich's Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1817).

Where Friedrich's work captures a Romantic longing and fascination with the grandeur of nature, Michael Kvium offers a critical reflection on humanity's role as an intervening force in—or conqueror of—the natural world. While Friedrich's figure stands atop a mountain peak, Kvium has placed his male protagonist on a mound of waste, set against Friedrich's sublime landscape backdrop.

Kvium's depiction of the man presents a classic image of a well-fed individual who has taken full advantage of life's privileges, perhaps without considering the major challenges facing the world around him.

At the heart of the painting lies the relationship between humanity and nature, as well as the growing problem of human-made pollution and its consequences for the planet. It is an intensely relevant theme that finds powerful visual expression in the work.

In this painting, Michael Kvium maintains a critical perspective on contemporary society and on the way we treat the natural environment of which we are both a part and upon which we depend.

Connections can be drawn back to the 1980s, when environmental issues were already present in Kvium's work. For example, his Patent Paintings (Patentbilleder) from 1987 addressed the problem of recycling, while in the 1990s he presented dystopian visions of a bleak future in God's Devious Trick (Guds Krigslist, 1991), warning of what might happen if humanity failed to change its behavior.

Central to Kvium's artistic practice has been the human desire to play God—to dominate and control the world—and the consequences that follow from such ambitions. The necessary changes in human behavior have not been sufficient, and for this reason Kvium once again turns his attention, through painting, to these pressing societal issues.



The Conqueror. 2024

Oli on canvas

220,5 x 275 cm

Bought february 17 th 2025with support from Ny Carlsbergfondet

Future Me, 1993-1994

A man and a child, both dressed in what resembles the clown costume of Charles Rivel, though adapted in color to match the dark yet clearly defined interior space. The man and child are inseparably connected, as the man's left arm is fused with the child's arm. In his right hand, the man holds a human skull. Both figures wear the distinctive hat characteristic of Michael Kvium's imagery, marked by a yellow stripe down the center.

The room is framed by two vertical grey panels, and at the center of each panel are three yellow lemons arranged in a formation reminiscent of the traditional symbol used to indicate blindness—three black dots.

Several familiar symbols stand out in this painting. The skull is a memento mori motif—a reminder of mortality. The lemons, within Christian iconography, symbolize life and fidelity, while their number, three, carries clear references to the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit.

In *Future Me*, death is presented as an inevitable companion. Yet there is also an awareness that life continues through the child, until the child, in turn, comes to inherit the understanding that life has an end.



Future Me, 1993-94

Oli on canvas

230,5 x 230,0 cm

Gift october 29 th 2009 from Statens Kunstfond