

# WATCHING SOMEONE LOOK

## EDITOR'S NOTE

*"I live on Earth at present, and I don't know what I am.  
I know that I am not a category. I am not a thing – a noun.  
I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process – an integral  
function of the universe."*

- **R. Buckminster Fuller**

*"Out of this face emerge banners and horses—O superb!  
I see what is coming;  
I see the high pioneer-caps—  
I see the staves of runners clearing the way,  
I hear victorious drums.*

*This face is a life-boat;"*  
- **Walt Whitman**, excerpts from *Poems of Faces*

How inaccessible is the face? It is that mystic landscape whose definition is thrown by light's direction against a genetic disposition. Yet within faces are empirical methodologies of lies and lie detection. Faces may hide as much as they reveal. Through portraits we can glimpse moments we can never fully know, or spoil with interrogation into self-consciousness. What are we really seeing in a portrait?

Humanity is the *mise-en-scène* of a portrait. In order to understand a portrait, we must place an analytical façade over the image in order to situate it within our world. The reflected light of portraits show us a human and violent reproduction of inner journeys and outer battles. A portrait succeeds when it slips from depicting a person to describing humanity, connecting the subjective to the universal. That portraits are expected to convey more than they depict is a given. However, the methodology of that conveyance is much contested.

In this issue of *Trebuchet* we unpack our fascination with faces, their expressions of history and suggestions of futures. Recognising that humans are programmed to be drawn to faces, the artists featured here play with modes of attraction, immanence and alienation essential to understanding what portraiture has yet to say. After all, if the biology of the human face remains constant, then innovation in portraiture must emerge from the artist's experience of being.



Markus Åkesson, *Sleepwalker (Satsuma jar)*, 2015. © 2019. Image courtesy of the artist and the Da-Erd gallery.









Markus Åkesson: Finding what is hidden

# Dreamstates and Mystery

*Trebuchet* cover artist (5: Art and Crime) Markus Åkesson is something of a rock star of new realism. His work contains mystery, illusion, identity and a touch of Scandinavian reserve that, while creating a voyeuristic distance between the viewer and the work, also offers an empirical objectivity. We see scenes caught in intimate moments but through a Lynchian veil where the real and the normal are emphasised but unrecognisable. We recognise the scenes but not the context, they are like dreams; we know they are us but our perspective is dislocated. We see ourselves but aren't seen looking.

Based in Nybro, Sweden and represented by Galerie Da-End in Paris, Åkesson's work has been placed at the vanguard of a subtle artistic movement that accepts conceptualism but shifts away from the obvious signs. Award-winning and terse, the usually reclusive Åkesson spoke to *Trebuchet* about the world he alienates and the reality he represents. Starting with the soul we asked whether, if any painting is a self-portrait, what does this say about portraiture?

"I would say it is true. When painting, you always relate to yourself in a certain sense, both psychologically and physiologically. To see an artwork is to see the artist.

I always try to get to know my subjects, in order to see beyond the surface. A portrait is more than a depiction of a person, it is also an interpretation of a personality. Even though I don't often work with portraits in a traditional sense, there is usually something more than the visual appearance of the subject that interests me.

I don't think that one artistic practice [photography or portraiture] has an upper hand over the other. In the end, I think it all depends on the artist's ability to create an interesting piece of art.

## Do you feel that photography has replaced portraiture?

Yes, of course, in a historic sense. I bet that it was a lot easier to get hold of a portrait painter 200 years ago. But, I don't think that specialised portrait painters went



Above: *Now you see me (blue & white toile)*, 2019  
Left: *I never wanted you to leave*, 2016





Studio Portrait by Jonas  
Lindström, 2019



*The Woods*  
(New vision), 2014

out of work when the camera was invented. They just opened photo studios instead and some of them were probably happy that they didn't have to go through the painstaking process of painting people by hand.

**What is your relationship to photorealism?**

I like the idea that every square centimetre of a painting has been carefully made by hand, I think that time and energy is somehow transferred to the viewer. And for me, it's a meditative practice to paint. I get lot of energy back, as well as investing a lot of energy into the work. All items, patterns and structures depicted are intentional.

**Do portraits ignore artistic history, existing in a parallel art world that has its own rules and references? (Portraits are not art for art's sake.)**

Portrait painting, despite being its own genre, is a part of art history. I feel that you can quite easily sense what period a portrait was made.

**Do you feel constrained or liberated by the term 'portrait'?**

I would say neither. The things with boundaries, set by yourself or others, is that it can actually make you more creative. So to work in a certain theme or in a certain genre can, in the best case, make you think in ways that you wouldn't normally.

**At what point is a painting of a person not a portrait?**

Maybe it's when the person becomes more like an actor in a scene or a vessel for the artist's ideas. When the painting is disconnected with the subject's personality.

**Is there a market for portraits outside of commissions?**

Yes, definitely. A good painting is a good painting.

**Do you create other artistic work outside of portraits?**

Yes. Actually, I don't see myself as a portrait painter, even though I've always painted people. I have done portrait commissions, and then the process has been different, more like a collaboration between me and the subject.

**A paradox between the solitude of painting and a human subject, how do you approach that?**

I usually work from photographic prints and sketches, so I don't spend a lot of hours together with my models. But when I do a portrait commission, I have somewhat of a regular contact with the subject, and we discuss the painting during the process.

**How do you consider the relationship between the sitter and the painter. What's in it for them? Immortality?**

Yes, maybe that is one thing. Paintings are often carefully handled through generations, more than photographs are. The relationship between the sitter and me is quite special. Usually we don't know each other at first, and then I am to catch this person's features in a painting, not just the visual features. I would say that's the easy part. The tricky part, and maybe the most interesting, is to try to interpret the personality of the subject. This is special and I have sometimes made friends for life in this process.

**Often portrait painters seem to consider skin as a conveyor of time, each line or fold carved out of the plain canvas of youth. How do you see it?**

Yes, and in a portrait, time also stops in a way. When I look at old classical portraits, they always bring me back

and give me a glimpse of what it was like back then. Contemporary portraits will also be time documents in the future.

**Do portraits have to be of people?**

No, a portrait can be of a dog, for example. But, the process is probably more complicated because it is more difficult to talk to dogs. At least for me.

"A PORTRAIT  
IS MORE THAN A  
DEPICTION OF A  
PERSON, IT IS ALSO  
AN INTERPRETATION  
OF A PERSONALITY."

All images in this article courtesy of Markus Åkesson and the De-End gallery. © Markus Åkesson. 2019



Now You See Me  
(Opium), 2018