

Being there

JH Engström's intensely personal, ground-breaking approach is informed by his own experiences and the human condition, finds Michael Grieve when he visits the photographer in his Swedish home

Summer is ending but still it is hot. On a train, speeding due west through the Swedish countryside from Stockholm to the Varmland province, it's easy to see why JH Engström loves this part of the world. Cumulus clouds fluff up in the huge, intensely blue sky, which is reflected in the still, cool lakes. The variations of green on the ground are lush and vibrant and the forests inviting but brooding. It's an idyllic landscape but it's also touched with melancholy, and even the most hardened urbanite can't help but be touched. Given that I'm en route to meet one of Sweden's most celebrated photographers, I'm also reminded of his many dreamy rural shots.

When I arrive at Karlstad, the small town where Engström was born, he greets me warmly on the station platform. During the drive to Smedsby, the tiny settlement where he now lives, we immediately start talking about Swedish cinema and in particular the work of director Ingmar Bergman. We agree that *Persona* is his greatest film, and the conversation moves on to photography and literature, their similarities and differences, and the controversial contemporary Norwegian writer, Karl Ove Knausgård, whose raw, autobiographical books are breaking up the Scandinavian tradition of conservative, politically correct reservation.

"I have read all of his *My Struggle* books, [which deliberately and controversially take the same title as Hitler's autobiography], and what I particularly like about him is that he is very honest and draws from a very personal experience," says Engström. "This is something we need more. His work is more realistic than mine but I certainly admire his one method all the way - this one vision. It is brave to do this."

Our discussion flows on and on, and we're still only halfway home. Suddenly conscious of our enthusiasm, we laugh and Engström exclaims: "Let's not empty the energies!" Over the next few days, 'energy' is a word he uses often. He says it's a key element of his first major photobook, *Trying to Dance*, which he published in 2003. The book showcased his critically-acclaimed visual eclecticism, mixing different camera formats, colour and monochrome images and romantic and realistic representations.

"I started this out of a desperation," he says. "I needed to make something different and radical that was true to my own personal sensibility. Not only should the single photograph possess an energy but, more importantly, it is the energy that is created from the tension between two or more photographs and how they associate with one another in the sequence of the photobook."

Many other books followed, some of them collaborations - such as *Foreign Affair*, 2011, which he shot with his partner, Margot Wallard, and *From Back Home*, 2010, on which he worked with Anders Petersen - but he has remained true to this radical vision. It's unusual, ground-breaking even, and as such it doesn't follow pre-set rules, relying instead on his instinct and taste. I ask if there's ever any doubt in his mind about the associations he has made and then set in his books, and he instantly retorts: "A lot! ...Sequence is constructed on doubt."

Tout Va Bien

His latest book, *Tout Va Bien*, will be published by Aperture in January but it has already won critical acclaim and this year's Leica Oskar Barnack Award. Unlike the intervening publications, which often centred on a specific topic or location, it's as freewheeling as *Trying to Dance* and can perhaps be read as a response to it. The photographer is moving from youth to maturity, and from having no responsibilities to being a father of three, and *Tout Va Bien* is part of the ongoing dialogue. "The other books are more specific to a place or subject," he explains. "Yet *Trying to Dance*, *Tout Va Bien* and possibly *Haunts* [published in 2006] are without frames."



Image © Michael Grieve



Engström's house has a wonderful view over Lake Fryken. Looking out at it, I call Christian Caujolle and ask him what he makes of *Tout Va Bien*. Caujolle is at a hectic, critical point in curating the GetxoPhoto Festival in Bilbao, but takes the time to give a considered response. *Tout Va Bien*, he says, "is the most important book Engström has done since *Trying to Dance*".

"There is something quite unique about this book that I cannot really understand, and yet it has a combination of the strong diversity of single images and a coherence of editing and sequence," adds Caujolle. "Like *Trying to Dance* it is a self-portrait without narcissism, but it differs in that it is more radical by virtue of being less sentimental. As viewers, we essentially relate to the presence of someone who is experimental in ways that we are not, and yet we can still recognise ourselves through the work, which consequently achieves an ambience of familiarity and unfamiliarity."

Caujolle has been a conduit for many important photographers and his relationship

with Engström began when he was director of Galerie VU. From the very beginning, he understood that the photographer had created his own aesthetic through very unorthodox means. "Christer Strömholm [the seminal Swedish photographer and teacher] recommended I meet Christian," says Engström. "It was in a hotel lobby in Stockholm and I showed him prints from *Trying to Dance*. I was young and confident and I knew I had something different, even though many people did not believe in it and regarded it as too radical."

"I had spent weeks in the darkroom, and from a mistake I made, I learned that I could over-expose negatives to the point of being black, using an exposure time of 20 minutes or more to render the traces of what was documented on the negative. Much of *Trying to Dance* was printed in this way and, though people find it hard to believe, all but a very few of the photographs were shot with large format. I wanted to break down the accepted hierarchy of the camera and photograph with the large format in opposite

ways – to say that when using different cameras and techniques, one way is not necessarily better than another," he adds.

"Initially, when I was studying, it was my teacher, Tuija Lindström [the Swedish-Finnish photographer and first female professor of photography at the University of Gothenburg] who provoked me to move away from more conventional reportage photographs to large format when I was working on my first book, *Härbärge*, about women in a homeless shelter. It meant I had to give up on two years of shooting 35mm but I realised that it could achieve a greater sense of intimacy."

That sense of intimacy is now key in work that effortlessly mixes everyday scenes, domestic details and shots of the rural landscape. At first glance, Engström's life seems to mix these worlds up too. As we speak, Wallard is feeding their one-year-old son, Sam, while twins Tula and Mischa are engrossed in a movie, in a home decorated with prints and paintings given to them by the likes of Robert Frank and Anders



Petersen. But Engström's large wooden studio, which is set a little apart from the house, is full of boxed archive prints and books, and the chaos of work in progress. Having Petersen as a mentor taught him you should always organise your work, he says, no matter how much life scatters.

"When I first met Anders, he said: 'You are not interested in my work!'" Engström laughs. "But he realised I had a passion for my own work and that I was willing to learn. He taught me much, but especially that you have to work hard and believe in yourself, and that you need to be humble and responsible towards people. And Christer Strömholm told me: 'You can be free to do whatever you want, as long as you can live with it.'"

Beyond stills

We sit down to look at some new work and I ask why photography is still his main creative expression when he's also known for his moving image work. "You need tremendous courage to do what you really want in life, to be focused

and follow your vision even when you fail, and for me photography is a symbolic act towards the pursuit of reinstating the right to be who I want to be," he explains. "It is a complex freedom and this is essentially what I talk about in my work. But there is no concrete conclusion, only a collision of energies."

He adds, however, that there is a direct correlation between his still and moving images, and we watch a documentary that he made for Swedish TV by way of an example. Following an elderly couple called Beril and Maggan, the programme was commissioned as a love story, yet shows the pair almost constantly at each other's throats. "The network found it too realistic and had doubts about airing it," says Engström, "though finally they did."

The film also has flashes of humour, rejecting easy conclusions in favour of something more messy and truer. Like his photography, like life, and perhaps like all of us, Engström is a complex character. He's warm, funny and considerate, but he is also fearlessly self-confident and

sometimes confrontational with it. Not afraid to reveal himself, he's passionate about his point of view, which means his discussions can sometimes get heated.

The kind of photography he shoots also demands a deep sensitivity, however – a certain curiosity that allows him to engage with people without intruding, even in the most private places. "I never want to photograph people who don't want to be photographed," he says. "I remember when I first met Nan Goldin, I instantly admired her way of getting to the point quickly. It is intense."

Engström's parents moved to Paris when he was ten years old, and he says it had a big impact on him and his relationship with other people. Suddenly finding himself at the Swedish School of Paris, surrounded by children from a so-called higher social status, he experienced snobbery for the first time. "In the class, the Ambassador was asking everyone what their fathers did. When he asked me, I said he was an engineer. I told



him what part of Sweden I was from. He laughed and condescended towards me, trying to make me feel small. I will never forget that moment," he says.

"In a way it motivated me to make *From Back Home* with Anders Petersen. To return home to document my origins and prove I was not ashamed of where I came from."

From Back Home went on to win the best book accolade at Rencontres d'Arles in 2009, but other commentators have observed that moving to Paris at this critical age established a fundamental dialectic within Engström – between the nature and conformity of Sweden and the grit and diversity of Paris – which now underpins all his work. Maybe his upbringing also influenced his unconventional approach to sequencing – the way he makes contrasts between his images and allows the resulting energy to flow free. Whatever is behind it, Engström's work has the ability to make the everyday unfamiliar, which is perhaps the sole duty of any artist.

Engström is involved in other projects too, which he approaches with as much energy and sincerity as his photography. He has run a workshop with Wallard called Atelier Smedsby in Paris for the past four years, which is unusual in that it runs for a whole year, with meetings in Paris followed up by one-to-one Skype meetings with the image-makers.

Angelica Elliot, who has been an assistant on the workshop for the past two years, says that Wallard and Engström are "very engaged with every participant's work. They are both very good mentors and I think they complement each other", she says. "They do not always share the same opinion, which I feel is honest and positive. They are good at working on solutions for everyone to move forward and develop their work, and what I find special about the workshop is that they help you to understand your work on a deeper level, not just technique or methods. I have seen not only my own work but the other participants' work develop over time, and some of the results are amazing."

Engström has co-curated the first three editions of the Landskrona Fotofestival, a photography festival held in a small town in the south of Sweden, though he has recently resigned from this position. Last year he showed work by Nan Goldin and Bertien van Manen; this year it was Boris Mikhailov, Chris Shaw and Veronique Bourgoïn, among others.

Improvising

It is Engström's 46th birthday and we decide I will take his portrait. Inspired by a quote by Bergman – "only when someone is well-prepared do they have the opportunity to improvise" – we walk down the field to the lake, strip naked, and jump in. Engström is totally open to the experience, a quality he looks for in his subjects, and the lake is still and serene as we wade through the cold water to find the best location. I want to capture something of his personality and suggest he lies submerged with his head just above the water. We revel in the spontaneity of the moment and, despite the absurdity of the situation, the



session has an urgency and sense of purpose characteristic of the man.

Before leaving Sweden, I meet his best friend, the artist Jonas Mathiasson, and we go drinking in the bohemian Carmen bar. During our conversations he eloquently describes aspects of Engström's character. "Everything JH goes into reflects his personality to some extent," he says. "If you eat together, drink together, it is more often a physical experience. JH is perhaps not much for tradition and yet he is a romantic, with a big appetite for anything that cuts along life's path. This applies to most of his photography.

"That's what gives his work so much credibility – through JH's photography we experience a physical act, a way of reflecting in a world of constant change. I rely as much on my nose as my eye when I look at his work, as it is more about the sensation of smelling than seeing."

The day I leave, it's apparent that autumn has arrived. There's a chill in the air and, when we take one last swim, the water is very cold. Engström's agenda for the coming

months will take him far from this beautiful home. He is launching *Tout Va Bien* at Paris Photo, showing *Bertil and Maggan* at the Montreal Film Festival and exhibiting at the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival, as well as serving on its jury. It's another contrast for a man, and a body of work, characterised by apparent contradictions. As I make my way back to Stockholm, I think about how to sum up his practice.

He is playing seriously, constructing fictions from his reality and expressing the human condition of pain, joy, loss and love, pieced together with certainty but also the modesty of uncertainty. It reminds me of Bill Viola's comment: "A lot of what making art is, is just being open and empty. And putting yourself in the right place for things to literally come together." How simple this sounds and yet how complex – and how beautiful to live life with such genuine verve. *BJP*

Tout Va Bien by JH Engström will be published by Aperture in January 2016, priced \$65. www.aperture.org www.jhengstrom.com

Portrait of JH Engström (page 27) © Michael Grieve

All other images from the series *Tout va Bien*, 2015
© JH Engström, courtesy Galerie Jean-Kenta Gauthier



