

**Formulating a Home**

*On the Art of Kari Elisabeth Haug*

By Kjetil Røed, Art Critic and Author

**Exhibition:** *Home – The Land of Silence / Roots and Reflection*

**Artist:** Kari Elisabeth Haug

**Venue:** Ski Kunstforening

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# Formulating a Home

*Kjetil Røed on Kari Elisabeth Haug's Art*

## How Do We Belong?

Can we know when we've come home? Can we describe it, capture it in words? It's common to think of home as something fixed—a place we “belong” to by default, because we were born there, grew up there, or perhaps have family and memories tied to it. To some extent, and in some ways, that's true. Kari Elisabeth Haug gives form to this kind of belonging in the three paintings titled *Good Days*, where square-seeking lines on the canvas circle around a memory—perhaps something entirely ordinary, like laundry hung out to dry or a sheet of paper fluttering in the wind. Or in the work *The Milk Platform*, which perhaps points to a place where one played as a child, or hid away in one's childhood world when adults came too close.

At the same time, these works do not present moments from the past as conclusive anchors of homeliness, but rather as points of reference for further reverie around home, childhood, and belonging. Because it's not as if we were children once, and then grew up and left that version of ourselves behind. All versions of ourselves come with us into the present, and as a subtext to who we have become, they surface again—or demand our attention. These earlier editions of ourselves are always in dialogue with the layers of our identity. Maybe they have something to tell us? Maybe they want to remind us not to forget playfulness, which so often disappears as we become adults. Perhaps belonging is found in the space between our various selves?

Elisabeth Haug certainly doesn't forget—this element of playfulness is precisely what characterizes the style of her works. The exploratory lines and strokes recall the fearlessness of a child and their ability to think more flexibly than our adult selves often can. In many of her pieces, playfulness touches both earth and air—heaviness and lightness—as in *Little Bird over the Field I, II, III*. In these works, the line might be a stalk of grain, a basic figure of nourishment, rooted in the field, in what sprouts and takes hold—but the movement of the lines can't be separated from what rises and swirls in the air either. Like the little bird referred to in the title, the line sometimes curls up to become it—or breaks away like loose stalks circling in gusts of wind.

I'm reminded of Jan Groth when I see these lines, because simplicity is not banal—neither in his work nor in Elisabeth Haug's. It is a manifestation of fearlessness, and a willingness to see things without embellishment. Elisabeth Haug also engages with matter in a way reminiscent of Anselm Kiefer, as she too brings in the elements—earth, straw, stone, wind, and rain—just as the German artist does. Both possess an authority in their expression that gains strength from aligning with nature's rhythms and freely participating in the cycles of life. The authority in the line—or the brushstroke—cannot be separated from the playful trust in the world, in doing something direct and unrestrained. It is also shaped by rejecting the adult anxiety over what other adults might think of what one carries in one's heart, and by embracing an open, direct play with form as something grounded in the life processes both inside and outside of art. What is childlike in both Kiefer and Elisabeth Haug is more commanding than the adult's constricted either-or thinking.

In many of Haug's works, there is also a dialogue between what can be described and what is beyond language—between the word that captures the world and that which we can only sense. But also, perhaps we could say, between what simply *is* and what dissolves in interpretation. Such oppositions are either suspended or pushed aside. This in-between space in Elisabeth Haug's visual universe—this impulse toward something more, something in motion through time and space—reminds me of the elemental need for expression, one that refuses to relinquish the uncertain and the

intuitive. That refuses to give up curiosity and fascination, perhaps even the joy of the ambiguous and mysterious.

We see something similar in the work of the American artist Cy Twombly. The French philosopher Roland Barthes describes Twombly's inscriptions as a kind of language-work—graphisms—or a manifestation of the urge to formulate, without severing the connection to ambiguity or the vitality of what we want to express. Like Elisabeth Haug, Twombly allows us to remain close to the thing itself, to lived experience, without rendering it fully articulate. Twombly creates blur, smudges, transitions, and spirals, Barthes writes, and at the end of all these inscriptions, the violence of language ceases, he continues.

But what does “violence” mean here? Perhaps it refers to the compulsion to decide what something *is*, and thereby end up locked in oppositions—in either-or, in yes or no, in man or woman, past and present, or heaven and earth? The vagueness of escaping this brings us to a different kind of precision than that of conclusions—because we come close to the processes that make us understand, remember, feel something, or tell something at all. Home? A sense of who we are?

We could at the very least say the same about Elisabeth Haug. But still, there is coherence and consistency in her images, pointing to what constitutes the pieces of a life. Or what life is, altogether. “To be without a story is to be lost in the vast world, that spreads out in all directions, like tundra or sea ice,” as the American essayist Rebecca Solnit writes in *The Faraway Nearby*. Yes, we must tell a story about ourselves, but it doesn't have to be a chronological one, where the parts are joined into a rounded whole. No, often our lives take shape as fields of tension between fragments that resonate with each other. In such spaces of resonance, we find ourselves—or an outline of ourselves—we find images of who we were, who we are, and who we might become.

Isn't this the very foundation of returning home: to be able to lay forth what we have lived, to create spaces that are narrative without reducing life to *just* a story? Elisabeth Haug connects us to this reality; we enter into an intense proximity to memory, to hope and longing. To what has been, to what is, and to what still lies ahead. And in all of this: breath.

Breath, which manifests in another of Elisabeth Haug's paintings, titled precisely *Breath*, in which the paint condenses into this life-giving cycle of life, of air, of pigment. The pulse is the beating heart, the blood flowing through the body, but also nature's cycles, the rhythm of the seasons, wind that calms and storms that rise. There is a rhythm in the breath that responds to all that lives, that resonates with the rhythm between concrete memory and the attempt to circle in on detail—between then and now, between child and adult.

Elisabeth Haug thus points toward direction, both outward and inward. Perhaps her works function somewhat like constellations, the way seafarers once navigated by the stars, I think, as I look at Elisabeth Haug's *Under the Stars*, where the outlines of three reclining figures form a shared connection as they lie on their backs gazing at the sparkling celestial bodies on the dark dome of a winter night. They create a map, and a shared point of reference, which in turn becomes a memory. *That* time. A memory that itself has now become a constellation in a search for roots—in ourselves, in the world. In history, which is both vast and incomprehensible, but also small and intimate.

This is the core of what home is—of who we are. This is what allows us to endure, without giving up our vulnerability, when things become chaotic and difficult.

These forces are present in Elisabeth Haug's *Roots in the Storm*, where the brushstrokes circle and swirl like a painterly tempest, and the surface of the canvas is scratched open, as if by claws. But within this cycle of moving forms—of both inner and outer unrest—fragile shapes emerge that, despite all the motion, appear as distinctive figures with their own weight and identity. Not strong forms, as we usually understand them, but as incisions and sketches—and it is precisely the fact that they are still there, when the storm churns around them in all its fragility, that makes them strong.

Perhaps we could say that transience and changeability are inherently part of what it means to belong in the world, to be whole, just as our identity is constantly transforming and evolving throughout the course of a life. We are not the same, over time, and thus neither is coming home ever the same. I experience Kari Elisabeth Haug's images as fields for such exploration, for the lines, the strokes, have a direction in them that seeks home, that gravitates toward solidity and the reassuring bonds of place—but at the same time carries a lightness and air that gives voice to play, experiment, exploration—and perhaps above all—longing.

The description of place that Elisabeth Haug searches for might be said to go both down into the earth, toward rootedness, and up into the sky, where wings carry us toward new horizons. Perhaps we could say that we humans never entirely belong in one place, and that we are constantly pulled between different impulses—between, for instance, the urge to venture out and the anchoring comfort of home? I don't believe belonging can be conceived outside of these dissonances in the rhythm of life, for there is a rhythm to it—to living—that always contains atonal components, which must also be woven into the refrain that might be called belonging, if we are to truly feel how deep the roots go.

So what is the common thread in all these works? Their strength lies in the balance between vulnerability and power, but also in the willingness to seek out roots while embracing the lightness of experimentation at the same time. This is, in many ways, the essence of what life is. For if we remain entirely still, we become locked into our attachment to a place, a person, or a memory—but if we indulge too much in lightness, we also risk floating away without grounding. No matter where we go or where we come from, we must relate to what we have and to the place we inhabit—and to the possibilities that exist there.

Perhaps this is what Elisabeth Haug shows us in *Water Your Child*, for here we find outlines and sketches of everything from earthly vegetation to potted plants and animal life—but also the child the title refers to is present. If we imagine all these forms—and their histories and futures—as life itself, as it is, somewhere on the map, then it is precisely these forms that must be developed, cultivated—and yes—watered. Listened to, so we can find the places where roots can grow, and where the connections between past and future are kept in motion. It is also there we can find the sprouts of the growth to come—that is where the new land begins, as another work by Elisabeth Haug is titled.

In this work, the palette darkens into a dense emergence of all manner of forms, and at the center, we see the outline of a new season, of nature's fresh growth and bounty—but also a face. Yours? Finally, we are home.

*Kjetil Røed, June 1, 2025*

**Kjetil Røed** (b. 1973) is among the most prominent art and literary critics in Norway in recent years. He has been a regular contributor to *Morgenbladet* (2001–2010), *Aftenposten* (2011–2018), and *Vårt Land* (2018–). In addition, he has contributed to numerous other newspapers and publications, including *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *Klassekampen*, *Dagsavisen*, *Ny Tid*, *Norsk Shakespeare og teatertidsskrift*, *Kunstavisen*, *kunstkritikk.no*, and the Danish newspaper *Information*, to name a few. He has also written for international publications such as *Frieze*, *ArtReview*, and *Artforum.com*.

Røed has previously published *Dislike* (Flamme forlag, 2014), *Kunsten og livet – en bruksanvisning* [*Art and Life – An Instruction Manual*] (Flamme forlag, 2019), and *Kunsten og døden – en bruksanvisning* [*Art and Death – An Instruction Manual*] (Res Publica, 2021). Since 2018, he has served as editor of the journal *Billedkunst*. Pelikanen publishing has also released his essay *Fra punktum til kolon* [*From Period to Colon*] (2022).

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Kjetil Røed wrote the text *The Desire to Formulate a Home: On Kari Elisabeth Haug's Art* for the exhibition *Home – The Land of Silence / Roots and Reflection* at Ski Kunstforening in 2025. He also opened the exhibition *Home – The Land of Silence* at Volodymyr's Contemporary Art Laboratory in Berger in 2024 and wrote the introduction text for that exhibition.