Odd Nerdrum and the Second Horizon
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An Interview with Clyde Edgerton
In Review: Frederick Buechner
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ODD NERDRUM has always been an iconoclast. As a young man in the 1960s he rejected the modernist-inspired art of his day—which he would later describe as “a wave of senility and apathy”—and focused instead on the skillful dramas of Old Masters like Caravaggio, Rembrandt, and Titian. He traveled often to see their paintings (a 1962 trip to Stockholm’s National Museum to see Rembrandt’s Oath to Claudius Civilis was formative) and developed his aesthetic sensibilities under their influence. Since then, and throughout his career, his opposition to prevailing art philosophies has both made him a significant force and something of an outsider.

A Norwegian who now lives and works in Iceland, Nerdrum is considered one of the world’s most important figurative painters. His advocacy of the figure—in all its visceral potential—is distinctive. From his earliest work Nerdrum has depicted the human form with both frankness and metaphoric stylization; amputees, defecation, and explicit sexual images have featured regularly in his large-scale narrative paintings. Always direct, often empathic, sometimes shocking, Nerdrum’s use of the body has long been a point of consternation for critics and viewers alike.

In 1998, Nerdrum surprised the art world by declaring that he was not an artist, but rather a kitsch painter. His philosophy of kitsch, which turns the accepted definition of the term on its head, embraces technical skill, the application of archetypal themes, mystery, and the stripping away of the masks of modernity. His paintings are stark, enigmatic, and full of personal symbology. Deeply potent, metaphorically earnest, and endlessly psycho-dramatic, his diverse body of work represents a staggering achievement.

Nerdrum’s oeuvre is anything but static. Even now, in his fifth decade of painting, he is entering a new period—one that as of yet has received little critical study. The new work defies the analysis used in the past and often sheds new light on enigmatic earlier paintings. Emerging themes of hope and redemption add yet another dimension to the work of a man who has always sought the eternal in the temporal, the universal in the individual.
Throughout most of Nerdrum’s career, critics have found in his work a sense of alienation, futility, and loss, which some attribute to the painter’s incapacity for true interpersonal communication and others see as a kind of overarching commentary on the sense of dislocation and alienation from nature and other people that modern culture has created. Where Nerdrum’s early and middle career are concerned, these observations are sound enough, but during the past half decade, Nerdrum’s work has begun to shift—in subject matter, palette, and even philosophy.

Nerdrum may once have “harbor[ed] a dream of unity,” as Jan Ake Pettersson observed of the work made in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but now he is painting it. The paintings of the last five years—whose motifs include prophets, boats, and the horizon—are full of signs of connection, unification, hope, and continuity, of which only traces appear in older paintings. This sea change seems to indicate some fundamental shift in the painter’s view of the world.

Throughout his career, major life events—learning more about his absent father, building a stable relationship with his wife, Turid (whom he calls “a ray of light”), having children—have shaped his painting in striking ways, from their subject matter to their colors and psychological focus. Nerdrum is a particularly emotive, passionate man whose internal struggles and triumphs work their way into his paintings. While this essay will focus mainly on the paintings themselves, Pettersson’s illuminating book Odd Nerdrum: Storyteller and Self-revealer offers a more detailed look at the connections between his personal life and his work.

The most recent book-length survey of Nerdrum’s work is Richard Vine’s 2001 volume, Odd Nerdrum: Paintings, Sketches, and Drawings. Vine combines a biographical approach with a close study of the paintings’ system of codes and symbols, delving into the images with confidently discerning warmth. He concludes that the changes in Nerdrum’s late work are primarily shifts in “rhetoric and thematic emphasis, rather than any drastic alteration of worldview.” Five years later, in light of the newer works, Vine’s estimation can be challenged.

By approaching the body of work as a whole, we can develop a broad understanding that folds the older works into the new—an understanding that includes both alienation and redemption. Certain elements—such as his use of the skewed horizon and the anointed prophet—testify to a gradual shift in the painter’s mind as expressed through what he calls his “uncontrollable hand.” These fundamental symbols extend through disparate works. By giving them careful attention, we can discern a worldview that underlies the paintings and holds them together.

One fascinating feature of the new work is its use of Christian signifiers. A crown of thorns appears several times, and titles like Flock and Second Birth (both from 2004) offer major stumbling blocks to old theories of Nerdrum’s indifference to religious matters. The specificity of these spiritual metaphors
seems to support the idea that Nerdrum has always expressed an affirmative, if sublimated, spirituality—one that is only now finding explicit expression. The presence of these Christian symbols is somewhat mystifying in the context of critical dialogue up till now, not to mention the painter’s own statements on the matter, which have run between atheism and agnosticism. Yet the symbols abide in the work. Perhaps they merely reflect an approach to metaphysics and philosophy that is decidedly western and therefore speaks the language of Christianity. But then again, perhaps they appropriate Christian symbology precisely because of what they symbolize.

Judeo-Christian theology is particularly concerned with the singular prophet or Messiah and how he interacts with a chosen people. Symbols of authority or anointing—mantles, tongues of fire, staffs—are prevalent in both Old and New Testaments, where prophets, often wild desert-dwellers who stand apart from the mainline religious community, have a special closeness with God. They receive visions, suffer persecution, call out the community’s errors, and exhort the community to return to a purer truth. In Nerdrum’s work, the figure of the prophet is worth particular attention. Through a series of self-portraits, Nerdrum tells the story of a prophet-as-painter figure who undergoes a transformative journey.

Second Birth is a self-portrait as well as a symbolic icon [see Plate 1]. By painting himself wearing a crown of thorns, Nerdrum makes a brash, even self-aggrandizing statement about himself, his own work, and his relation to the world, while at the same time creating an outwardly functioning image meant as pure symbology. Second Birth displays the duality of expression so common to Nerdrum’s work. It is both high and low, both a grand presumption and a felt reality: high symbolism of the sort utilized by Gustave Moreau (Nerdrum’s phallic torso is every bit as sensual and decadent as Salome’s in Salome Dancing before Herod ) is combined with the dark, interior, personal narrative. The painter’s personal symbolism of the earth—a place of protection, change, and psychological trauma, as in Buried Alive (1995-96)—is played off of the crown’s otherworldly significance. He is an Orpheus, a Christ. He has been reborn, renewed, changed through pain. The open, beatific expression on his face is a sign of that experience.

The crown of thorns, hallmark of the suffering savior, serves as foil to the stalwart advocacy of fleshly reality that has characterized Nerdrum’s greatest works of the past—works like Hepatitis (1996-97), in which the convalescent painter rises from his bed. Hepatitis reasserts the corporeal; it affirms the reality of our mortal coil and the integrity of the autonomous individual. Alone in his room, the painter takes in air with his lungs, raising himself up by his own strength. This is not the case in Second Birth. Here his strength is useless to him: his arms are bound; his legs are buried in the soil. He is not the sole arbiter of
this birthing. Here, in one emblem, Nerdrum reunites the spirit with the flesh via the lusty yet tortured physicality of a body that, in the midst of birthing pains, aims its brow toward the heavens. As in Genesis, the dust has been imbued with the breath of life. Once born in the flesh, Nerdrum’s prophet-painter is now born in the spirit. Nerdrum’s earlier work seemed to indicate an almost aspiritual conception of human life, often seeming to portray man as only animal, without soul. This new work stands against that idea.

Second Birth takes us to the division between birth and death, triumph and defeat, the spirit and the flesh, the secular and the sacred. It traces the same liminal edge as the life and passion of Christ. Nerdrum seems deliberately to play up that resonance. The watery eyes of his tilted head are both innocent and sorrowful. The bound, helpless frame echoes that of Michelangelo’s Dying Slave, itself long associated with the condemned Christ. The body both shrinks away from and emerges out of the surrounding landscape. The warm, blood-red earth is both a sacred space of womblike protection and a vast arena, evoking both incarnation and martyrdom.

A crown of thorns, a second birth: despite the explicitly religious nature of these symbols it is clear that for some time Nerdrum has been aiming at a conception of transcendence apart from religiosity. He has defined religious transcendence as “surpassing this world,” something he made clear he did not want to do. Yet he has also defined transcendence as fully concerned with this physical world, a sort of lifting of the physical body outside of the temporal realm. He has written that he aims to “bring the body into an eternal atmosphere where linear time no longer has a hold.” The duality he seems to see between the present physical and the eternal arises from his horror at the destruction modernity has unleashed upon the psyche of humanity (an aversion he has made clear in his book On Kitsch). By stripping away the masks of modern life, of linear time, and of psychological defense, Nerdrum hopes to depict mankind as it really is: not as a set of mentally deficient buffoons, but as instinctive and pure. Is this strange backdoor return to Eden truly the goal of the self-described prophet of painting?

Within the bizarre, archetypal world of his paintings, Nerdrum’s prophets preach to groups of other inhabitants. These scenes of exchange between the one and the many, the touched and the untouched, the sane and the insane, and the eternal and the temporal are part of a larger pattern. The painter has always been concerned with thresholds. In his work, the point of meeting between opposites is ceremonial, psychological, and metaphorical.

Many earlier works—including The Ultimate Sight (1985), Woman with Milk (1988-93), and Return of the Sun (1986-95)—depict the mythic or archetypal experience of a small group involved in a strange kind of ritual. In later works the group often meets with or is led by an anointed individual, as in Sleeping Prophet (1999-2000), The Messenger (circa 2003), or Pregnant Woman with Followers
SECOND HORIZON


*Lunatics* depicts a kind of group meditative state explored in earlier paintings like *Twin Mother by the Sea* (1999) and *Dawn* (1990), but takes it in a new direction [see Plate 2]. The painting uses a vibrant and intense palette, with jewel-like tones of fuchsia, deep violet, and rich, saturated scarlet. Cerulean blues play against ochre-laden gold. The painting has a tremendous sense of perspective and huge, deep space, in contrast to earlier works that often take place within tight tableaux. Here the so-called lunatics are more loosely configured. Ten figures dot the purple landscape like precious stones. Some watch points on the horizon. Others look at the ground. Some are hunched and pensive; some sit proudly, others neutrally. Some wear crowns or helmets; some are cloaked; others are naked. One holds a shield. All seem to be waiting for something. They sit together on this plain as a purposeful, corporate expression, all engaged in the same activity. Viewers are left to contemplate what they might be waiting for.

Certainly Nerdrum’s paintings of groups exhibit a tension between personally felt alienation and vicarious unification: though the figures are waiting together, they have no interaction with each other. They do not touch or even look at each other. However, the animosity and contempt the painter once displayed in works such as *Barter* (1995-96), *The Red Cape* (1992), or *Woman Killing Injured Man* (1994) has in large measure fallen away in favor of community, family, and—in some primary form—society. Even Vine’s 2001 description of “conciliatory gestures...obliquely endors[ing]...communalism” now seems too cautious for what is happening in the newer paintings. The figures in works such as *Wanderers by the Sea* (2000), *Flock* (2004) [see front cover], and *Woman in a Boat* (circa 2004) seem to have true connections, not merely “shared loneliness.” There is a sort of serenity, a unity and purposefulness expressed in these groups by virtue of their proximity and posture. The figures stand in similar attitudes and face the same direction. Even in works such as *Lunatics* where the conglomeration is less definite, they seem to fit together, to be analogous to one another.

The ritual silence of these groups seems to have metaphysical import, to represent something larger than a mere inability to communicate. Earlier works like *Barter* and *Woman Killing Injured Man* dealt with the casting off of societal masks; the expression is now different and more fundamental. These groups demonstrate the essential sense of eternity that those gathered in like mind can achieve. Theirs is a spiritual silence, like that of a congregation partaking in the Eucharist or sitting in meditation together. The groups in *Lunatics*, *Flock*, and *Wanderers by the Sea* represent a yearning for union.

The true character of these groups is essentially instinctive rather than specifically antisocial. These figures do not choose to be antisocial, it simply does not occur to them to be social at all; they are drawn together by some other,
more primal force. Though indifferent to modern social forms, they do subscribe to a kind of communal structure imposed by nature: they gather together based on what Jung called the “purposive mechanism,” that is, our need for protection, procreation, and survival. By placing them in a bleak, barren natural landscape, Nerdrum presents an object lesson in what we might be apart from the masks of an advanced society. These figures have been left to survive with rudimentary clothes, tools, and relationships.

Yet the survivalist paradigm is not enough. As God told Moses, “man does not live by bread alone.” Or as Jung has it, “the existence of Man will never be satisfactorily explained in terms of isolated instincts…. That is, Man’s purpose is not to eat, drink, et cetera, but to be human. Above and beyond these drives, our inner psychic reality serves to manifest a living mystery.” Certainly Nerdrum has espoused the Jungian conception of our purpose being simply “to be human” (perhaps most effectively in his classic Twilight (1981), in which a solitary female figure, seen from behind, defecates in a still forest). But the idea that being human is also the manifestation of a living mystery is one that has blossomed for Nerdrum only more recently. Jung connected the “living mystery” to the symbology of what he called the Cosmic Man—a representation of man’s interunity with man. The idea of a hidden human unity might offer us a sort of backdoor solution to the problem of unity in Nerdrum’s work. His expression of the living mystery—via his prophets and cryptic system of symbols—indicates some fundamental desire for unity through the act of communication, however obscure; indeed, what reason do his prophets have to exist if not to communicate some cohesive truth to the inhabitants of his world?

So there are two principles at work. The first is Nerdrum’s paradigm of the physical body becoming transcendent through instinct, through nature, and through its own functionality; the second is a reassertion of the traditional religious principle that humanity needs some type of graced, extramundane encounter in order to manifest its living mystery. Interestingly, Nerdrum’s work is able to answer both with a new spirituality, one that allows for the definition of transcendence that Nerdrum favors, while initiating another tier of understanding beyond the merely physical.

Throughout his career, Nerdrum has made use of a private language of symbols that runs consistently from painting to painting. In the past, he has modified the horizon line in his works—curving it to a variety of extremes—beginning in the early eighties with the iconic Iron Law (1983-84). In this work the horizon bends off as if being seen from a great height, even as the viewer stands on the same ground as the main figures. The skyline in Second Birth is similar. This bending of the horizon has allowed him to create what he calls an “eternal point of view” upon a “singular substance of soil and water.”

Nerdrum has further developed this use of mythic space in his newer works
with the use of "turned, or broken" perspective, utilizing two points of view in a single painting. This phenomenon happens most strikingly in *Five Singing Women* and to lesser extents in *Early Morning* and *The Boat* (all from 2004). In these paintings the viewer's perspective seems to be both from above and level with the picture plane. In *Five Singing Women*, we look down upon the women, while the horizon careens in at a disorienting angle from the top left corner of the frame. "It is the play with these two perspectives that gives me the feeling of eternity," Nerdrum writes. Implied in these two perspectives is a second horizon, one unseen but sensed: a point of view that stands outside linear, temporal reality. Given the metaphysical importance Nerdrum has assigned to the horizon throughout his career, it is no wonder that a work actively engaging two horizons would overflow with special power for him. The later horizon contrasts with that of past works, which many critics read as the marking point of nothingness, symbolizing what Donald Kuspit called the "threat of imminent non-being." Antithetically, the new horizons are a focus of yearning, a point where the eternal breaks into the world. This kind of symbolism is prefigured in works begun as early as the eighties, such as *The Ultimate Sight* and *Return of the Sun*, where figures gaze, gape, and grasp at a sight on the horizon [see Plate 3]; the symbolic horizon is more fully realized later. In the new works, a dyad of sun and moon often presides above while figures gaze longingly into the fading twilight in observance of some stupendous rite.

Nerdrum's horizon as it manifests in recent works like *The Boat* [see Plate 4]—in which viewers lean yearningly toward a glimmer of light in the distance—is the meeting place of the eternal and the temporal, the infinite and finite, the sacred and the profane. It is the point of his amalgamation of light and dark, substance and void. It is an agent of connection between the knowable and the unknowable. Nerdrum's figures can empirically perceive nothing that is beyond the horizon, yet for them the skyline has a powerful significance in that it both conceals and reveals the great truths beyond.

Nerdrum has defined transcendence as "rescinding place and time"—a definition that is key to his conception of horizons. By bending and turning the skyline, he gives his figures nonstandard horizons, allowing them to see things ordinary people can't. He dodges Enlightenment epistemology, asserting a nonrational, metaphysical understanding of time and space. The idea of transcendence of rational sensory experience not only illuminates Nerdrum's treatment of space, but also helps us interpret his narrative scenes: Nerdrum's strange wandering prophets and transfixed observers do not know as we know.

Nerdrum’s horizon, and indeed much of his symbolism, is an attempt to make sensible what William Shea called the "transcendent real." He desires eternity, yearns for it, and therefore wants to infuse experiential reality with a transcendent reality. Since the real experience of eternity cannot be sensed inside our time-
space horizon, Nerdrum produces an alternative horizon—the symbol of
eternity—that functions as what Shea calls a “vision of the ideal,” standing in for
the “eternal real,” which itself cannot be known. These paintings are his attempt
to sense eternity. As such, they are fundamentally hopeful.

Several of the new paintings develop the narrative of a boat journey, a theme
Nerdrum has been using off and on for nearly two decades. The early boats were
mostly just vessels laden with his psychological baggage—as in *Three Men in
a Boat* (1996) or *Father Finding His Son* (1993), both of which dealt with his
feelings about his absent father and the surrogate father figures in his life—but
the recent boats play a new part. They function as metaphysical vehicles, a mode
first seen in the 1998 painting *Self-portrait in a Boat*. Here the prophet of
painting faces the viewer, his body insistently rigid, his head thrust forward, his
mouth open as if to speak some profound word. Above that scumbled and faded
visage, a signal fire atop a distant mountain seems to indicate a kind of spiritual
knowledge, as if we are witnessing some otherworldly Pentecost. In the reflection
on the smooth surface of the murky water, the prophet’s face has been blotted
out in muted darkness. Viewers are left to ponder this cryptic symbol; perhaps
the prophet is moving to a place beyond personality, beyond the accidents of the
physical and into the essence of form.

The narrative develops over the course of several works, each depicting some
part of the journey, from initiation to enlightenment and rapture. In *Man in
a Boat* (2003), the craft floats right up off the surface of the water, carrying
the silent figure—obviously once again Nerdrum himself—who lies as if in an
otherworldly trance. His body, seemingly spotlighted from above, rests in a
pregnant stillness. The twilight expanse around the boat—a rich, deep indigo
atmosphere—slides off toward an ethereal horizon. The journey narrative seems
to culminate in *The Boat*, where the watercraft continues its odd, gravity-defying
journey as the curious faithful watch from shore. The boat is empty; the prophet
has vanished. Only a glowing trail of ether suggests his assumption into the
sunset.

The boat paintings form the archetypical narrative Jung called the “night-
sea journey,” the figurative passage of the soul across a sea of darkness, literal
or metaphoric. Jung considered the night-sea journey a necessary step in the
development of the psyche, fundamental to a person’s movement toward self-
actualization. Passage through darkness is the ultimate metaphysical initiation
and portends special transformation. Biblical examples include Joseph in the
well, Jonah in the belly of the whale, and Christ in the tomb. Each man was
fundamentally changed by his journey, both in himself and in his relation to
others: from the well, Joseph was taken into slavery in Egypt, where he rose to
become a powerful and influential administrator and was able to save his family;
after Jonah escaped the whale, his preaching brought an entire city to repentance;

Plate 3. Odd Nerdrum. Return of the Sun, 1986-95. Oil on canvas. 41 ½ x 63 ½ inches.

when Christ rose from the tomb, he redeemed the sins of the world. Jung would claim that since we all carry the night-sea journey in our unconscious, when we see the prophet in the boat, we expect his transformation, though we may not know what form it will take. The viewer’s sense of anticipation is an integral component of the picture.

Nerdrum’s prophet also bears some similarity to the Hebrew prophet Elijah, whose story is told in 1 and 2 Kings. Like Nerdrum’s prophet, Elijah had a transitional wilderness experience and at the end of his life was carried up bodily into heaven. Elijah was God’s last surviving prophet under a violent and idolatrous regime, whose gods and priests he taunted and condemned, making himself so unpopular that he had to flee for his life to the desert. There the despondent Elijah prayed for death before falling asleep under a broom tree. On waking, he was fed by angels and traveled on to Horeb, God’s holy mountain, where he went into a cave and again fell asleep after his journey. There he was awakened by the voice of God, who told him to go outside, for God’s presence was about to pass by. First there was a great wind, then an earthquake, then a fire, but God wasn’t in any of these things. Finally there came a gentle whisper, which Elijah recognized as the voice of God. God assigned Elijah several important tasks, which Elijah went on to perform faithfully. At the end of his life, he was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Nerdrum’s recent boat paintings seem to represent the resolution that comes at the end of the prophet’s mythic journey. In earlier works like *Man in Sunset* (1989), *The Storyteller* (1988), *One Story Singer* (1990), *Blind Wanderer* (1992), and many others, the divinely touched man moves through Nerdrum’s landscapes, pronouncing, initiating, saving, condemning, and undertaking all manner of ritualistic rigor. He ends up entranced, sleeping upon the earth (as in *Sleeping Prophet*). Next, in *Man in a Boat*, he enters the watercraft, where he is transfigured. In *The Boat*, before a cloud of witnesses, the boat lifts off, the prophetic mantle trailing behind it, and the prophet passes beyond Nerdrum’s eternal horizon, the conduit of divine revelation or disclosure.

Among its other distinctives, the boat journey is one of the most viewed events Nerdrum constructs. That is, there are spectators in these paintings who seem to be aware—if only vaguely—of the importance of what is happening. They are not merely idiots or lunatics. Like their counterparts in *The Ultimate Sight* or *Return of the Sun*, the spectators watching the boat are moved by a pre-intellectual compulsion. Richard Vine describes the watchers in the earlier works as looking for a “never-found deliverance,” but in *The Boat*, their gaze seems met with an affirmation; the wandering prophet has been translated out of their presence. They lean forward, straining toward the now-empty boat. To them, the realization that the man is gone is a revelation about their world; they know that something more is happening beyond that horizon. Perhaps they have found
deliverance after all. In this sense, the prophet is not the only person whose faith is actualized by his boat journey; those who watch his assumption from shore are also transformed.

Nerdrum favors archetypical, philosophically laden forms like the nightsea journey, and once he has found a motif that works powerfully for him he returns to it again and again. One of his longest-running series uses images of bricks, which many critics have come to read as representations of singularity, autonomy, or separateness. Nerdrum’s work of the late 1970s and 1980s is very much a tableau of alienation and misunderstanding (with a few moments of resolution), and critics have used paintings such as White Brick (1984) [see Plate 5] to illustrate those ideas. The bricks—detached, set apart, evidently doomed to crumble into nothingness—offer a bleak portrait of human existence. Nerdrum has said that he painted them during a period of feeling that he was “coming from emptiness to emptiness.”

But perhaps there are ways of reading the bricks that hint at the hope and resolution evident in later works. Seen another way, these bricks—permanent, singular wholes—might just as easily be existential treatises against oblivion: perhaps they are the seeds of substance taking root amid the warm darkness, shoring up physicality against extinction. On the surface there is little to validate this hopeful reading over the old, more despondent view; after all, the same rough-hewn, battered bricks appear in 1982 and 2002. What can differentiate them are the other paintings created during the same periods. Just as Nerdrum’s other themes and motifs have changed and progressed, his bricks, though outwardly similar, are created with feelings and aims that have shifted over the years. Nerdrum still paints bricks from time to time; they seem to be psychologically necessary to him. Though the feeling of “coming from emptiness to emptiness” is certainly an ontologically bleak one, it’s interesting that he describes that period as being in the past: that mental state was “where I was when I painted the bricks,” he says (italics mine). His writing reveals that much has changed in Nerdrum’s mind and heart over the years; we can also sense this change in his paintings, which stand as ensigns of his emotional and psychological states.

The question of origins seems to be an ongoing one for Nerdrum, be it his personal, familial origins or a deeper existential ontology of the self. He can’t quite be satisfied with an accidentalist view of the universe; his mystical humanism won’t have it. He values the individual, prophetic, singular perspective of natural man too much to sit comfortably with the twentieth-century claims that nature has no good, no evil, no purpose. He values life and consciousness in such a way as to assume their purposefulness. He says, “I have not entered this world in order to be entertained. I have come to have my life confirmed”—a statement that indicates a kind of oblique hope, in that it assumes confirmation
is both possible and desirable. In the face of what Joseph Campbell called “the rotten, horrendous” reality of existence—a horror Nerdrum sees with shattering clarity, as his paintings attest—he still wants to have his life confirmed. Intimately as he understands the brutal aspects of reality, he nevertheless wants that reality and his role in it affirmed.

Another of Nerdrum’s long-running series depicts infants and children, images that naturally convey a sort of confirmation of human life—for example, Baby (1993) [see Plate 6]. Tightly bundled for protection, the infants in this series are depicted in a state of sleep or quietude. Cherubic and still, the swaddled child represents far more than what it is—Baby at once shows us a single individual and implies an unseen community, a social network of people who have created and will care for this child. In the infant, burgeoning consciousness takes the form of a ringing cry to creation. The cry both declares the child’s autonomy and asks for companionship; this is the paradox of a self-aware existence.

Nerdrum has referred to his paintings of children as depicting the “timeless reality of living substance that cannot be divided.” This idea of living, indivisible substance provides an avenue for understanding the brick paintings as expressions of unity. The bricks fold many metaphors in a singular object, creating a kind of unity of meaning. The brick is the singular form that holds out against oblivion, and also the symbol of Nerdrum’s own self-conception. The brick, like the child, is a sort of irreducible unit. Both are vulnerable, yet form the basis of permanence. Each may be wounded; the child might easily be hurt, the brick easily chipped. Yet in them Nerdrum’s humanism is boldly pronounced: the self must persist through, beyond, and despite destruction.

Interestingly, and in contrast to the brick paintings, the way Nerdrum has depicted infants has changed dramatically over the years. In earlier works like Baby, the babies are presented in the same light as the bricks, as if the two are directly analogous. Recent pictures of babies, such as Twins by the Sea (1999) or Twins at Dawn (1998-99), are more colorful, more real, and less symbolic. Still wrapped and protected, these later children are somehow more alive than the earlier figures, who seem to be caught in an eternal stillness. This generative hopefulness seems to culminate in a wonderful painting from 2000 titled Summit. In this work, the swaddled infant sleeps in the foreground as the parents—their backs to us—tenderly lean toward each other. Atop some rocky mountain, with the sea and the sky and that grand horizon before them, this family is a tremendous sign of unity and affirmation.

Nerdrum’s works express a longing for completion, for affirmation, for establishment and continuity. The confidence and defiance with which the painter comports himself publicly cannot hide the deep sense of need in his work. Vine calls Nerdrum’s work “in large part a visual entreaty: remember me.” His works do not deny God; they beg a revelation from the deity. They are a song to eternity.
The old nihilistic assumptions about Nerdrum will not suffice for work that has moved beyond them. Unfortunately, in an exhibition of recent paintings at Forum Gallery, a decade-old remark attributed to Donald Kuspit was used to inaugurate the show. Quoting from George Frankl’s Utopia and Tragedy, Kuspit wrote that Nerdrum “shows us...our impotence and sense of futility in a world which happens without us and takes no notice of our judgments and aspirations. He shows us just how dispensable we have become.” While this observation was perfectly valid ten years ago, as an interpretive formula for the new works it fails catastrophically. Though there is no doubt that much of Nerdrum’s motivation for painting is related to what Kuspit called “injuries to our narcissism,” once the focus of the works drifts from past wounds and bitterness, the paintings take on an altruism that disarms and warms. The older paintings may often be nihilistic, indifferent, or apocalyptic, but the newer works offer a glorious reversal, taking on warmth, intimacy, and idyllic hopefulness.

The irreducible self, the promise of the infant, eternity in the horizon, the transformative night-sea journey—in a fictive world such as Nerdrum’s, one that has so frequently expressed loss, alienation, and destruction, these redemptive themes are all the more striking. In the early pictures, the song of redemption began almost as a whisper; in more recent works it begins to ring out clearer and stronger, resounding with grace and hope.

Nerdrum has declared, “I do not believe that man is good, but that he can become good.” Like the figures who watch the strange horizon in his paintings, Nerdrum’s statement is full of longing; the people of his pictures do not stare stupidly into the distance, but look with expectation and deep yearning. They are witnessing, as Pettersson observed, “with eyes very different from our own,” a glowing, astonishing scene.