

VOGUE

PHOTOGRAPHY

The magic world of Simen Johan

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An artist that uses photography to bring his imaginary world to life



I remember vividly when, back in the 90s I was living in New York and saw Simen Johan's series on archetypal images of childhood for the first time. It was so powerful, disquieting and cinematic that it impressed me right from the beginning. He went on to pursue art replacing the human figure with nature but continued to create incredible images in which the familiar becomes unfamiliar and the boundaries between what is real and what is unreal, or what is beautiful and what is threatening become blurred. His photographs are often the result of years of meticulous work. He is an artist that uses photography to bring his imaginary world to life as stated in an interview: "I'm not a conventional photographer, the way a poet or a novelist is not a journalist, or a dramatic filmmaker is not a documentarian. The world as it appears is not enough of what I

want to say. I like to create more than I like to observe." His work is multi-layered and open-ended. Not only stunning and flawless from an aesthetic point of view but also politically poignant: his images are like profound metaphors capable of provoking a visceral response in the viewer.

AG: I wrote many essays on the topic of true and false in photography. My opinion is that reality and truth are not absolute postulates but rather fluid concepts and that it does not make much sense to concern ourselves with the truthfulness of a photograph (except in photojournalism) given that any image is a narration, an interpretation and never an absolute truth. Yet, our brain is prejudiced, meaning it believes that photography equals reality: the object is transparent and gets lost in the subject of the photograph. It is true, however that, in order to exist, photography needs real subjects (even if they can be modified during post-production or integrated into a multi-image collage) and that object and subject need to meet, and this is what makes photography so fascinating, magical and different from any other form of art. What differentiates photography from other forms of representation of the world is the fact that it is a trace, a clue, a sign of reality.

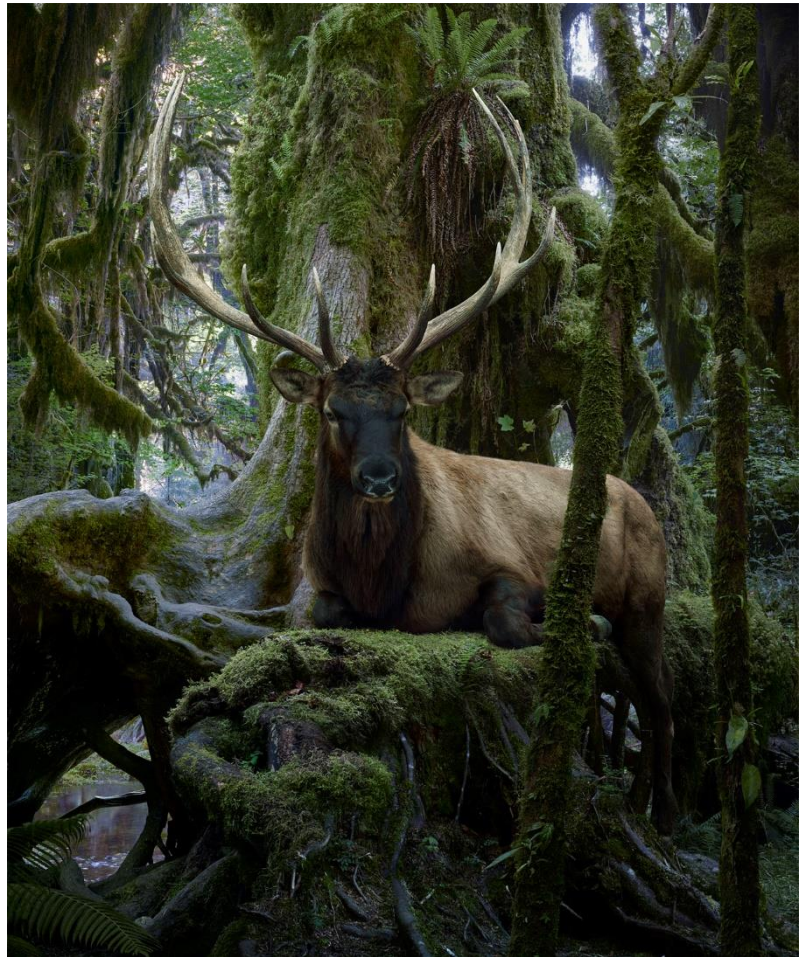
SJ: I agree. In regards to our brain being prejudiced to believe photography, we're really hardwired to believe in anything that looks or sounds about right, or simply feels good or beneficial.

AG: I am sure you had to answer this question many times, but I would like to ask you about your technique and retouching. How has that changed since the start of your career?

SJ: I initially moved to New York in 1992 to study film, but ended up switching to photography because I wanted more creative and financial independence. However, I continued to have cinematic ambitions. I wanted to construct worlds,

rather than document them, and to use dramatic tension, symbolism and atmosphere to communicate meaning. So from the start I looked for ways to overcome photography's creative limitations. At first I would manually cut and paste my images into collages and narratives, and then in my second year I learned about photoshop. This was before Photoshop was part of the curriculum, so I had to take a graphic design course to get computer access. The program was very basic back then and the maximum file size I could work on before the computer crashed was 4MB so I could really only work in B&W. There were no photo printers, so I would invert my images and output them to slides, the kinds companies would use for presentations. So then I had a negative of sorts that I could use to make conventional prints in the darkroom. It wasn't until about 2000 that computers got fast enough for me to work with color. Around 2005 I was able to start working large scale.

AG: The elements of fantasy that emerge in your pictures are particularly convincing because, if we did not know about the way they are digitally manipulated, we would see them as "quotations" extracted from the larger text that is the real world. Yours is my favourite use of retouching, the most powerful one as it doesn't break the "magic spell" of photography and we are led to believe that what we are seeing is exactly what was in front of your camera. Can you tell us about it? Your taste, your perception of colours, shapes and composition skills are exquisite.



SJ: My approach is a bit like a filmmaker's. It is important for me to be able to identify with the characters and their expressions, and for there to be a logic to what they're doing and where they are, even if the scene is an obvious fiction. It all has to come together in a manner that's interesting, meaningful and relatable.

AG: Can you talk us through your creative process? How do you first envision an image that you will then produce?

SJ: Making an image for me is a process of discovery. I like images that have multiple layers of meaning and that speaks truth to me about what life and the world is like--multifaceted, mysterious, illusory, contradictory. So I vaguely envision the end point, but I never know how to get there. I work intuitively, playing around in the computer with different elements that I've photographed in various places around the world, adding and subtracting until the type of image I'm looking for emerges.

AG: Being so elaborate, is the process itself part of the meaning or the reason of your art? How? It seems like a form of meditation to me. The process is a bit like a meditation, sure, on life, meaning, experience, composition, symbolism, storytelling and more.

I'm sure there must have been images that were easier to produce and others that were more difficult. Can you tell us about one of the most difficult ones and why? How many hours of work did it take?

SJ: I typically work on each image for several years, but keep many in progress simultaneously. I have hundreds of compositions in my computer that I've started, but then had to pause for whatever reason. Maybe I need an element that I have to yet photograph or I just don't know where to take it next. Sometimes a composition doesn't work because I've photographed something in the wrong light or weather. I captured the face of the wolf maybe 10 years ago at a wolf sanctuary in California. The caretaker was rubbing its belly when it made this face. I found it fascinating that this was the wolf's "happy face". I didn't have a good body for it. I tried photographing various dogs, but the body of a wolf is very specific—big paws, coarse fur. Several years later, I met someone who had a tame wolf that I could get close to and photograph. The background is a composite of images I photographed in Yellowstone National Park. This was a fairly simple image to compose as it doesn't have many elements.

AG: On October 24th, there will be the opening of your latest exhibition 'Conspiracy of Ravens' at the Yossi Milo Gallery in New York. In the press release, your new work takes a theatrical turn, featuring animals in turbulent scenes of power play and fabricated poses. "The artist attributes the shift to the

current socio-political climate, but also to his continuing and evolving interest in life as a fictional experience, shaped by desires, fears and illusion.” These are very powerful concepts that deserve to be explored in depth. The idea to talk about the current socio-political climate through your animals is very clever. In this sense, is there a particular image that you could describe for us?

SJ: Even though I don't consciously plan my images, they typically end up speaking to what's going on in my life and in the world around me. There's an overall menacing and predatory feel to this show. There are grizzlies ransacking a pelican nesting ground. One could draw parallels to the current US administration. There is a conspiracy of ravens (that's what you call a group of ravens), where everyone is talking and nobody is listening. There's an image of two lions, “kings of beasts”, intertwined in a play of domination and subjugation. However, there are other ways to look at this work. I personally find the works' mysterious attributes more compelling.

AG: I remember your first series in the 90s on archetypal images of childhood. It was very powerful and disquieting; what was the inspiration behind it?

SJ: When I make art, I engage with a more primal part of myself, beyond ego, that's more like a child or even an animal. I think this is why these subjects came to me. On the other hand, I like to upset expectations. Children are typically portrayed with such innocence and cuteness, it felt at the time as something that could be challenged.

AG: And is there a reason why you abandoned the human figure?

SJ: It happened gradually. I first removed the children, focussing on what they left behind, which included some animals. Then at some point the animals became more important so I removed the remnants of children. The subject matter changed, but not so much the underlying topic.

AG: Where does your passion for animals and nature come from?

SJ: I grew up in and around nature, but I never appreciated it. Every summer we spent hiking and camping in northern Norway, eating the fish we caught, while I longed for the city, or at least some palm trees. When I was 14, I saved up money playing the flute in the streets of Sweden to fly to New York to visit my step grandparents who worked in fashion and film. I fell in love with New York and the lifestyle and decided this was where I wanted to live. I moved when I was 19. Nature for me is a like a repressed passion, something that I left behind, that keeps nagging me to come back. When I go there, I feel a sense of ease, but if I stay too long I miss the city. It's a conflicted relationship.

AG: What is the role of obsession and of being obsessive as an artist?

SJ: When I was younger my art was an obsession and my images in many ways came to be about this obsession—children engaging in play that verged on ritual and obsession. Creative obsession is romanticized, but it takes you away from the present moment where there's a more natural kind of creativity and wisdom.

AG: How, if it has, being from Norway informed your art?

SJ: I think moving around a lot at a young age has informed my art. I was born in Norway, raised in Sweden and moved to New York as a teenager. I don't feel a cultural connection to any one geographical place and this is probably why I like to mix geographical locations in my work to make images that are geographically unspecific.

AG: If I'm not wrong, Gregory Crewdson was one of your teachers.

Who are your favourite contemporary photographers and why? What about photographers from the past?

SJ: Yes, and he was one that really understood me. I like Hiroshi Sugimoto and James Casebere for their level of perfection that transcends into something spiritual. I like Diane Arbus and André Kertész from the past. “Photographer” is a complicated term. It emphasizes the tool used, while the vast variations in ambitions and creative processes are ignored. I am drawn to artists whose work expresses the world in profound visual and visceral ways and they also include filmmakers (David Lynch, David Cronenberg, Roman Polanski) painters (Cy Twombly, Edvard Munch, George Baselitz) and sculptors (Medardo Rosso, Louise Bourgeois, Huma Bhabha).

AG: What kind of impact do you hope to have with your images? Is there an image that is in your head but that you have not been able to produce yet?

SJ: When I was younger I would be motivated by the idea of legacy, but as I better understand how everything is rapidly vanishing and will be forgotten, I just want to do my best. I would like to see myself putting together a solid body of images and exhibiting them all at once in a beautiful location, just as I envision it, and publish a book that looks just right.