

STOCKHOLM

Jonas Dahlberg

GALERIE NORDENHAKÉ

Were Jonas Dahlberg a film director, his camera work might be described as front and center or a little bit square—but that's OK, because his work is otherwise flush with mystifying dramas. In his earlier three-screen video *Three Rooms*, 2008, domestic interiors simply melt into nothing. There's no trace of special effects, you can't

believe your eyes, and then it's over—chests, chairs, beds, all gone. You shake your head, you move on. Dahlberg doesn't need to move the camera around; he positions you to experience his version of the Kübler-Ross model of five stages of grief, running from denial to acceptance.

Dahlberg's best work reminds me of what can be read as another revision of Kübler-Ross's sequence, J. G. Ballard's 1981 short story "The Autobiography of J. G. B." A man wakes one morning to find his town of Shepperton inexplicably deserted. "Nothing in this peaceful suburb was out of place, except for its missing tenants." Gradually, he realizes that everyone—as in *everyone*—has gone missing. Also missing is any upshot to the story; in its place, Ballard provides the mild-mannered acquiescence of the lone character, who grows content having become the last person on earth, while Shepperton turns into "an extraordinary aviary, filled with birds of every species." Dahlberg's new exhibition, "View Through a Park," could be the set for a transatlantic version of Ballard's fancied autobiography. He has taken New York's Gramercy Park as his location, showing it after sunset in a video, *View Through a Park*, 2009, and a suite of photographs, *View from a Street*, 2009. Shot from a model, not from life, the photographs depict the buildings that surround the park. The film begins in an apartment in one of these buildings—appointed in the way that makes *World of Interiors* call about doing a feature—and from there proceeds out the window at a slow crawl. On the other side of the park, the camera enters through another window to discover an apartment not precisely the twin of the one from whence it has come, but close enough to call it so. And then it's out the window, heading back. Dahlberg's obsession with spying back and forth between apartments has its own backstory in his earlier work *Safe Zones no. 1*, 1996–2003. Dahlberg once lived in an apartment facing another whose tenant prominently displayed trophy rifles; this triggered enough paranoia for Dahlberg to arrange the furniture in his apartment so that from the would-be assassin's POV, it would appear that his apartment was abandoned. Photographs and diagrams document Dahlberg's manic solution for self-survival.

As an account of Dahlberg's video, Vivian Mercier's 1956 review of *Waiting for Godot*, "nothing happens, twice," can't be beat. The film, a single, exceptionally long tracking shot, carries you from one apartment to its twin, faithfully withholding any conclusion through a nightmarish sameness. The single emotion it expresses, while constantly teetering on the brink of wide-eyed madness, is mild-mannered serenity. Gramercy Park has been the last privately held park in Manhattan for decades. A statue of Edwin Booth, the feted nineteenth century Shakespearean actor and brother of Abraham Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, serves as the park's centerpiece. As an example of landscape architecture, the park is fully anesthetized and ringed by brownstones as solidly sedate as the grounds they face. Ready-made, it is Dahlberg's perfect conceit: a secular Eden where private park

equals private world fully in denial of the real world just beyond. In Dahlberg's portrayal, it is a psychological landscape that you might like to visit, but . . . *View Through a Park* is a loopy black comedy caught up in its own tautology that unexpectedly baits your emotions; its strength is that its complacency is so well bred, it makes you want to scream.

—Ronald Jones



Jonas Dahlberg,
View Through a Park,
2009, still from
a black-and-white
video, 16 minutes
58 seconds.