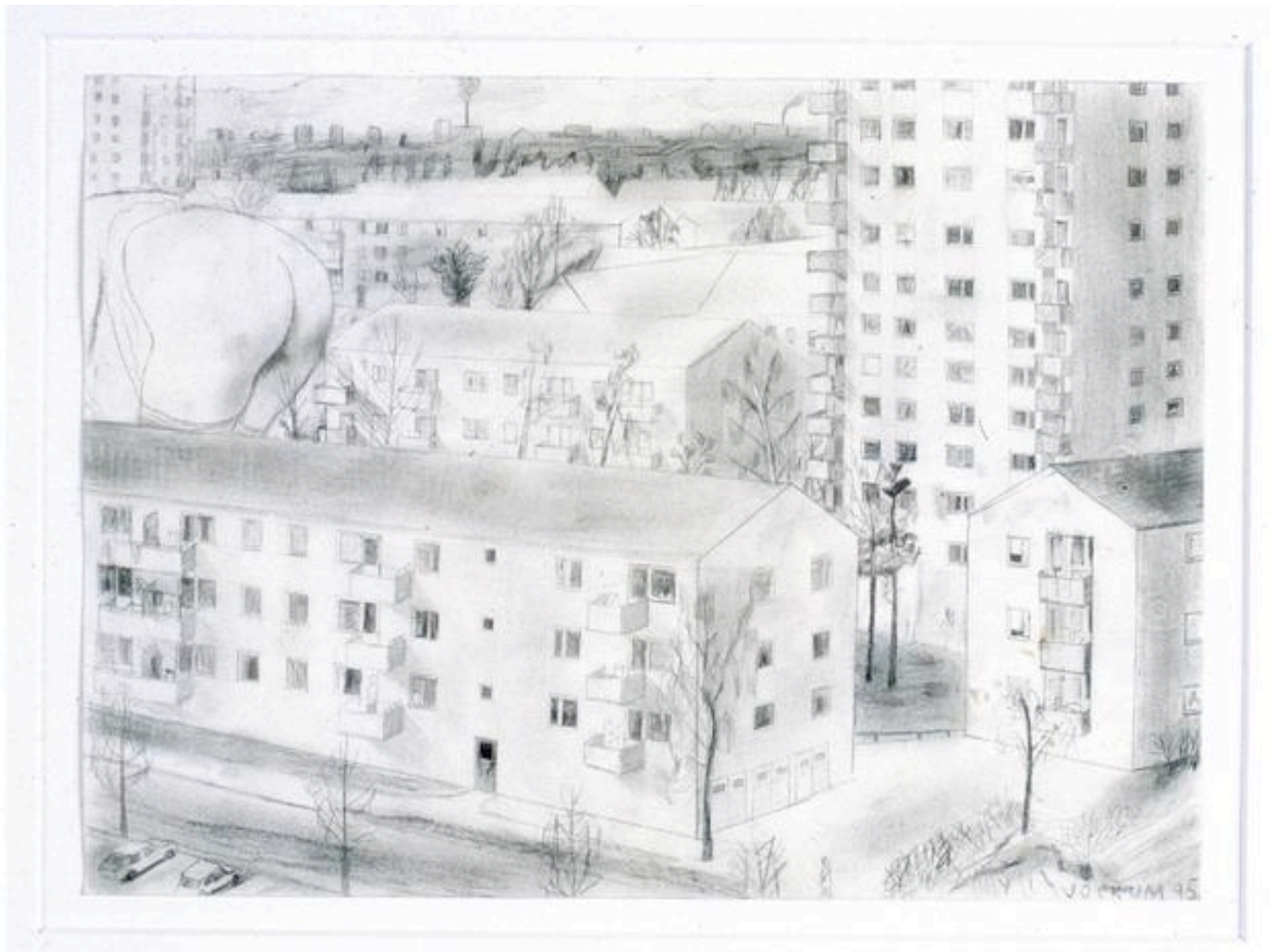


Charles Darwent on Jockum Nordström's All I Have Learned and Forgotten Again: The bottom line of beauty

Swedish artist's drawings, collages and sculptures are wilfully naive but
deceptively sophisticated

[Charles Darwent](#)

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What do modernist architecture, Robespierre, pine trees, conductor's batons, doggy-style sex, Manet, harpsichords, matchboxes and paper dolls have in common? If you haven't seen Jockum Nordström's show, *All I Have Learned and Forgotten Again*, then your answer may be "nothing". If you have, then your answer is still likely to be nothing, other than that they all turn up in the show. Don't worry: it's meant to be like that.

Before we look at the 50-year-old Swedish artist's work, let's rewind for a moment to 1944, New York, and the studio of Mark Rothko. In that year, Rothko painted *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea* – a Kandinsky-ish canvas that looks nothing like the brooding, bruised rectangles we now associate with his name. The squiggly hieroglyphs of *Slow Swirl* are mined from Rothko's subconscious (he had been reading Jung) and are there to communicate directly with our own. All of the items listed in the first sentence of this review come from Nordström's memory banks, and are meant to do the same.

The question, for him as for Rothko, is how to set those items down. It's all very well having your own personal armoury of visual reference, but how do you arrange it for the delectation of others? Dalí painted his in meticulous, glacial perspective; Jean Arp carved his in wood; Rothko went hieroglyphic. And Nordström? He works with his hands.

Take *Fuck the Big Revolution, and Where is the Holy Bible* (2005). Before it is about anything else, the piece is about memory. It mingles world history with Nordström's own: a figure who looks like Robespierre stands in a Swedish-looking, Seventies-ish room, perhaps one in which the artist grew up. It is both a very personal story – Nordström's father, like Robespierre, was a Christian who turned Communist – and one that applies to everyone born since 1789.

As always, though, it isn't just a question of what the image says, but of how it says it. The further back Nordström's history goes, the more childish he draws – Robespierre is sketched as a kind of kindergarten cartoon, whereas the room in which he stands is skilfully finished. *Fuck the Big Revolution ...* is, intentionally, an assemblage of ill-fitting parts.

It also refers endlessly to its own artistry, the work's variety of styles and skills acting as an advertisement for Nordström as an artist: what looks very much like one of his own drawings hangs on the room's far wall. Most of all, *Fuck the Big Revolution ...* is a drawing; pencil on paper. Nordström discovered at art school that he was allergic to oil paint, coming up in spots if he touched it. He was, quite literally, born to draw.

That same allergy lies behind pretty well all of the work in this show, making it, by its nature, autobiographical. Thus *View from the Studio* (1995) is personal both in being exactly what it says it is, but also in being a pencil drawing rather than an oil painting. Likewise, Nordström's sallies into watercolour. A long glass vitrine contains scraps from his studio floor, including small paper cut-outs of water-washed figures. There is just so far you can go with watercolour, in terms of scale. Nordström's solution has been to collage his little images into bigger ones, in works such as *Child of Nature* (2010).

Look at this image and various things may come to mind, among them the phrase "A child could have done that". In which case, Nordström will be happy: in his view, a child did. Any work of art is an accretion – of time, of learning, of the histories that have gone before it. So are we. Minds and memories are overlays, palimpsests. So is history. *Child of Nature* sees Nordström trying to get back to a state of innocence, before he was an artist who drew skilfully, when art – his own and the world's – was naive. His watercolour collages look childish, but they also look primitive, like cave paintings or aboriginal art. *Tiddlywinks* (2004), glued together from hundreds of narrow strips of paper, has the crafted feel of a Swedish quilt or a birch-bark picture.

There is a problem. Back in 1944 Rothko said that he was trying to deal "not with the particular anecdote, but rather with the Spirit of Myth, which is generic to all myths at all times." In the end, he gave up his search for universal archetypes as a bad job and retreated into abstraction.

Nordström isn't Everyman, either: he is a 50-year-old Swede with a growing international reputation and designer glasses. How well he succeeds in what he sets out to do depends, in the end, on what you would have to call "sincerity". Does his work feel as though it is playing around with Naive or Primitive or Outsider Art, or does it somehow convince us that it is real, the only way that Nordström can work?

As with the art itself, that is very much a matter of personal response. Either you will get Jockum Nordström or you will not. Personally, I think he's wonderful.

Camden Arts Centre to 29 Sept (camdenartscentre.org)

Critic's Choice

Water, water, everywhere ... **Lucy + Jorge Orta** are exhibiting at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park's Longside Gallery; their large sculptures, including their Clouds series (you may have spotted these at St Pancras station too), follow a watery theme (to 3 Nov). And at Nottingham Contemporary, catch *Aquatopia*, an exhibition focusing on the ocean deep with 150 works by everyone from J M W Turner to Juergen Teller (to 22 Sept).