

# WETTERLING GALLERY

## Barnatro

Text by Ulrika Knutson

I was present in the copper mine at Falun in 2011 when Peter Johansson inspected his buried concrete loaves in the depths of a tunnel where they had lain for 22 years. The loaves were made from a variety of different ingredients, some with the local red paint together with rusty reinforcing rods and others with food for the journey: mouldy Falun sausage and cheese. Each of the loaves was decorated with Dalecarlia's 'kurbits' floral motif and, as is often the case in Peter Johansson's art, the kurbits is an ambiguous language. The loaves were both elegant and poetic at the same time. I wrote an article about them in which I tried to draw their meaning from them. This proved difficult because there were so many possible meanings to the loaves. They were shaped like torpedoes equipped with homing devices, even though they were not very accurate. They darted round and round in the mine's tunnels. The exhibition was called 'Under'; in itself ambiguous but possibly suggesting below or underneath. The word also signals "wonder" as in miracle.

It was, at any rate, clearly evident that since leaving art school in Stockholm the artist had engaged in some form of weapon smuggling deep inside the mine beneath the town of Falun which is the capital of Dalecarlia. He threw in neat little bombs decorated with kurbits designs. Peter Johansson wanted to "blow everything up, to settle accounts with my childhood and to shake up the irredeemably reactionary people among whom I grew up".

One of these bombs has now exploded with the exhibition *Barnatro*\*. The effect is bloody and, to a degree, liberating. There is not the slightest doubt about what is going on here. It's all about crimes against children: sexual, physical and psychological abuse.

Using large tableaux Peter Johansson depicts his childhood in the town of Sälen during the 1960s and 1970s. He makes use of the family photo album, creates reconstructions of his childhood home, and makes a film in which his mother explains herself. We gain an impression of a dysfunctional family in which the father and grandfather are constantly at boiling point while the mother has abdicated from all responsibility. The result of all this is an atmosphere of blistering frustration. The little boy of the family is cute with his rosy cheeks, both terrified and angry and a constant victim of one of his father's workmates who sexually assaults him. There is nothing to check the abuse for no one does anything about it.

When the youngster starts school, the bullies are queuing up to continue and fulfil the destructive process. As is always the case, children can sense weakness. The vulnerable child is not redeemed free of charge.

This is a potent exhibition. One cannot ignore it. This has taken place and it continues to take place all around us. The artist reveals an appalling childhood: splash! Help yourself. An art critic can naturally reflect on the artist's choice of expression and tone of words. I choose to accept all these tones just as they sound with the conviction that *Barnatro*, with its drastic and sometimes naive approach can mean a great deal to other victims. If art has a therapeutic dimension for the public, it is surely a matter for which to be grateful?

The artist has claimed that he has never received as many reactions to an exhibition as in the case of this one when it was first shown in Malmö. Letters have poured in from people who talk about similar experiences and who ask for advice. Peter Johansson answers every one of these but cannot, of course, provide professional therapy. Even art has its limitations.

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I was also deeply moved when I saw *Barnatro*. My first reaction was simple: poor little boy. Who is going to look after him? For anyone who has followed Peter Johansson's art over the years, the *Barnatro* bomb will not come as a complete shock. He has left footprints. Most recently, in an exhibition entitled: *Min vän korven/El Hombre Elastico/My friend, the Sausage* at Borås Konstmuseum (2016). But there were hints long before this. Even though humour has a prominent role in all of Peter Johansson's art, violence has its place too together with a patient undermining of a patriarchal and authoritarian culture, complete with bright colours, virtuosic brushwork and fascistic elements. It's Dalecarlia, stupid!

Ought we to have noticed the assaults at an earlier stage? Have we, too, kept our eyes shut? Is this what it feels like to be an accessory with regard to a large, dysfunctional art family? A place where Peter Johansson's *Barnatro* can also send pain shooting through one's memory? Have we tittered our way past the pain? Art critics and visitors to the opening sometimes need to have their noses rubbed in the matter.

It was in the early 1990s that I first witnessed Peter Johansson's Dalecarlian horses and I was an instant disciple. The horse had been sawn into slices, covered in plastic and placed in the refrigerator in a grocery store. This was a brilliant and entertaining image of Sweden's national project I thought at the time; and I still think so. But in no way did this signal the demise of the Dalecarlian horse. Our spiritual horse trots on in different guises. Peter Johansson even painted his own body with a kurbits design. In this apparel, neither clothed nor naked, he stood eating a hotdog at a down-market fast-food stand outside Stockholm's famous town hall. The picture was taken by the noted Swedish photographer Lars Tunbjörk.

Just like Tunbjörk, Peter Johansson has worked with the forms and materials of his childhood. The charming but despised aspect of the 1960s and 1970s, shiny sausage brown as in PVC sewage pipes, or the fleecy orange as in a blanket crocheted in acrylic yarn. Orange, dirty brown and fiery red remain Peter Johansson's basic colours.

He has never engaged in psychotherapy as such. But in much of his work he lays out Dalecarlia in its entirety on the couch, and by this stage the poor patient has blurted out a positive flood of dreams and nightmares which would suffice for a lengthy psychoanalysis, at times parodic and at other times deeply serious.

At the Dalarna museum in Falun there is one of Peter Johansson's classical works dealing with a family in crisis. It shows the head of an elk, spray-painted with blood, hovering above the dinner table. Over the years, he has shown many interiors from the claustrophobic family, with his sources of inspiration ranging from Carl Larsson to Louise Bourgeois.

Even Carl Larsson laid out mines at his idyll a century ago. The angelic children were not nearly as angelic before they came to be used for decorating biscuit tins. Rather, they were provocative in the way in which they lived out their need to liberate themselves: banging on drums, screaming into trumpets and flapping their unruly plaits and untied laces. In one of his most famous watercolours, *Christmas Eve*, with the table already laid for dinner with polished silverware and a beautiful housemaid holding a foaming tankard, the devil himself is present behind the idyllic scene. Disguised as a jovial grandfather, Carl Larsson's own father is shown sitting in an armchair while pretending to be a well-wisher. He fails in this, remaining a bad-tempered old man. In point of fact he was a sadist who harassed his wife. He, too, forms part of the Sundborn menagerie.

In his *Barnatro* exhibition Peter Johansson constructs settings based on the family photo album. He masks individual faces, thus inviting visitors to fill them in from their own tormentors and their own memories. Since I belong to the same generation as the artist, I cannot get away from the fact that the spirit of the time is observing me. On the one hand holding me responsible, and on the other, pretending a self-sufficient innocence that was

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actually missing. Or at least not present in Peter Johansson's confined world of nightmares.

Peter Johansson fills a whole wall with his family circle against a background of snow and scrappy birch trees. A striking double exposure causes members of the family to hover, like ghosts, above the landscape. Here it is surely a question of exorcism. In this, as in other works, he has also added images of an angry little boy who screams and pulls faces. 'Pretended anger' on occasions, though perhaps the child made use of his own concrete experiences in front of the camera in the manner of Stanislavski or Grotowski. Anyhow, the angry little face is liberating.

Roll-play and staging events have always been important techniques for Peter Johansson. He has stretched the male costumes to breaking point, whether launching skinheads on a raft in Germany with the red cottage, symbolic of the Swedish welfare state, on board or has himself crept into Anders Zorn's wolf-skin coat.

I am even more gripped by the films that are part of *Barnatro*. And in which the artist's mother burns the Falun sausage in the frying pan, muttering demoniacally and puffing vigorously on a cigarette. Her apron sports frills, while the woman has red cheeks from the stove. "It's a serious matter now", his mother hisses, "it's serious now." This deeply unpleasant and, surely, dangerous mother figure is played by her adult son. Contrary to all expectations, the double exposure leads to a certain tenderness. In his portrayal, Peter Johansson manages to both accuse and defend the mother. This is strange and very interesting in itself. Perhaps this is how art can break through its boundaries and can reach out to what we know as reconciliation. I don't know. I need to visit *Barnatro* again.

\* The title *Barnatro* (meaning child-like religious faith) refers to an in Sweden widely spread Christian song.