

Overview



Back to the Land, 2008. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with aquatint and soft ground etching. Paper and image size: 26 x 48 1/4". Edition 50. Printed by Emily York.

JOCKUM NORDSTRÖM STORIES FROM A SUITCASE

By Valerie Wade

From December 10, 2007 to January 2, 2008, Swedish artist Jockum Nordström worked for three weeks making etchings in Crown Point's studio in San Francisco. Nordström carried with him a suitcase when he arrived that first day at the press. I couldn't imagine what was in there, maybe music, clothes, a computer? When he opened the case, we were delighted to see that it was packed full of colorfully painted paper cutout shapes: men, women, heads, legs, insects, trees, buildings, and furniture. He spilled out the shapes and they covered the entire surface of a long worktable. I exclaimed, "It must have taken you all year to make these," and he surprised us all with his answer, "No, I made this work over the past two or three months."

Up to this point I had seen only a few drawings of Nordström's here and there, and many years ago in a show at the Jack Hanley Gallery in San Francisco. After he had completed

the prints, the opportunity to see this body of work gave me the idea that his art is like a storyboard—a sequence of enchanting and peculiar tales about domestic interiors, landscapes, and imaginary events that blend the past and present, fact and fiction. In Nordström's collages, the images are flat, cut out with hard edges and painted with sensuous washes of color. Much has been written comparing his work to folk art or outsider art. But I see irony and sophistication in it. I see these pictures as fairy tales for adults. Everything is mixed up and fragmented, creating a level playing field – something akin to the way we experience life: someone is talking to you, the radio is playing, and then you witness a car crash; it all happens at once.

Julie Caniglia, in an *Artforum* review of Nordström's 2002 drawing show at David Zwirner Gallery, sums it up this way, "While one detects the influence of Dubuffet and Hockney as



House and Bugs, 2008. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with soft ground etching. Paper and image size: 22 ½ x 31 ½". Edition 50. Printed by Emily York.

well as outsider and folk art in Nordström's works, these drawings get their power from the artist's own restless imagination...which effectively jump-starts that of the viewer."

We all have an urge to look for clues in narrative art; we ask ourselves what is going on here? In the etching *House and Bugs* we may not recognize the figure with the black top hat as familiar, but we can recognize the metaphorical situation we catch him in. The figures often gaze straight ahead and appear stunned or disconnected, yet they have expressions: yearning, sadness, or complacency, for example. The visual reading of Nordström's compositions moves left to right, like literature. In *Back to the Land* three oddly assorted characters stand innocuously together in a landscape with a clump of trees, underbrush, and a patch of blue sky with clouds. As we move to the right side of the page, Nordström has created a faux paper seam in the center of the image, inferring that the backdrop might be a yellowed page from an old book. The fold or the seam is the only element that separates the figures from nature that is going awry. A stumpy tree is blossoming oversized oranges or red rubber balls. Blooming out of one of these round shapes are menacing clouds in black and grey. The other trees are barren.

A colleague from David Zwirner, Nordström's New York gallery, gave me a copy of the catalog *Jockum Nordström – A Stick in the Wood* from an exhibition at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, 2005. In addition to the reproductions in the catalog, there are several poems that Nordström selected by poets he admired. As I

read through the poems, I noticed that they all have in common a visual presence. They evoke a sensation or, as they say in acting school, a strong sense memory. As Nordström puts it, "Poems have a density for me like music. Really good poems can be like an inspiration well." Here is *Daydream* by Eric Pauli Fylkeson:

It is the middle of summer.
The sky is a white sheet of paper,
my eyes a colon:
I have to write my life down
before I can start to live.

In the studio, as Nordström sorted through the cutouts he had brought with him, he was open and enthusiastic, sharing his approach to the many possibilities of combining and recombining images to create a composition. "Like a composer," he said as he moved the shapes around. A jaunty sailor man from the 17th century leans on his cane and pays no attention to the floating torso of a woman with her tongue sticking out—the body parts came and went along with flowering trees and giant bugs. Master printer Emily York, who was leading the project, showed him how to translate his compositions onto a copper plate prepared with a soft ground. He laid a piece of paper on top of the ground and lightly taped his cutouts to the sheet. Then he placed a piece of tracing paper on top and traced around the edges of the shapes. The pressure of his pencil made an impression in the wax and every mark

and detail of the tracing was recorded on the plate. He then used that plate as a key plate to make all the other plates.

Nordström had made prints before, but this was his first experience with etching. He quickly caught on to the flexibility of the medium. With Emily York, he developed a method to get the crisp edges and light colorful washes that he desired. The edges of the shapes were outlined with asphaltum, a dense, thick ground that acts as a stop-out against the bite of the acid. After the printers laid an aquatint over his shapes, Nordström used both the acid bath and the spit bite process to bite the airy quality of watercolor into his shapes. Watching the proofs coming off the press, Nordström said, “When I make the prints, when I see different plates come to the paper—I see images in a way that I have *never* done before. It is a new way of seeing.”

Several years ago, Nordström discovered that the materials used in oil painting were making him ill, and at that time he stopped painting. Since then, his primary medium has been works on paper: graphite, watercolor, gouache, and collage, his predominant form of expression. He told us that he thinks of scissors as a drawing tool, just like a pencil, and he has developed great dexterity with them. He explained, “Collage is a flat way to see in the world...images *are* a flat thing. With collage you can feel the flatness.”

Collage as a form suits Nordström’s work well: it allows him to put opposites together, and at the same time it accepts all images as material that can be used to make other images. Collage is a humble medium with a history that travels from early Chinese papermakers and Japanese calligraphers to Hans Christian Andersen



Jockum Nordström in the Crown Point studio, 2008.
Photo: Anders Kruger

(who made collages for his books) to Picasso and the Surrealists to Romare Bearden. Among the contemporary artists who are working with collage are Jules de Balincourt, Henrik Olesen and Wangechi Mutu. I wonder if there isn’t a movement growing in the art world, one that desires a more humble, intimate and reflective art versus the more recent work we’ve seen lately that is hyped up and full of technical bravura. The New Museum in New York made a strong



Lick My Hand, 2008. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with aquatint and soft ground etching. Paper and image size: 19 ¼ x 27 ½".
Edition 50. Printed by Emily York.



Jockum Nordström and Emily York in the Crown Point studio, 2008.

statement when it chose for one of its inaugural exhibitions a show titled *Collage: The Unmonumental Picture*.

Nordström perfectly fits the profile of an artist who might enjoy making unmonumental pictures. He shuns the life of an art star and for many years now has lived and worked outside Stockholm in an apartment complex in the suburbs with his partner, the artist Karin Andersson and the younger of their two sons. He told me that music has always been very important in his life, especially blues and jazz. Since childhood he has played instruments and in art school he played bass in a punk band. While he was in San Francisco he visited with his brother in Oakland, across the bay. His brother is a blues musician.

I see Jockum Nordström as a contemporary version of a Renaissance man. He makes furniture, plays music, and has made animated films. He has even designed carpets. Throughout his art

career he has made illustrations for children's books, album covers, and music posters. In his compositions he moves easily from humor, irony, and visual puns to gravity and formal concerns, and he shows this same agility in his interactions with others, bouncing from intense concentration to cracking a joke or engaging in quick conversation. He possesses the rhythm and timing of an improvisational actor or comedian—Buster Keaton comes to mind. We talked a bit about body language and silent films. I didn't really expect Nordström to agree when I confessed that he reminded me of Keaton, but he laughed and offered that many years ago someone had actually told him that he looked like Keaton!

As he packed up his characters, getting them ready for their suitcase and eventually the journey home to Sweden, Nordström told me he could definitely have extended his engagement here. "The biggest problem may be the time. I want to be here maybe a half a year! So three weeks was maybe too little time for me, but it was a good time. And I hope it can be more."

We do too. Stay tuned for the next installment.

Art|39|Basel|4-8|6|08

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Concepts, Chemistry and Copper

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