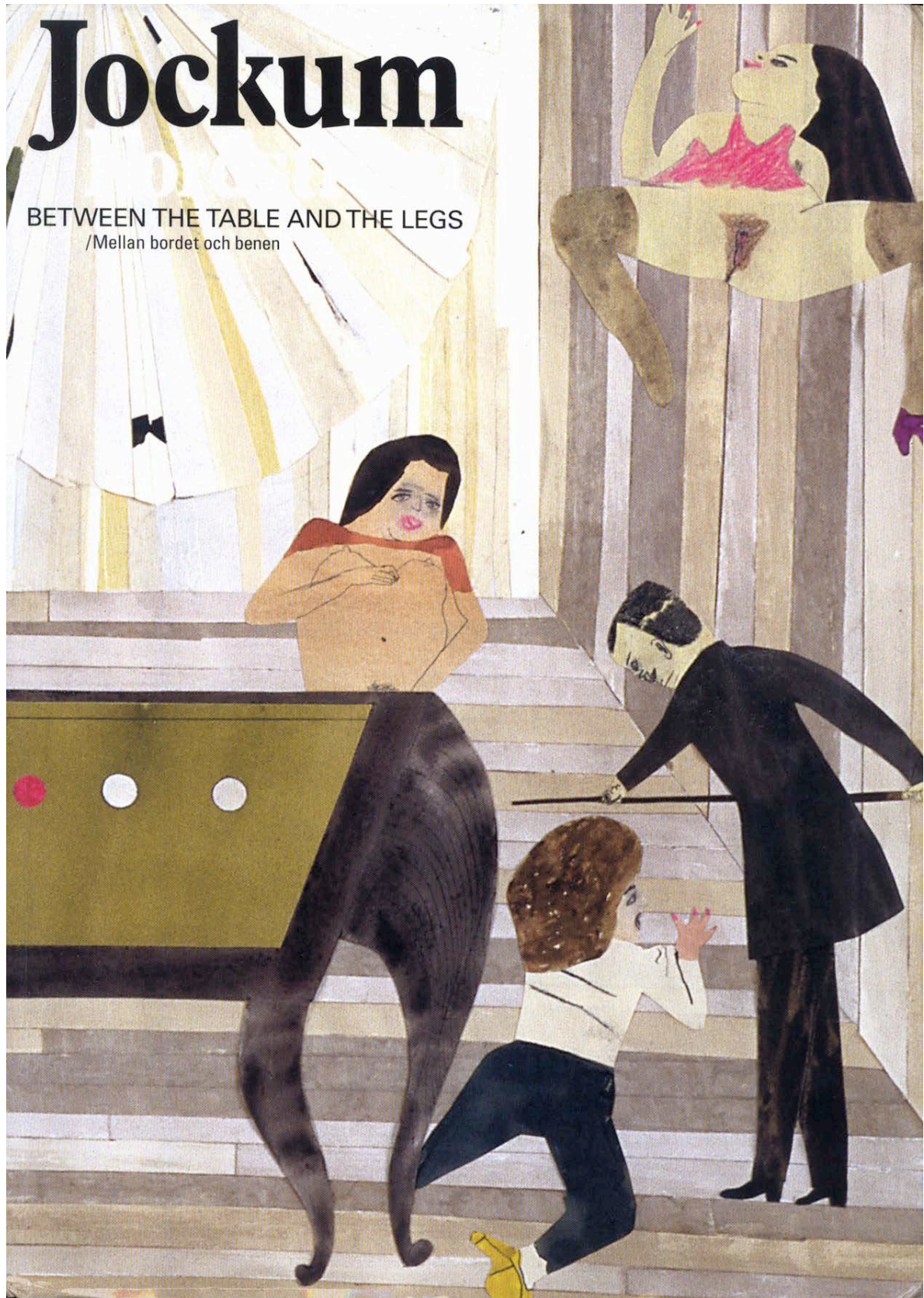


Spears Dorothy, 'Jockum Nordström essay'. Catalogue: Between the table and the legs, 2003.



## Jockum Nordström essay.

By Dorothy Spears



JOCKUM, 2001.

I have never visited Jockum Nordström's studio, but he says that it's full of light. It's located above the high-rise apartment he shares with his wife and sons, in a suburb just south of Stockholm, Sweden. "The view is amazing," he says. Below he can see subway trains, traffic, buildings. Above are huge amounts of sky. He describes the studio's contents, its sofa and old armchairs, its fireplace. There are collections of books, records. There's even a balcony. I imagine something along the lines of an airborne living room. The stuffed birds are floating. Dried butterflies and potted plants hover around the edges, like in his drawings. When he mentions the piano, I want to ask, "Upright or baby grand?"

But this is not your typical artist interview. For Nordström and I have never actually spoken. My questions have reached him indirectly, via e-mail. They have been translated into Swedish, answered, translated back into English, then e-mailed back to me. Our virtual interview has been supplemented by a Fed Ex package containing two animated films Nordström has directed, several children's books he has illustrated, a catalogue of his drawings, published in 1998 with a Swedish text, and a manila envelope with miscellaneous items bearing numbered tabs, and accompanied by a typed list explaining each item's significance to the artist.

Poring over these materials, I am struck by the extent to which the process of writing this essay resembles Nordström's own process for making art. For as he puts it, "A single picture of mine may often be based on a multiple of originals." Nordström is a collagist – collage being, in this age of electronic data transmissions and air-freighted hard copy, perhaps the most appropriate means for conveying what one knows. "I am constantly looking at my immediate surroundings," he writes, "as well as books." Art, photographs, people, plants, architecture, patterns, textiles and history also play a role. In other words, like most artists, Nordström absorbs the world around him, and then turns to his work to stake out his place in it. "I often take a walk in the middle of the day," he confesses. "I might stroll among the houses, or walk up to the garbage recycling station to breathe in some oxygen."

Among the items included in the manila envelope is an example of Nordström's favourite comic strip as a child. "A short strip every day in the morning paper of Stockholm," he writes, "became long stories after some time. You never knew how it would end. I cut them out and saved them in boxes." Accompanying another cartoon by a Danish artist and cartoonist, Storm P, Nordström comments, "His drawing on a Tuborg beer can was magic to me. I have always liked his simplicity and anarchistic attitude." I am touched by Nordström's excitement for these materials, his respect for his own history, as well as his childlike urge to connect with me, to make his work understood.

Nordström draws at his desk and paints and pastes with his work spread out across a fake Persian carpet. During good work periods, his studio is messy, but it's a productive sort of mess: drawings, books, paper, letters, cut out bits of reference material, gramophone records. In spite of the chaos, his tools – pens, brushes, scissors, knives, glue, rulers, and tape – are always strategically placed where he can find them. "I usually tidy up twice a year," he reports. "Often after exhibitions or in connection with my tax declaration. The effort always feels tedious and empty. Like rummaging among ashes after a fire."

Nordström's pencil drawings and collages – along with his earlier animated films – often depict such tedious and empty moments in conjunction with imaginative flights. In *Note-writer (Notsskrivare)*, for example, a drawing from 1996, a middle-aged man in reptilian shoes sits at a handsomely carved piano. The music on the stand in front of him is blank and the pencil in his left hand suggests that he's composing. But something interferes with any facile interpretation of the goings on: a life-like miniature reindeer and naked Roman-type figure holding a bow are poised atop the piano. The weary expression in the composer's face, combined with the way he holds his pencil frozen in mid-air, suggest that recognizable shock and resignation one feels when one's familiar demons happen to pay a surprise visit. On closer examination, perspective lines below the reindeer and naked Roman suggest they may actually represent figures. But then,

in the upper right, dangling from a tree branch in the window, a hand with two cut-off fingers undermines all the suggested normalcy in the picture. One wonders, is the figure really writing music? Or is he just wishing he were writing music? Or is he just resting at the piano, taking a breather, because the absurdity of his life has made him dizzy? And, by the way, those reptilian shoes do look a little – well – kooky.

Sometimes it's difficult to tell whether the imaginative flights of Nordström's pictures – the reindeer and naked man, in this case – represent scraps of suppressed fantasy fighting their way into the flattened-out consciousnesses of the figures, or if they're a coping mechanism, a reaction, borne of necessity, to the mind-numbing activities of daily life. In many ways, this is what makes Nordström's drawings so compelling: there is an openness to them, an invitation to the viewer to take a stab at interpreting, to fill in the blanks, so to speak.

Nordström's work reminds us that interpretation – like life – is an inherently playful activity. For example, *Kitchen Trolls (Köktroll)*, a drawing from 2000, presents a woman in a kitchen wearing what appear to be tap shoes. Dancing on the dining table, hiding beneath it, and playing the violin are a variety of miniature men. *Jam Session in Mum and Dad's Room*, also from 2000, presents a trio of musicians in the mildly transgressive act of playing music in their parent's bedroom. As usual, the scenes presented in Nordström's drawings are consistently – one might say resolutely – ambiguous. They offer no fixed answers. So in the end, like a Rorschach test, Nordström's depictions, or at least what the viewer sees in them, reveal as much about the viewer as they do about the artist himself. In this way, Nordström's artwork functions like the best art, including literature, drama and film: it reveals us to ourselves, handing us back our humanity.

Nordström's drawings and collages read like storyboards – he even refers to them as "stills" – with all of the action taking place simultaneously in a single, frozen frame. There is the sense about his work of the uncanny. The figures often gaze out at the viewer, like characters in a horror film, displaying either guilt – as if they've been caught in a shameful act – or zombie-like detachment. Are the figures in his drawings based on people from his actual life? Sometimes, he tells me. Mostly they are imaginary or symbolic. Then comes the secret, the quirky admission of someone who spends a lot of time alone: "I've actually experienced meeting characters for the first time in real life that I have already, strangely enough, met in my paintings."

Nordström makes collages, but even his pencil drawings and paintings have a collage-like feel. Soft, voluminous patches are erased and redrawn, then contradicted by hard, architectural contours; interior and exterior worlds are juxtaposed without regard for continuity. These strategies create the effect of fragmentation without actual cutting and pasting. And fragmentation – either imagined or real – is both the means and the end of Nordström's oeuvre. It's as if he's saying, our lives are prismatic, disconnected. We are constantly building bridges, reconciling what is virtual with what is physically before us. We see forests burning, buses blowing up on television. Then we go and fix our children's lunches.

Nordström's "multiple of originals" can be traced to a great variety of sources. Cranach and James Ensor are longstanding influences. Also important is the work of Laplander artist Nils Nilsson Skum, a reindeer keeper who died around 1950, and Primus Mortimer Pettersson, a sailor, who, according to Nordström, "went nuts and started to paint." More recently Nordström has been looking at drawings and watercolours from 16th and 17th century India. And of course, surrealism, with its levitating objects, and bizarre, automatic associations, has made an indelible mark on the artist's psyche.

Nordström describes how, as a child, he would draw every day with his older brother. "It was simply a necessity," he says. Together they drew cartoons, maps, animals, sports scenes, things they saw on TV, in the cinema, and in magazines. At times they would spend days on the same drawing, continuously taping on new sheets of paper when things got too cramped. These were Nordström's youthful, improvised version of storyboards. He went on to build soccer arenas in cardboard, construct board games, and design his own decks of cards. "Once," he reports, "my little sister and I built an entire city in paper, complete with hospitals, factories, and cable cars. We started one Easter and continued a whole year."

After graduating from the National College of Art and design in Stockholm in 1985, Nordström began earning money as a freelance illustrator. His work has appeared in a wide variety of media, from books and newspapers to album covers. All the while, he's been making art and – not surprisingly – playing music.



VIEW FROM THE STUDIO / UTSIKT FRÅN ATELJÉN, 1995.



The influence of music on his work is consistent, clear. Content-wise, there are musicians, though mainly of the formal, turn-of-the-century, concert-clad variety. Then of course there is improvisation, that riff of spontaneity. As the artist says, "It is through the choices one makes in combination with chance occurrences that compositions and narratives arise." Nordström is a bass guitarist, and has played in bands for 15 years. Lately, he's been revisiting the blues: Bessie Smith, Otis Spann, and Earl Hooker.

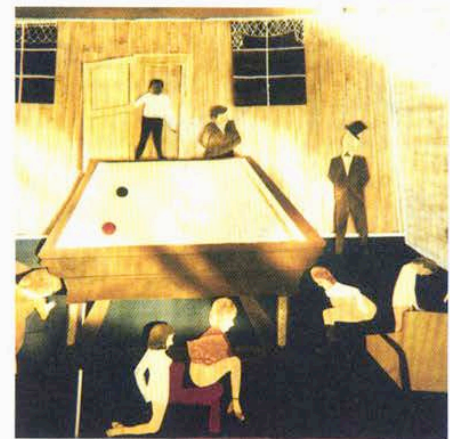
One sees the melding of art and music in Nordström's animated films. In *In his Loneliness (I sin ensamhet)*, for example, a stark winter landscape of leafless trees and anonymous, low-rise buildings gives way to reflections in the windows of the buildings, lyrical renderings of the outdoors. Stopping on one particular blue window, the camera then zooms inside to find a middle-aged man dusting, mopping. The soundtrack is full of powerful simulations. The squeegee squeaks; the mop thwacks and slops. When the man reaches the toilet, the camera cuts to the dirty water inside. The toilet is flushed and a whole collage of colourful cut-out images of sex and grit fills the frame. The rest of the film juxtaposes scenes of the middle-aged man engaged in the ordering of his home – folding laundry, ironing – interspersed with scenes starring himself in uniform, galloping on a horse, clearing hurdles. The vacuuming of a chair becomes the vacuuming of a woman's ass, but then it is just vacuuming again, and the man is alone, crying. The music accentuates the man's solitude. There is a moment of pause. Then, in the end, the view out the window is colourful, and the man goes for a walk among characters who are, by turns, dressed in mundane, contemporary wear, and more fantastical period top hats and ball gowns. Reality and fantasy coexist in the man's new, jerry-rigged consciousness. Therein lies peace.

Nordström's animated films are wonderfully poignant. Still he confesses, "I find working with animation very demanding, to the point of risking psychic exhaustion." Thus, he has put filmmaking aside, at least for the time being, without dismissing it entirely. "Who knows," he writes, "what the future has in store?"

Filmmaking is inherently collaborative. But Nordström also perceives drawing with his older brother, and making paper cities with his sister when they were children, as a way of interacting socially. And I would argue that art-making for Nordström continues to have a social component. For when the figures in his drawings look out to the viewer, it's as if they're asking one, if not for completion, exactly, at least for careful consideration. In other words, drawing connects Nordström's inner life with the outside world. It also, paradoxically, connects him to himself. As he says, "It is within the work process that I really find concentration. This is where my identity as an artist and my everyday life resides, and this is where my ideas take shape."

In piecing together our virtual interview and the assorted materials in the Fed Ex package, I have observed the following about Nordström's character: he has a deadpan sense of humour; he is generous in communicating indirectly; he likes to make lists. At least this is what he wants me – and, by extension, you – to know.

Nordström's work explores the subject of modern day alienation. By treating this as a given, however, and accepting it without protest, the artist is able to access his imaginative world very elaborately. Which leads me to posit: fantasy, in Nordström's view, is less for escape, than for sustenance. One might even go so far as to argue that fantasy offers redemption. The world is flawed, Nordström seems to be saying. But it's negotiable. On account of our fantasies. Our fantasies give us individuality, and by extension, life. Fantasy has the power to transform banal, alienating tasks into moments that shimmer with humour, poignancy, enchantment, whimsy, gallantry, glamour, and – most importantly – profound hope.



IN THE STUDIO / I ATELJÉN, 2000-2002.