

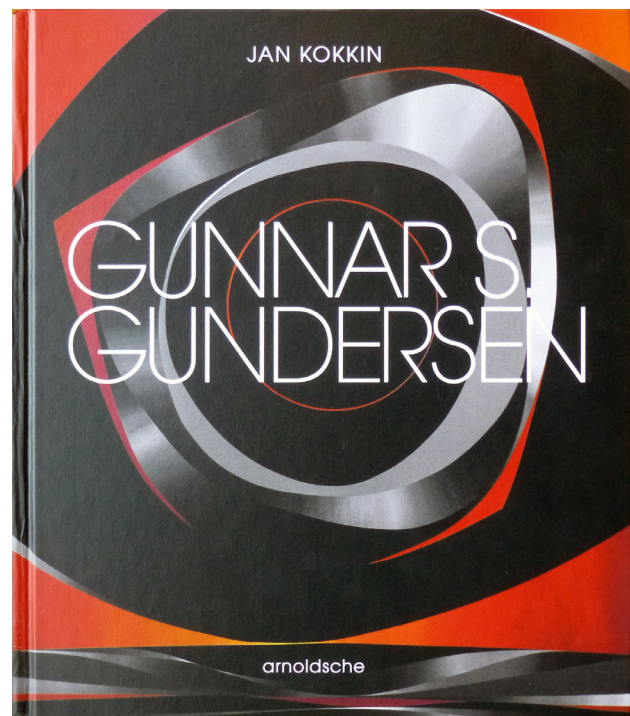
## RECENSÃO AO LIVRO

### *Gunnar S. Gundersen* *Norwegian Post-War* *Modernist*

KOKKIN, Jan. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, 2020, 288 pp.  
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It is not common to find the inclusion of issues and cases related to Portuguese modernism in the international bibliography. This is just one of the reasons that explain the interest aroused by this book about the Norwegian painter Gunnar S. Gundersen (1921-1982). In fact, Jan Kokkin mentions one of the great 20th century artists in Portugal, Júlio Resende (1917-2011), and his friendship with several Norwegian artists.

Jan Kokkin is currently an independent researcher, curator, and critic who has studied several Norwegian artists of the 19th and 20th century, situating them in their time and tracing their connections to the European artistic and cultural context. Following the 2018 monograph *Gerhard Munthe: Norwegian Pioneer of Modernism*, he publishes *Gunnar S. Gundersen Norwegian Post-War Modernist*, at the same publisher. The book has its origin in an invitation from the Høyanger Art Society and the municipality of Høyanger to curate a permanent exhibition in a space dedicated to the painter, the Gunnar S. Gallery in Byporten (the Town Gate). Gunnar S., as the artist was known, grew up in the small town of Høyanger.

In a bilingual edition, Norwegian and English, the book is organized into six chapters, in a linear chronology, to which are added two chapters, one

exclusively dedicated to the decorative work in public and private spaces, and a final one mainly focused on personal and family aspects of the artist's last years. The chronological account of the artist's life and work is profusely illustrated and includes a wide range of topics under analysis: the artist and his personality, his training contexts, groups and tertulia in which he participated, exhibitions, relations with gallery owners and collectors, critical reception, and commissions. It is based on institutional and private archives, correspondence, family photographs, and testimonials from family and friends. It features a compromise between documentary material, reproductions of works of art, the artist's incursions into interior design and collaboration with experimental architectural projects, and image analysis that fundamentally seeks its convergence with 20th century art movements and modernist derivations.

One of the issues that is inferred by the reader (or perhaps by the Portuguese reader) is the parallel between what could be qualified as two cultural peripheries, one from the north and the other from the south of Europe, with protagonists who met in Paris in the mid-twentieth century, thus confirming this city as a meeting place for artists from different origins and nationalities. Later, some of these artists would seek

to replicate this multicultural experience in their own countries.

The title immediately refers to this regional situation and throughout the book there are narratives pointing to the affinity between peripheral artists. However, Jan Kokkin classifies non-figurative art from Gunnar S. Gundersen as *timeless*, an approach also calling for a certain *placeless* which could contradict the situated character above mentioned. This unstable dialogue between a situated artistic practice and a practice of timeless and universal validity underlies the text as a whole.

Circling back to the affinities mentioned above, Jan Kokkin reports that Gunnar S. “was not impressed with contemporary French art” having stated: “The abstract art, in particular, was pure aestheticism, and descriptions other than speculative, decorative and constructive seldom fit” (p. 56). And so too Resende had stated in one of his scholarship reports, sent from Paris, that “abstract art is a difficult art that lends itself to all facilities” adding, however, that he had appreciated the works in the II Salon des Réalités Nouvelles for their “great harmony of color, solidity of drawing, and rhythms and joyous forms”.<sup>1</sup> Under the impact of their first visit to Paris, both were interested, preferably, in the Impressionists and the Modernists of the 10s and 20s.

Gunnar S. Gundersen is an artist of Júlio Resende’s generation, the former having studied at the National College of Art and Design, in Oslo, in the 1940s, and the latter having graduated at the School of Fine Arts in Porto in the same period. Both would be professors at the institutions where they graduated. They are in Paris in the post-war period, Resende from 1947 and Gunnar S. in 1949. The Portuguese painter came into contact with several Norwegian artists at the fresco studio of Othon Friesz (1879-1949), at the Grande Chaumière Academy. It was in this Academy that he met, in 1947, Oddvard Straume (1913-2015). In 1950 he traveled to Norway, visiting Kristiansund and Alesund, in 1952 he held an exhibition of watercolors at the Kunstnerforbundet in Oslo, and in 1957, accompanied by António Charrua (1925-2008), António Lino (1914-1996) and Gastão Seixas (1926-1982), he presented the exhibition “Quatro Artistas Portu-

gueses” (Four Portuguese Artists) at the same venue. In turn, Oddvard Straume would visit Portugal in 1949 and Gunnar S. Gundersen in 1953, to participate in the first of three International Art Missions. He visited several cities, from the north to the south of the country.<sup>2</sup> The International Art Missions were conceived and implemented by Júlio Resende and resulted from the desire to maintain contact with international artists, carrying on the inspiration of the experience lived in the French capital. The first (1953) took place in the Trás-os-Montes region, the second (1955) in Póvoa de Varzim on the coast, and the third (1958) in Évora. These initiatives were supported, respectively, by the patron Manuel Pinto de Azevedo Júnior, the Póvoa de Varzim Municipality, and the Pro-Évora Group and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Gunnar S. participated in the first and another Norwegian artist, Odd Tanberg (1924-2017), attended the second meeting.

Gunnar S. and Resende would go on to produce major public work in their home countries and both shared the intention of enhancing functional spaces through art, making it accessible to the general population. Formed in the same humanist background that the post-war period has imprinted on many creators, they were committed to improving the environment where human experience takes place. Gunnar S. embraced geometric abstraction and in the 1960s consolidated his language and formal vocabulary characterized by great dynamism and visual impact. His work was possibly influenced by Vasarely (1906-1997) and is certainly tributary to gestalt theory and the principles of the psychology of perception related with form, colour, and space. Hospitals, hotels, churches, schools, and other buildings of public use display his mural works. While Gunnar S. adopted a vocabulary of universal aspiration and plastic compositions of intrinsic value, Resende always adopted an iconographic narrative based on the places and communities for which the works were addressed.

An important problematic that the book summons up is that of the decorative character of modernist work. The author states in the Introduction: “Gunnar S.’s pictures are not to be understood but experienced intuitively, as is the case for most Modernist art” (p. 14). The choice of the designation “Decorative Commissions” to refer to a significant part of his public work is also based on

1 Castro, Laura – *Júlio Resende: tentações da pintura ocidental*. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1999, p. 62.

2 There are several works by Oddvard Straume and Gunnar S. Gundersen in the collection of Lugar do Desenho – Júlio Resende Foundation, in northern Portugal.

the formalistic assumption and on the aesthetic reception it conveys. When Gunnar S., in the early 1950s, settles definitively into the territory of abstract art, one of the critics, quoted by Jan Kokkin, claims: "This is not visual arts in the European sense of the term. But it is something equally interesting; it is ornamentation" (p. 62). His first commission, in 1950, for the decoration of the facade of the Kunstnerforbundet gallery in Oslo, would go on to become the first abstract mural work in Norway. One of this country's most prominent artists, Henrik Sørensen (1882-1962), also quoted by Kokkin, addressed non-figuration in the following terms: "It stands for me not as art, not as pictures to hang on the Wall, but to be the Wall, inserted on the wall. The non-figurative should be incorporated into decorative art" (p. 74). The celebration of the decorative place of late modernism, and the affirmation of

concrete painting in collaboration with architecture, are amongst the most striking arguments of the book.

The opportunities to show Gunnar S.'s work on an international level include events like the São Paulo Biennial, Milan Architecture Triennial, Venice Biennial or the Salon des Realités Nouvelles in Paris, drawing a circuit that was crucial for artists from countries such as the ones concerned. Kokkin's text is, therefore, a rich corpus of information that helps to map the nexus and the cultural circuits of the second half of the twentieth century. In this regard, it contributes to an art history made, not only from a center to the periphery, but, mainly, from the periphery to multiple centers, highlighting parallels and analogies between different geographies and modernist traditions.