

Caspar David Friedrich by Johannes Grave: review

Martin Herbert applauds Johannes Grave's thoughtful and visually sumptuous assessment of the German painter Caspar David Friedrich.

★★★★★



On the Sailing Boat by Caspar David Friedrich

By Martin Herbert

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The image most readily associated with Caspar David Friedrich is that of a figure standing in misty mountainous wilds, turned away from us – in critical parlance, a Rückenfigur. Which is apt, because 172 years after his death, the German Romantic painter remains one of the most unknowable of all artists, and interpretations have come and gone: the Nazis, most notoriously, read him as espousing German nationalism through his soaring, sublime landscapes.

Not only is there disagreement as to what Friedrich's images, at once serene and twitchy, mean in religious or political terms; as Johannes Grave writes at the outset of this sumptuous, immense, illustration-bedecked monograph, "there are also opposing views as to whether fixed meanings are conveyed by his paintings" at all.

Not surprisingly. You can gaze protractedly at the paired-by-Friedrich paintings *Monk by the Sea* (1808-10) and *Abbey in the Oakwood* (1809-10) with, respectively, a lone figure gazing upon lapping black waters and a mute ruin among gnarled trees, without extracting a comprehensible scenario. For the author, though, who characteristically devotes a lengthy, punctilious chapter to this coupling, that is by design.

Within the book's detailed retelling of Friedrich's life – studies and aesthetic breakthroughs in Copenhagen and Dresden, working for the Weimar court, interactions with Goethe, misery-inducing financial reversals – Grave manages to limn him as at once a raptly devotional artist and a proto-modernist for whom medium and content were indivisible.

As far back as Friedrich's school calligraphy exercises, which give blooming decorative emphasis to the “wrong” parts of phrases, we are presented with a reflexive interest in the act of looking, one that only deepens. We are shown how Friedrich's landscapes subtly revise illusionistic space and complexly confound the viewer's sense of where they would be standing in the scene: the traditional window becomes a wall. “Never forget that you're looking at a picture” is purportedly Friedrich's message.

This is the stuff of 20th and 21st-century art, yet Friedrich got there two centuries earlier via religion. In a lovely bit of microscopic detective work, Grave examines an 1802 chalk drawing of an old lady with a Bible, wherein viewers must contort themselves to read what she's reading. It turns out to be John 20: “Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.” If you are close enough to read that, the rest of the drawing becomes an abstraction of thick, hatched lines. For Grave, Friedrich spent his life making images that mistrusted the power of images to reveal the ineffable.

“The viewer has to understand that God's presence cannot simply be pictured in an altarpiece,” Grave writes. Nor is the meaning of the cross – see Friedrich's lonely mountaintop crucifixes, at once symbolic and matter-of-fact – inherent in its simple form. The artist's most radical block on the transparency of looking, though, comes when he places a proxy “viewer” in the landscape, in his iconic back-facing figures.

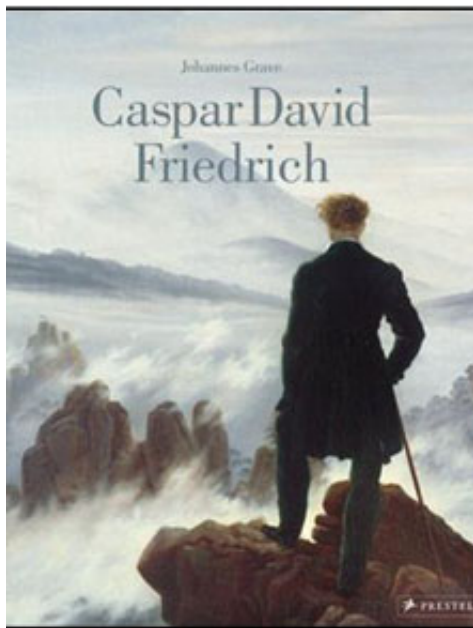
A naive reading of this technique would see it as an act of identification: we imagine ourselves as, say, the enraptured figure at dawn in *Woman in Front of the Setting (or Rising) Sun* (c1818). Grave would have it as someone getting in the way, an impediment, and a reminder that what we look at and how we look are “the outcome of a very particular standpoint and moment, and that all seeing is dependent on conditions that even the seeing individual is unaware of”.

Criticism, too, is tied to its moment and one might argue that Grave is simply seeing Friedrich through modernism-educated eyes. Yet a virtue of his text is that it situates the artist in a religious/philosophical context that justifies his convolutions. Kant, in his contemporaneous *Critique of Judgment* (1790), was writing that “the sublime must not be shown in the products of art”, and Friedrich’s art more largely reflects Protestant wariness vis-à-vis images. The effect is to make Friedrich seem more modern and our own moment less so.

The above, of course, is for that assumedly small percentage of people who actually read what’s written in coffee-table books. Without diminishing the writer’s synthetic achievement, though, this book is primarily a visual thing.

And visually it is superlative: a journey from prodigious teenage sketches to hugely atmospheric coastal views whose blackening skies flip between suggesting commonplace storms and the end of the world, replayed via illustrations that are expansive, lusciously printed and immersive.

In order to understand the limits of seeing as they pertain to believing, Friedrich apparently knew, one must first look. If not in the world’s museums, this gorgeous artefact is the place to do it.



Caspar David Friedrich

by Johannes Grave

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