

# Wetterling Gallery

LINDA BÄCKSTRÖM – JEWELS

Simone Schmid

When President Obama gave his State of the Union address in January 2014 the whole world paid attention. Since the end of World War II the USA has taken over the role of world leader from war-torn and divided Europe and has become the principal power in the world. Over the ensuing decades the "American way of life" has become synonymous with "modernity" and has been both loved and derided. The USA has been at the forefront of scientific research as well as of lifestyles and popular culture.

The country of unlimited opportunities is also a multifaceted country, a melting pot of different cultures that have to reach agreement on a common set of values. The dream of freedom and the belief that everyone can succeed is deeply rooted in American culture and even finds expression in many visual symbols. It is no accident that Hollywood, the world's most famous film and dream factory, is located in the USA; but the country's narrative is also communicated visually in advertising, art and the public domain with the aim of building and endorsing a common identity.

It is precisely the USA of visual images that is the focus of Linda Bäckström's exhibition *Jewels*. Her sculptures, made of spray foam and aluminium, represent objects that make one think of road movies and old westerns, of unfettered freedom and romantic nationalism, faith in weapons and kitsch aesthetics; but also of an irrepressible will to move civilisation along and to come out on top. Linda Bäckström is fascinated by the assertive grandeur of the cliché that is the USA, which contrasts so strongly with the cautious restraint that so often rules in Sweden.

In her art, Linda Bäckström portrays a traditional male world which is characterized by the romantic notion of wide open spaces and the lone cowboy. In *Jewels* she brings together a variety of well-known images, for example in her sculpture entitled *Saddle Tramp*. A classic horse saddle is combined with a chopper's distinctive front fork. Two very different 'horse powers' meet here but both of them are concerned with the same dream of freedom. The fact that the motorcar culture, as an extension of the concept of man/horse/freedom, is a decisive aspect of the American self-image is reflected not just in the cheapness of gasoline in the USA, but is evident in literature, music (Bruce Springsteen) and film (*Easy Rider*, *Thelma & Louise*), as well as advertising (most recently in Chrysler's TV commercial featuring Bob Dylan at the Super Bowl 2014). Linda Bäckström's

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exhibition is a visual journey through a country with an incredible wealth of faces. It presents different aspects and seeks out something that can summarize the American dream but that may not actually exist; that is precisely a dream.

Linda Bäckström is not the first person to concern herself with the American dream and its attendant world of visual images. Pop artists like Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist have made frequent use of everyday objects related to mass communication, urbanity, technical development and, not least, to advertising, film and celebrities who have become symbols of the USA. Richard Prince's iconic *Cowboy* series presents an absolute, idealized American masculinity which merges with the world of advertising; in this instance the Marlboro man. In other series, too, he explores the myths and images that constitute American culture and its subcultures.

Linda Bäckström's sculptures do not seek to pay homage to the USA. She does not comment on the underlying values. By giving her images a three-dimensional form she treats them in similar fashion to Jasper Johns' use of the American flag in his famous painting, *Flag*, from 1954-55. The symbol primarily serves as a visual object without any direct value judgement. If one aspect of the American cliché is that everything is surface and that images and messages are smooth and polished, then Linda Bäckström's work provides a welcome alternative standpoint. In her sculptures, not only do two-dimensional images become rounded bodies but they also undergo material deformation that contrasts with the perfectly smooth images of the advertising world. And they have also lost their functionality which challenges expressions of power and the right to exist. The satirical playfulness of her works is reminiscent of Erwin Wurm's sculptures.

But one still cannot ignore the potential of the images as powerful ideological tools. The USA is characterized by a highly visual culture in which power and values are communicated by visual images created by a vast advertising industry. Billions of dollars are invested in advertising, product placement and lobbying. Linda Bäckström's exhibition brings visibility to the self-confirming identification process that visual expression and symbols have in a society. And this is not the first time that objects which embody power have caught Linda Bäckström's interest. There have been earlier occasions when her art has concerned itself with exploring power structures and their visual communication; in heraldry for example. Even the fundamentally human search for happiness and the desire and the dream of a better world have been the objects of previous artistic explorations on her part, as in her exhibition *Unearthed* (2012), which was concerned with the myth of Atlantis.

Linda Bäckström claims not to be undertaking a scientific but an artistic analysis, using intuition, chance and association as her methodology. She completely immerses herself in a process of visual superfluity by collecting and compiling images of chosen objects that catch her interest. Such objects can be rearing horses, pinups, oil pumps, or trucks. She collects everything in a scrapbook which

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provides the starting point for her art. Visual images are often taken from the Internet where she consciously follows the logic demanded by the medium, which naturally follows the mechanisms of advertising and lobbying. This enables her to find popular, recognizable stereotypes that provide models for her artworks. Thus her sculptures do not represent an individual variant of a specific object, like a motor, but should be seen as a symbol of all motors. A motor with a capital "M".

Nor do her aesthetic choices follow a strictly planned route but include a measure of experimentation and processes that cannot be planned in detail. The spray foam sculptures are cast in textile moulds and are then assembled, bit by bit. The rate of expansion and the drying process cannot be precisely controlled. At a later stage, some of her sculptures are cast in aluminium and finally painted or enamelled. This process means that the sculptures literally grow organically, gaining their own identity and rejecting the artist's total control. They are authentic because they do not fully follow the same stereotype. Because of this unpredictability her works permit a variety of interpretations. The stereotype begins to open, the door stands ajar and we are able to explore the world of the sculptures ourselves.

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Stockholm, February 2014