

Pigeat Anaël, 'The Floating Worlds of Jockum Nordström'. art presse, nr.399, April 2013, p.51-53.

The Floating Worlds of Jockum Nordström

The LaM in Lille (Villeneuve d'Ascq) is currently hosting the first French museum outing by Swedish artist Jockum Nordström (although he did exhibit at the Institut Culturel Suédois, Paris, in 2011). Titled *All I Have Learned and Forgotten Again*, the show, curated by Marc Donnadiou, will cross the Channel in a more compact version to London's Camden Arts Centre (July 26–September 29), and the two venues are co-publishing a catalogue (with Hatje Cantz). Here is a chance to discover fifteen years of rich, varied but coherent work.

After studies at Konstfach University College of Arts Crafts and Design and a spell working in the offices of the Swedish postal service, Jockum Nordström began working as an illustrator for a local newspaper (*Dagens Nyheter*), then went on to produce children's books. Incipient boredom edged him into painting but an allergy to solvents forced him to stop and he chose drawing instead. Today, all his work is done on and with paper.

Music infuses everything he does. Classical, blues, jazz—he listens while he works. Lots. And he has designed many a record cover. He cuts out photos of musicians and sticks them in his drawings. Other times he draws them. "Here is Stravinsky teaching a child music, he is acting as an educator, and in fact that's the picture's title: *Education*." (1) The musicality of the forms is particularly striking in some of his compositions.

DRAWING WORLDS

At first glance, Nordström's world is light and childlike, almost naïve. There are occasional dark notes, but nothing desperate. He refers to Paul Klee for his relation to

drawing and music, to James Ensor, to Manet and Magritte, to the mosaics of Ravenna, to folk art and outsider artists such as Henry Darger, Théophile Bra, and Jules Leclercq: what matters to him are not the categories, however, but the images.

The themes of the first drawings recur throughout the subsequent work. Many of these drawings construct and explore worlds—rather as if, as Marc Donnadiou explains in the book,(2) this were a way of reliving his childhood ambition of sailing the seas and discovering the world. And so Nordström's line speaks of life, of nature, of the spirit of the Enlightenment, but also of Sweden, of the ships it sent to the mouth of the Delaware River in the seventeenth century. Nordström's images show people swearing on the Bible, hunting scenes, field work, scenes of bourgeois life in the nineteenth century, with the rich and successful going to the opera and keeping courtesans. There is a touch of irony and no little humor behind his many erotic drawings in which ladies in suggestive poses spring out of clouds or from behind a theater curtain. The ringmaster watches the whores. Nordström knows those 347 etchings by Picasso, which certainly come to mind here, but that wasn't his inspiration. The processes of making the works remain highly visible, which makes them more abstract than they seem. The surface of the paper vibrates with a thousand marks left by a sheet or piece of adhesive tape, corrections, and ghostly eraser marks. In some erotic drawings the surface of the paper has been so thoroughly worked, rubbed, and scraped, that in places it is beginning to fall apart.

"At a time when I was listening to a lot of blues, I wanted to make images that look like that music sounds, that give a sensa-

tion of color: flat collage was the way I found." Nordström says that he also came to collage because he wanted to make larger formats.

CUT AND PAINT

His method has almost become a way of life. In the small studio in central Stockholm where he has worked for several years now, Nordström is surrounded by images, books and objects. He may spend weeks cutting things from pieces of paper of varying thickness and texture—men, women, trees, dogs, horses, apes and other, indeterminate objects like the rocks/clouds/ tears with a Far Eastern feel. These forms are like the characters in a shadow theater. "I don't draw, my scissors are my pencil." One thinks of cartoons made for tapestries, going from one scene to another. In the early days, he used to cut out several sheets at the same time in order to obtain identical forms, but no longer. He has borrowed extensively from Indian and Persian miniatures, and when explaining the position of one little running figure he referred to the Bayeux Tapestry, as he did to explain a decorative motif cut out with a knife which looks like a frieze or embroidering thread, as found in several collages.

After that comes the painting phase. Like Matisse, Nordström paints his paper by hand, but he does not cut straight into the color. In his case, the form comes first. He paints costumes, fur, bark, but also grounds, in a meditative addition of layer over layer, the slow-drying paint sometimes so dark as to be black. The elements he is most pleased with he keeps in a kind of image bank—no computers, for him. The discards simply end up on the studio floor in a kind of creative mulch.



Finally, the time comes to assemble the different elements on one or several superposed grounds. The compositions are extremely varied and evolve over time, gaining varying degrees of density, symmetry and rhythm. These incongruous associations of heterogeneous elements, *exquisite corpses* with a single maker, were already a feature of the drawings, but here their evocative power is that much greater. Nordström may have some idea where's he going, but a good part of proceedings is always improvisation. His compositions are floating worlds, left as open as possible. "I don't want to say too much, neither to others nor to myself." No sooner do you think you have latched onto an interpreta-

tion than it disappears into the mass of other possibilities. His drawings are like stories without narrative, as Donnadiu notes: "It's as if he positioned himself in a pre-language, without the filter of the unconscious, making him closer to Breton's than to Dubuffet's definition of art brut."

The titles of the works often come to him when making the work. These can be literal, bizarre, pithy or droll: "Back to the garage with the bullshit detector," or "Shit the great revolution but where is the Holy Bible?!" These are haikus, after a fashion, chosen more for their sound than for their meaning.

The most difficult moment is when he actually makes the collage. "It's tough: you

have to be really, really precise." This is when he may decide to slightly loosen the legs attached to a woman figure, or leave a guitarist's hand free to beat the rhythm. Such figures become tiny sculptures on the surface of the canvas, each with their own shadows and vibrations.

TIME SUSPENDED

Nordström likes to describe his collages as frames or stills: suspended moments. He may be referring to the decisive moment in photography, or rather, to cutting, a process to be repeated as many times as there are elements to assemble. There are also several layers of time coexisting in each collage, if we bear in mind that the forms in a given piece may have been made at intervals of several months. These different time frames are also mixed into the making of the collage.

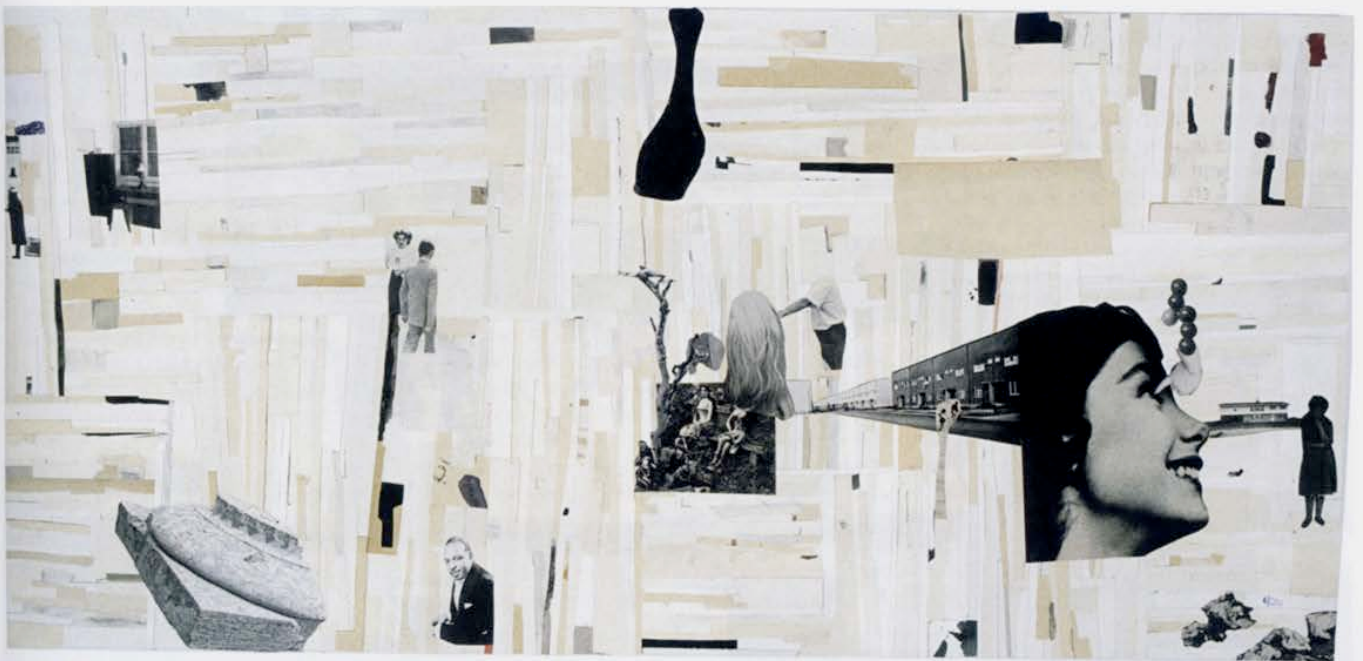
There is a series of works in which this presence of time is even more palpable. Nordström has also made grounds by assembling strips cut from his notebooks, in a kind of paper marquetry. We glimpse a first name, a phone number, a doodle made when phoning, an address, or simply a date. His everyday life is passed through the filter of his collages, like panning for nuggets. The residue of the days is fixed on paper, pinned down like butterflies.

Nordström also compares his marquetry-like grounds to the sound of drums—imagine the movements of a drummer captured by Marey or Muybridge. They are like scores on which little figures are glued like the lyrics to songs or notes on a stave in a music that is also time. These strips are also akin to weaves, or architecture.

SCULPTURE/ARCHITECTURE

Many of Nordström's drawings show a taste for the architecture of big housing blocks. In *Vu de mon studio* (Seen from My Studio) and *Maisons en bandes* (Strip Houses) we see a carceral row of identical houses, nightmarish in their monotony. After drawing several very strange houses, Nordström felt like building in three dimensions, as if actually making them would help him to understand. These sculptures are commentaries on his images. In a very Cubist-style approach, they are made up of bits of paper and cardboard from the studio—also a way of resisting the temptations of commercial success. Most of them represent buildings inspired by the suburbs of Stockholm where Nordström grew up: a paradise forever lost (however hard it could sometimes be). The inscriptions on the bits of cardboard are like graffiti on city walls, except that these are studio notes. These paper facades have transparent, rectilinear facades, their symmetry only rarely





altered, in a triumph of the modernist grid, on which more below. Take Nordström's representation of the school he attended as a teenager, "a block which looks a bit like a train, because a school is a train that you take in life": on the roof, a strip of paper presents a series of *As* clumsily drawn by one of his sons when he was learning to write. Some of the architecture is imaginary. Most of the sculpture, on the contrary, is completely, almost hermetically closed on itself. Constructions made of old matchboxes evoke the house in Jacques Tati's *My Uncle*. There are small, poetic figures—for example, "Long Trousers" (*Pantalon long*), whose title alone brings a smile to the lips. At the time when he started creating sculptures, Nordström made a few collages inspired by Surrealism, based on photos cut out from magazines. We recognize Antonin Artaud, the rooms of a museum and all kinds of anonymous figures transformed into heroes of this strange universe. In one of the collages we see a photo of a picture wall in a museum. The photos were cut out with a craft knife, "because they were bad works." The result is a grid stuck on a ground that in fact hangs slightly free, which resonates with the facades of the modernist buildings (which is what the Lam exhibition subtly shows).

GRIDS

Examining Nordström's work, references to childhood and popular tales and legends immediately come to mind. But there is another motif that appears very early on in his work, and on many other occasions in different forms, which might be said to

Page de gauche/page left: « Child of Nature ». 2010. Collage, aquarelle et graphite sur papier. 76 x 57 cm. Collage, watercolor, graphite on paper
 Ci-dessus/above: Sans titre. 2006. Collage et graphite sur papier, 48 x 103 cm. Collage, graphite on paper

move his work towards abstraction: the modernist grid. In his first drawings, small grids are sometimes hidden in the leaves of a tree, on the collar worn by a figure in eighteenth-century costume, on the keel of a warship in full assault mode. It is a kind of decorative motif whose meaning is not really clear. The grid also appears in the marquetry grounds. Nordström often quotes the mosaics of Ravenna, which are grids in their way. As we have seen, the grid is strikingly present in the facades of the cardboard buildings, and in the photograph mentioned above. We also find it in the composition of certain collages, which take the form of natural history plates—Nordström says that he had them under his bed when he was a child, with birds on. When you ask him about the importance of this motif, he replies that symmetry has always been present in his work, even if he hasn't theorized the phenomenon, or even been really aware of it. The form imposes itself.

POP-UP EFFECTS

A few years ago Nordström was invited to adapt one of his children's books, *Sailor och Pekka* (a pun on David Lynch's *Sailor and Lula*) as an opera. He designed the sets. After that the publisher Christophe Daviet-Théry invited him to a pop-up artist's book. (Nordström spent four years working on it.) *By and to Jockum* is getting

its first public showing here. The ideas involved in going from the small sculptures in paper to the articulations and folds of the book inspired Nordström to ask new questions about decoration. Since that period his collages have evolved. As Marc Donnadieu explains, "Before, there was a symbiosis of the figures and the ground. Since he made the pop-up book, there has been a successive separation of layers." The formats are bigger, the cut-out forms are more monumental, more synthetic, more abstract too. Nordström also loves the look of his book when it is folded. ■

Translation, C. Penwarden

(1) The quotes are from the author's conversation with the artist, held in February 2013.

(2) Jockum Nordström, *All I Have Learned and Forgotten Again*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013 (with texts by John Hutchinson and Marc Donnadieu).

Jockum Nordström

Né en / born 1963 en Suède

Vit et travaille à / lives in Stockholm

Expositions personnelles récentes :

2011 Galleri Magnus Karlsson, Stockholm

(avec Marcel Dzama); Institut suédois, Paris;

House of Sweden, Washington, D.C.

2012 Zeno X Gallery, Anvers

2013 musée d'art moderne, d'art contemporain

et d'art brut, Lille

Expositions de groupe récentes :

2010 *Today Is Yesterday Tomorrow*, Galleri Magnus

Karlsson, Stockholm; *New Narrative*,

Heskin Contemporary, New York; *Thrice Upon A Time:*

66 Artists from the Collection, Magasin

3 Stockholm Konsthall

2011 3^e Biennale de Thessalonique, Grèce