

JOHAN THURFJELL

“imagination’s effect on life, time’s wear on memory, and fiction’s influence on reality”

Sasquatch: Legend Meets Science is the title of a book by the American anthropologist Jeff Meldrum, in which he analyzes evidence of the mythological creature Bigfoot. Ever since the 1800s, there have been enthusiasts the world over that have asserted its existence. *Legend Meets Science* (2010) is also the title of the first piece one encounters in Johan Thurfjell's exhibition - a series of small paintings inspired by Meldrum's book that represent alleged proof. Thurfjell has naturally not made the paintings as a means of insisting on the truthfulness of the legend, but he has discovered that the poetic mystery surrounding them consists of metaphors of human experiences of a very particular kind. The experience that everything can potentially be something else.

One of the more feasible explanations for the gigantic footprints depicted in a few of the paintings is that they were originally tracks of more common animals, such as bears, but that they have, since their initial formation, eroded or melted and therefore grown in size. In its simplicity, this is not only an explanation of the footprint itself. It also shows that when a track or a course of events is subjected to the effects of time, it can broaden into a full-fledged narrative that simply becomes more and more significant with every reiteration. Thurfjell is a very good storyteller himself, but not of the kind that creates a weave of fanciful narratives or that tells us especially much at all, for that matter. Instead, he leaves tracks with the intention of having them grow in the viewer's own consciousness.

Collapse (2009) is a good example of this sort of openness. Upon first encountering the piece I was struck by how construction and collapse are so intimately intertwined - in fact consciously inseparable - in the creation of this impressive construction. The act itself of depicting a catastrophe in a model format can easily be interpreted as the artist's desperate attempt at convincing himself that such a thing is in fact manageable. A processing or a comforting illusion of control. But the piece naturally also has a metaphorical dimension to it as an image. "Building bridges" is a term that is as worn as it is banal, having to do with immediate understanding (between people, cultures etc). In this case, however, the immediately detectable aspect represents, as with an iceberg, but a deceptively small part - a hint - of its full significance. The depicted connecting link can be understood not as a collapse, but rather in terms of relationships, inter-humanity and communication where the understanding is "indirect", and where specifically the lack of understanding or the misunderstanding (the collapse) that arises in the transition is actually a more constructive state than the comprehensible. A situation in which an entirely new form of understanding can emerge, just as with the case of Bigfoot. Here it becomes evident how the artist takes a step back in order to allow the viewer's thoughts, memories and emotions to gain access to, and fill the works with content that goes beyond commonly identifiable generic terms. The bridge thus becomes a landing field for our projections.

Putting one's finger on precisely what it is that Thurfjell does to charge the objects he creates so that they do not reveal themselves for what they are is no easy task. What is clear, however, is that, just as is the case with myths, the works would not endure such discoveries - at the precise moment the bridge becomes a bridge, the story loses its relevance. Part of the explanation has to do with the artist's own impassioned conviction and the fact that he puts his faith in something that lies deep within the viewer: our emotional lives, our dreams and our drive to create meaning in what we see. By giving us room to maneuver and putting his trust in us, he provides us with the enticing perception that both we ourselves and our experiences are significant. This is a welcome sentiment in the midst of the global media and information society where we, more often than not, are viewers of a world theatre - passive, insignificant and exchangeable (despite the readers' comments and all the interactivity). A risk Thurfjell readily subjects himself to is that the works otherwise could easily become empty or disheartening. Unlike many artists, he has the courage to teeter at the edge of the banal as he knows that it is here that the experience is at its most intense.

Another characteristic aspect of Thurfjell's work is that he often combines materials from various sources that merge as a camouflage pattern into a whole. It is often a question of fragments of his memories that are combined with elements taken out of context from the world of fiction. This is something that reflects and accentuates "imagination's effect on life, time's wear on memory, and fiction's influence on reality", to use the artist's own words.

It can be interesting to note that this synthetic manner by which the understanding of reality is produced appeared to us at its most distinct when we were children. Before we broadened our range with bicycles, buses, subways, cars, trains, airplanes - and before the sheer mass of immediate impressions themselves exceeded our ability to manage and sort through - the immediate world was measured with infinitely small steps, and we instead allowed experience to expand to a higher degree with the help of the power of imagination.

One could say that we unconsciously adopted a more critical stance with regard to information by not accepting it as objective. Something extremely simple such as a stone or a piece of wood could assume magical qualities and a scene from a film could sometimes have an eerie tendency to merge with reality while on our way home along a lonesome forest path.

References to childhood recur as a common thread out Thurfjell's entire production. As early as ten years ago, while still a student at the Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, he made the works *Eight Dreams* (2001) and *I Picture My Neighborhood* (2001). In the former he retells dreams that were played out at his family's summerhouse. The piece consists of descriptive writings and a model of the place itself. In the latter, he had built from memory small models of the houses of his childhood friends and placed them on covers of horror novels by Stephen King.

The new piece, *Prologue* (2011), continues where these earlier works left off. The thirteen small, meticulously crafted backdrops, built up layer by layer in the prologue, lead - as in one continuous movement - through a number of passageways to a murky housing area. What it is we are following, or whether it is we ourselves who are traveling, naturally remains uncertain. But if one takes the title literally, it leads lip to the work entitled *Stage* (2011) that is presented in a room of its own. We enter from behind a backdrop and accordingly end up on a stage together with a model that represents the room we are standing in. We find ourselves simultaneously both in the midst of an experience as well as outside of it. Nearby stand several additional backdrops, each of which depicts a different location. Here we find the housing complex, the schoolyard, the junk pile ... Well, you get the picture.

That said, it is important to stress that Thurfjell has no interest in nostalgically reminding us of a childhood gone forever. Instead, his aim is to actively reclaim this approach to the world. And he has good reason for doing so. The capacity to see meaning in something that is often seemingly meaningless is perhaps the finest trait \life humans are endowed with. There is, not least, a fundamentally existential and political aspect to this. If we do not have the ability to envision the life, society and world we would like to live in, then it is also impossible to strive for these things. And if art and culture can aid in stimulating this approach, of which I an, fully convinced that it can, then it is undoubtedly its "unnecessity" that is one of the most vital elements of a well functioning society. Art can maintain a sense of freedom in relation to the tyrannies of objectivity and the immediate impression. Here Johan Thurfjell stands on the side of the sphere of the possible, against the sphere of the achieved.

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