

Sights Unseen Travels in the Underground World of Simen Johan

I'll never forget seeing Eric Mulholland in his Frankenstein costume. It was fifth grade, Halloween, a holiday I believed was instituted just for me. I won't go into the debacle of my costume, except to say that my mother remarked: "You look nice. Horrible, but nice." I, too, was the Frankenstein monster, until I saw Eric Mulholland. He did not look nice. He was tall for his age with an indescribable face, the world's youngest 40-year old. He lumbered out of his house dressed in a wooly vest with bolts in his neck and, astonishingly, a squared forehead made of paper-mache. The frame houses of my town became cottages in some Rhenish village, the crossing guard an ineffectual burgomaster, the kids in costumes on their way to school mere sheep to be sacrificed to his bloodlust. "Stop him before he kills again!" I shouted.

I hadn't started reading yet — Kafka, Kleist, Shakespeare and Borges — or seen a movie that didn't have a flying saucer or a coffin in it, but when Eric Mulholland came to life as the Monster, I suddenly knew what the Uncanny is. Not exactly what Freud says it is — the return of the repressed — but the imagination's power to manifest wish, dream, and fantasy in the forms it chooses. Once these take on concrete shape, arising out of thin air like a magic plant, they alter the so-called real world as if they were true and it were a sham. They reveal the world's incompleteness, its inadequacy in the face of consciousness. As Freud admitted, the power of the artist, the storyteller, is sovereign: "He deceives us into thinking that he is giving us the sober truth and then after all oversteps the bounds of possibility. We react to his inventions as we should have reacted to real experiences; by the time we have seen through his trick, it is already too late..." I didn't know at the time that the Monster was showing me the power of art.

I also didn't know I was closest to that power just then, as a child, when inchoate longings, boredom, and alienation from the adults I didn't want to turn into — martinis and Al Hirt records? — bred a desire to be somewhere, anywhere out of this world. Eric Mulholland did something about that longing. So did my neighbor Jamie McGee when he built a perfectly parabolic dish antenna out of balsa wood and tinfoil in his bedroom and picked up a radio station from Argentina.

So did Simen Johan. When I first saw his photographs at Yossi Milo's gallery in Chelsea, it was as if I had wandered into a garage and discovered all my childhood friends in the midst of planning some-

thing really big, like spraypainting the tulip beds up and down the street silver, something that would change everything and leave everyone wondering how it had happened. I had recently written a book of stories for my own children about the strange kids I grew up with, and here was someone who obviously had much stranger friends than I did. Except they weren't exactly real. Using early-90s computer imaging technology and a cut-and-paste ingenuity, Johan had grafted the fantastic and outrageous onto a surface of black-and-white reality to create a paranormal version of childhood. It was as if Jerry Uelsmann had grown up in the Village of the Damned.

Although I couldn't get them out of my mind, there were a few things that bothered me about the black-and-whites. The first was how quickly some of the images seemed to yield themselves up. Constructed along a fairly rigid axis, they sexualized childhood and subtly adultified it, in the mode of Inez van Lamsweerde. The other issue for me was a residual Arbusism. Arbus is one of Johan's influences, and I have never liked her work. She gets a pass for her misery and the strength of her obsessions, but the photographs have always struck me as profoundly entrapping. In the early images of Johan's that I liked best, however, I didn't feel trapped like a voyeur, and I didn't ask "Who are these people?" I just got into the story. The characters seemed to spring directly from their ominous, off-kilter surroundings.

Johan's move to color photography was like opening the basement door and yelling, "Come out, come out, whatever you are." It severed his connection to drawing and illustration (as well as historical documentary photography), reinforced his links to film and performance art, and unleashed a more baroque cast of characters and situations into contemporary-looking reality. In terms of influences, Johan moved out from under the protective angel's wings of Duane Michals and into Gregory Crewdson's postmodern twilight. Both were among Johan's teachers. The more dense and extreme his tableaux have become, the more faithful he has grown to a factitious semblance. The so-called truth value of photography, its ontological anchor, has been fading like a cheap print since the 1960s. It has been undermined by staged imagery as well as the pervasiveness of digital fabrication. The most radical representative, because he is so subtle, may be Andreas Gursky, whose manipulations to accentuate scale turn the viewed world into a spectacle. Who thinks seeing is believing? Yet for Johan and others who cannot find in the outer world the images that correspond to their apprehensions of an inner one, the plausible surface is essential. It is the residual mark of conventionalized consensus about the way things look. Johan doesn't want to deny that consensus but extend it to things unseen.

The power and pathos of Johan's images springs from his intuitions about the texture of childhood experience and from his method. He works in collage, the technique at the heart of Surrealism. Collage frees him to walk the world with his camera and receive its impossible permissions. Something ordinary will strike him — a driveway, an abandoned house by the side of the road, a woman's cheek — and he will shoot it, or sample it digitally if it comes from another source, and file it in his electronic unconscious (the computer). Children, dolls, and the peculiar constructions at the heart of his photographs (Dolls stuffed with meat and bird corpses, among others) Johan usually photographs in his studio. How he assembles these elements into digital tableaux is the mystery, and the process of adding, subtracting, and recombining can be lengthy. "I don't finish quickly," he has remarked. Discards are strewn along his digital highway.

Having watched Johan at work, it seems to me the most fertile associations usually spring from the most innocuous material. Often images or fragments that seem the most suggestive or weird don't lead anywhere. There's a lesson here. As with Proust's madelines, the extraordinary — by this I mean not just memory but the entire complex of unassimilated experience — is bound up with the ordinary, and the ultimate goal of unbinding it through art is to enable others to recognize its pervasive, transformative power at work everywhere in our lives. The images of Johan's I have found most moving and evocative are the ones in which nothing appears out of joint except, somehow, everything. Young unclothed boys file past a porthole in the dirty, industrial hold of a ship. Are they refugees? Prisoners? Remember the fear of regimental nakedness at camp or in gym class. A girl dressed in furs and holding a plastic camera waits anxiously outside a sleazy law office in the midst of a blizzard. She stares into swirling snowflakes that seem impossibly large. Portrait of an artist as a forlorn, expectant waif. As in a story by Borges, I could imagine Johan assembling his fragments, each one the sign of a buried intuition or memory, into an image exactly resembling the most ordinary photograph. Isn't this the promise of conventional photography, that there is something behind and beyond every picture that you sense but cannot see? You had to be there. You had to be the photographer.

But Johan isn't interested in closing the photographic circle with a perfect fabrication. Having opened it, he seems to want to explore its origin — and the origin of art itself. His starting point is ritual. In image after image, Johan's children don their versions of Eric Mulholland's paper-mache mask and go where adults cannot follow, into realms of fantasy, magical practice, and supernatural invocation. These rituals are associated with animal life — and death. Far more than sex, which is simply puzzling,

it is death that haunts childhood. Boundless, heedless, at one with the world, Johan's children come upon a chalice filled with the poison of absolute finitude. They don't fear it. It is a summons to creative consciousness. They draw on walls, steal stuffed, howling baboons, dress in rat costumes, or, in my favorite image, make runic circles out of cigarette butts in the squalor of a pigpen, all in an attempt to harness power.

Other photographers have entered this territory but have not stayed long. Helen Leavitt, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Andrea Modica come to mind. For them, childhood fantasy is possibly generative but mostly compensatory. Putting on a mask, playing with dolls, or acting out a scene in a city street are the rear-guard actions of an imagination beset by a world it never made, an adult world of more-or-less rigid social conventions and sexual identities. We identify our lost innocence and freedom with the children as victims. "Shades of the prison house now close around the growing boy," as William Wordsworth put it. With a few exceptions, Johan does not indulge any nostalgia for the imagination. He accords it the power to take over the world and gives us the photos to prove it. Seeing is believing.

Because the occasion that stirs the imagination is the awareness of death and the desire to align with its negativity, sacred violence is always just around the corner, lurking in the front yard or upstairs in the kids' bedroom. There is a *Lord of the Flies* quality to this world, except that children never turn the power of death against other children, only, Johan seems to suggest, against adults. Mom, Dad, don't take it personally. Johan's bright side resembles E. Nesbit's *Five Children and It*, in which a group of kids with more imagination than sense discovers a creature who can make their wishes come true. Johan's dark side has the mood of the story by Saki in which a boy prays in his backyard to an imaginary god with the Hindu-ish name of Shredni Vashtar to destroy his various tormentors, usually adults. The god, it goes without saying, does his bidding.

At the altar of the computer screen, Johan's god does his bidding, spinning straw into gold, conjuring fragments into fictions, making meaning in the face of dissolution and decay. Johan beckons us to a second childhood, the one we must recover, the childhood of the imagination.

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