

The man who sank the Villa Savoye

Artist Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen has long been inspired by modernist architecture. So why did he submerge a full-scale model of Le Corbusier's iconic house in a Danish fjord?

By Riya Patel



ABOVE Open Door Policy, oil on canvas, 2016

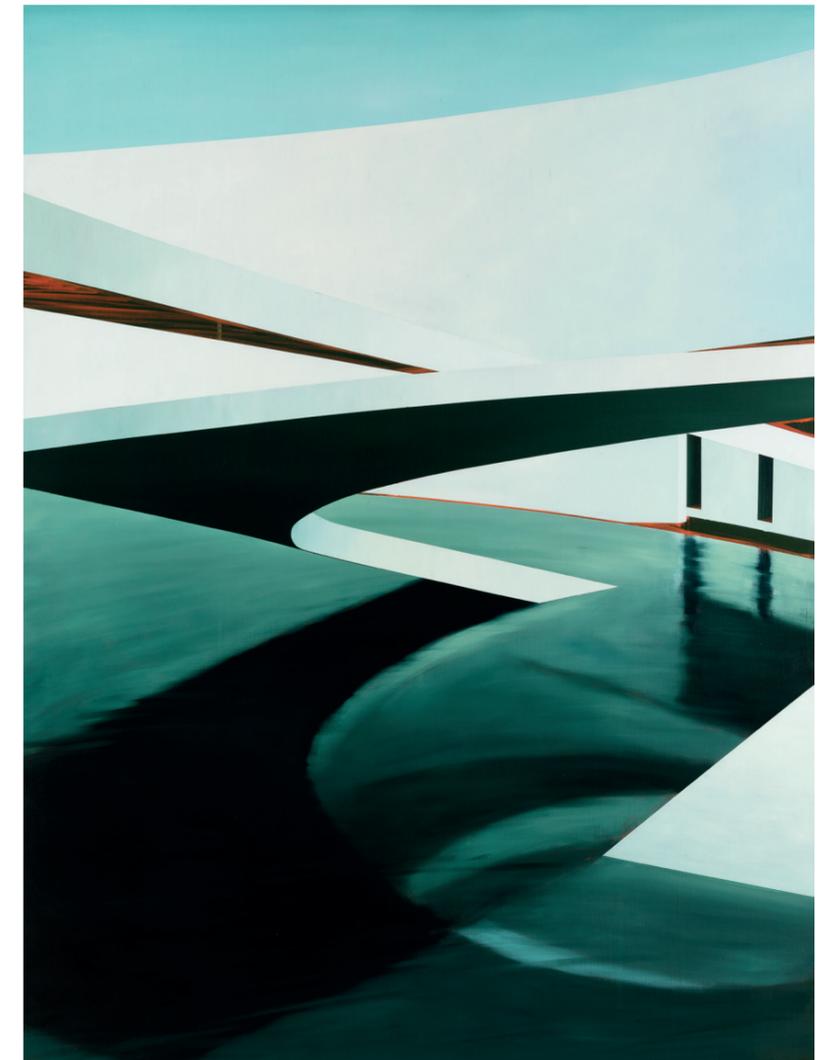
WHEN ASMUND Havsteen-Mikkelsen appeared to have sunk the Villa Savoye in a Danish fjord last summer, it naturally got the architecture and design world's attention. The installation, named Flooded Modernity, was actually a full-scale model of one corner of Le Corbusier's iconic house from 1930, floating on the water to look as if the rest of it had been fully submerged.

The immediacy of the visual pun saw it go viral when Icon first posted images online, spreading quickly through other sites and social media. Now Havsteen-Mikkelsen has had time to reflect on the scale of the reaction. Much of the Danish artist's work – installation and painting – touches on themes of modern architecture, representation and culture. But, he says, the Savoye stunt is unarguably his most provocative.

'You have to get me right,' Havsteen-Mikkelsen insists. 'It wasn't my intention to destroy the Villa Savoye. It was more to make a statement about our political culture.' The work was proposed for the Floating Art festival on the Vejle Fjord as a comment on the influence of technology on the democratic process. The Cambridge Analytica data breach that surfaced in March 2018, the various other revelations in the aftermath of the British referendum on leaving the EU and the election of President Trump in the US, had Havsteen-Mikkelsen thinking about an erosion of principles that have held since the modern era.

In Flooded Modernity, the revered Villa Savoye was pictured as an embodiment of those principles, and there was shock value in showing it untethered, out of context, and being pulled to the deep. The artist explains: 'People got excited because the idea of destroying icons is so powerful. The act of destruction opens up the possibility that the order that we are living through is not as stable as you think it is.'

You could read Flooded Modernity as a one-liner. Others have trodden this ground with a similar reaction. In 2014, visual artist Xavier Delory created fake images of the Villa Savoye vandalised and covered in graffiti. Architectural practice Ashton Raggatt McDougall created a black version of the house for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ▶



"The idea of destroying icons is so powerful. The act of destruction opens up the possibility that the order we are living through is not as stable as you think"

ABOVE Revolution, oil on canvas, 2017 – shown at the Tectonical exhibition at Fold Gallery, London

Studies in Canberra in 2001 (dubbed the Evil Villa Savoye).

Havsteen-Mikkelsen's project adds to this subversive line of work, but not in an offhand way. He says Le Corbusier's practice as an architect, but also a painter and thinker, is inspirational. The image of the Villa Savoye is almost more significant to him than the building itself. It appears in a series of drawings by the artist, and the painting Ghost (2012), which shows the house 'standing on a meadow at twilight as if it's a spacecraft landed on Earth'.

The canon of modern architecture is a recurrent theme in Havsteen-Mikkelsen's work. At Expo Chicago in 2018, he exhibited a series of paintings of Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House. In Mood Machine and Channelling Forces (both 2018), the house's pristine white forms are defined against a dark, inky sky. In 2017, at Fold Gallery in London, Tecton and Berthold Lubetkin was the subject of a dual exhibition with the German artist Florian Schmidt. In Havsteen-Mikkelsen's set of paintings, blocks of colour are used to pick out features and make sharp contrasts between planes. Instagram photo projects are a growing area of interest for the artist and a book will soon be published based on his Instagram account exploring Louis Kahn's work in Denmark. His next project is a sculpture and photograph based on a piece of rubble picked up from a Copenhagen building site. 'I define myself as someone who is interested in architecture,' he says. 'For me, that's a motif.'

From a large archive of architectural imagery, Havsteen-Mikkelsen focuses on those that stay in his memory and makes a mental projection of the painting he wants to make. 'I tend to take things out of the photographs so my buildings become dysfunctional,' he explains. 'They don't have door handles, for example.' Although they appear heroic, Havsteen-Mikkelsen is not painting these modern buildings uncritically. Art provides room for ambiguity, unlike the fixed camera lens. And the main job of an artist, he believes, is to think through image. It is a position he attributes to the uncanny photographs of Thomas Demand, cited as a distinct influence. 'I'm always thinking, how did we get here? Is the world that we're creating on these modern principles the best world? I'm not convinced it is.'

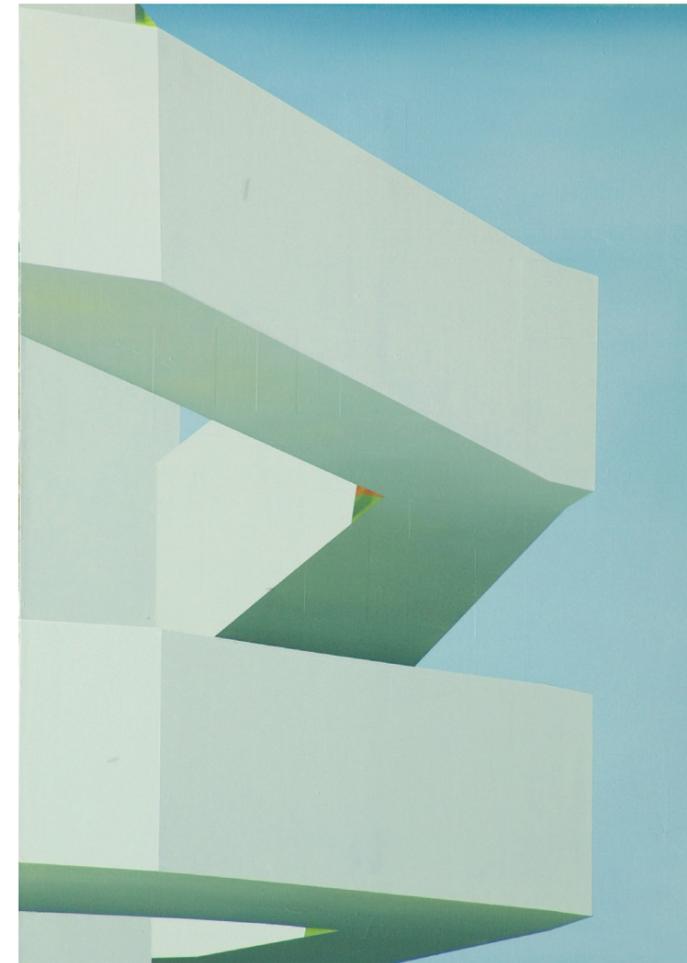
Taken with the artist's paintings, it is clear there is an earnestness to Flooded Modernity that might not have been apparent at first glance. If the installation had been made for shock value alone, there would have been a far easier way ▶

BELOW Space as Membrane, oil on canvas, 2018

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LEFT Concrete Snakes, oil on canvas, 2014



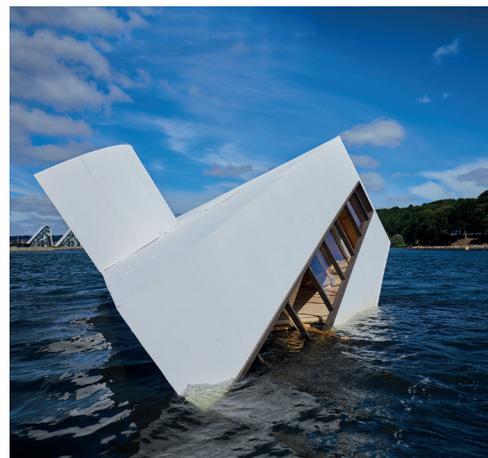
RIGHT Space Stripped Bare, oil on canvas, 2014

PORTRAIT: LÆRKE POSSELT; PHOTOS OF PAINTINGS: UWE WALTER / DAVID STJERNHOLM



"I knew from the beginning that it had to be monumental. And because I actually built the thing and made it happen, it became much more serious. I really had to mean it"

ABOVE Flooded Modernity, 2018 – staged for the Floating Art festival in Vejle Fjord, Denmark



to accomplish it. The sunken villa could have been a Photoshopped image (a digital manipulation might have been fitting for the statement) or made at a lesser scale. 'There's this strange dialectic between the material and the immaterial,' he says. 'The more uncertainty between what is real and what is fake builds up a desire for the real thing.'

The physical labour of replicating Villa Savoye was carried out by a team of two people initially, working without drawings by an architect or engineer. Havsteen-Mikkelsen says he saw the project through at great risk to his finances, reputation and mental health. 'I knew from the beginning that it had to be monumental. It had to be huge. And because I actually built the thing and made it happen, it became much more serious. I really had to mean it.'

It often takes an outsider to make the architectural profession look at itself. In the 1970s, artist Gordon Matta-Clark famously pierced the pomp of the establishment with his 'anarchitecture', which comprised large-scale works that sliced into buildings to disrupt the viewer's sense of normality. Taking up the mantle of the antagonist for these turbulent political times, Havsteen-Mikkelsen's works prompt debate about whether modern architecture should still be on its pedestal, or if a new architectural language is needed to address a world in flux.

Whether publishing, painting or installation art, Havsteen-Mikkelsen's work plays on the power of the artist as a free agent within society and culture. 'Architects have huge responsibilities and a tendency to become ingrained in authoritarian structures,' he says. 'What [artists] have is this anarchistic, non-authoritarian position that allows us to do things that other people wouldn't do.' ♦