



MICHAEL JOHANSSON

INTERVIEW AND PORTRAIT BY HENRIK HAVEN

IN SPITE OF, OR MAYBE DUE TO, THE CHAOS IN YOUR LIFE, AT SOME POINT YOU have considered a way to compartmentalize yourself. You stack your books a certain way, color code your closet, or start to frame and hang your loose photos. Whatever it is, successfully or not, we have all tried to be organized. Swedish artist Michael Johansson has made a career of systematic organization, and on the surface, turned the contemporary art world into a game of Tetris. But look deeper, and note that Johansson is preparing our world for us in a box, showing how the world has made a concerted effort to coordinate all our goods, services, and material products to fit comfortably together to avoid any unnecessary fuss or offense.

We live in a world addicted to ease, and Johansson is on to this scheme. Henrik Haven investigates Johansson's busy exhibition schedule, public art projects, and how an everyday object can be a piece of art. —Evan Price

Henrik Haven: Please introduce yourself and tell us how you embarked into the world of contemporary art as a conceptual artist.

Michael Johansson: I'm a Swedish artist, based in Malmö and Berlin. During the past several years, I have been dealing mainly with ordinary objects in my practice, finding ways for new contexts to emerge by assembling the objects in various combinations.

In the beginning of my studies, I tried to force myself into painting. Back then, it seemed the logical way to proceed in becoming an artist. But my impatience with cleaning the brushes properly made all my canvases turn out grey. At the time, I regarded it as a failure, but it pushed me into trying out every other medium that came my way. It was actually through my explorations with photography that I rediscovered everyday objects as a stepping-stone in making sculptural work.

How would you describe your work to someone who has never seen it before?

The easiest way is to describe it as "real-life Tetris." I combine all kinds of common objects into three-dimensional puzzles, which fit perfectly into a limited space. In doing this, the original function of the objects is altered and twisted into something new and unexpected.

Your home country, Sweden, is known for being on the quiet, well-structured and conservative side, whereas Berlin is considered more dynamic, artistic and multicultural. How do you and your artwork straddle the two of them? I understand that you are currently planning to move to Berlin permanently, so can you reveal a bit about the reasons for that?

To begin with, Malmö is a very dynamic and multicultural

city, not too different from Berlin, just smaller. Here, I would say that size actually plays a part. For an artist, Malmö can be a very comfortable city to live and work out of. For me, this has lately had an almost pacifying effect, and I definitely feel ready for new challenges. Berlin is a creatively healthy city to be based in. Even though it has changed quite a lot in the last several years, it is still one of the few large cities in which one can engage fully in artistic activities, without the surrounding city demanding too much from you. And so, the move is just what my creative process needs at the moment. It is true that many people seem to find a connection between my work and the Swedish community structure, but let's not forget about the German bureaucracy. Hopefully, I will fit right in here, in Berlin, as well.

Do you remember your first attraction to art or who initially introduced you to this "world"?

I have always felt an attraction to art, even from a very early age. Of course, I didn't know back then that I would follow the call of fine arts, even though that's probably what I would've told you if you had asked me at the time. Starting out, I had a very classical view on art, and I sometimes wonder what the person I was at the very start of my studies would have thought when encountering the work I make today. I am convinced that my response would have been likewise.

I can imagine that you, as a young child, were already into Legos, Tetris, anything with stacking and blocks. Am I right?

I was never that interested in video games as a child, nor in playing Tetris. That connection came later in life. Legos, however, were something I used to devote a lot of time to growing up, and not necessarily following the instructions that came with the box.

How do you think your whole "pattern gaze" on everyday objects began?

Everyday scenarios inspire me tremendously. I have always enjoyed spotting all kinds of irregularities or patterns in my surroundings, so many things that one passes by, normally not paying attention to, but that for some reason or other,

Down
Detail
Mixed media
80 x 80 x 80cm
2010





suddenly stands out. It can be a parking lot filled with cars in the same color, or the pants you are wearing that are the exact same shade as the chair you just sat down in. Well, basically anything you encounter in your daily life but never really paid attention to before. Something ordinary disguised in an extraordinary way.

You seem fascinated by mathematics, shapes, colors and everyday objects with a retro feel to them. What is it about these fields that interest and inspire, and how do you transform it into your own works of art?

The main reason as to why I mostly work with everyday objects, sometimes with a retro-feel, is that I am interested in the history they hold. This concentration of objects of different origins into one imaginary image of a fabricated reality is much more intriguing for me than the use of newly produced objects purchased at the local supermarket. There is something about knowing that only a limited number of these particular objects is left that increases the unlikelyness of them being morphed together with such a precise fit.

Using the colors and the shapes of the objects as a platform for them to interact is my way of loosening their original purpose and making them into art. Lately, I have also realized that by forcing myself to adapt to the already fixed appearances and limitations of the objects, it is easier for me to relate to them. It also helps me not have a stream of endless possibilities in making a work. What others might find obstructive has become a necessity in my practice. The limitations force me to react, ushering my creative decision-making, and an endless stream of possibilities wouldn't provide the same. And since all the items I use already come with a defined color and shape, as well carrying their own narratives, I almost feel that the work creates itself once I begin making it. When all the riddles are solved and everything fits perfectly together, it is almost as if the work was predestined to be put together in one particular way.

above
**Some Assembly Required -
 Hard Hat Diving**
 Bronze cast of diving suit, welded
 bronze frame, spray paint
 3.6 x 3m, 2 x 0.3m
 2011

right
Recollecting Kagonecho
 Furniture, household items,
 4.5 x 12m
 2022





I have been fortunate enough to follow you for a while now, visiting the studio to experience and document your work process and art in the making. Describe your typical creative method and how you go about making a piece of work. It varies a lot depending on the character of the works, as some of them are made in my studio and others are site-specific pieces created on the spot in museums or public spaces. Nevertheless, the main challenge usually lies in finding the right objects to fit within a specific system of limitations. Once I have decided on the spatial limitation for a project, it usually begins with a period of collecting.

Most of the objects are found in different flea markets and secondhand stores. I mostly do my collecting around the area where I live, but if I make a work in Japan, for example, I usually spend some time in the beginning of the process collecting things on site. I have also made several site-specific works at museums or galleries, solely constructed by objects found in the storage spaces of that institution. In doing so, the daily function of all objects was somehow neutralized.

Do you have a favorite element or phase in the work process that you enjoy the most while creating a work of art?

There is a critical moment in each process when there are too many loose ends at the same time, as if everything is about to collapse. At this point, there is no beginning and no end to the puzzle. And just by changing or removing one object, the consequences can be enormous. Even if it might last only for a little while, my favorite phase is always when this stage has passed.

What makes an object stand out to you?

There are always certain qualities I keep in mind while searching for objects for an upcoming work. It is a combination of color, shape, aesthetics and content which makes them just right. The perfect object for me is something that carries as many of these characteristics as possible. Unfortunately, the formula changes from project to project, so an object that is perfect for one work can lack one or two vital ingredients for the next. After each finished project, a few promising objects always end up in storage, waiting for their moment to shine.

You mention on your website that the power of the double is too strong to resist. Could you try to walk me through one of those experiences?

I have always been a collector; somehow flea markets never cease to fascinate me. I especially love to find doubles of seemingly unique objects that I have already purchased at another flea market. Even if I do not even have a use for the objects in the first place, the unlikelyness of discovering them twice on two different occasions only increases my desire to possess them. The same rule applies to my art practice. There has to be a combination of the highly recognizable with the very unique in order to create a fruitful encounter between the work and the viewer.

Your works have an obvious mathematical precision, but they still radiate this abundance of personality and history in the singular objects constituting the whole. What are your thoughts on the play between strict calculation and the unique and personal impression of the particular objects?

It intrigues me not knowing the origin of the objects I source. Most of the time, I know what they are, and what they have

above
Studs shots captured
by Henrik Hoven

right
Shoole
Ordinary items
3.8 x 5.6m
2012

following spread top left
Toy/Walk - Denny Scale 11
Dingly, food equipment, welded
metal frame, spray paint
2 x 2.6m
2008

following spread bottom left
The Mouse Overseas
Containers, household items
6 x 7.8 x 2.4m
2008

following spread right
Self Contained
Containers, cardboard, fabric,
Volvo, pillows, refrigerators, etc.
8.2 x 10.8 x 2.4m
2010



been used for, but not by whom, when and where. That is an important reason for why I choose to work with used objects instead of new ones—they have lived a life before I find them. Since each work contains hundreds of different objects, all found in different places, many lives morph together into a manufactured identity that never existed. The compact, more mathematical way to combine these objects is a way to make this new context feel self-evident. The perfect fit between them enhances the illusion of their cohesivity.

When I look at your works for longer durations, it kind of feels like the world has changed when I "re-enter." Colors start arranging themselves in patterns, objects seem to fit into each other, and even people almost fit, if I could just move them slightly to one side, you know? And I wonder, "How must Michael feel?"

Sometimes, when I'm right in the middle of a very busy period of work, the few hours I sleep are usually filled with dreams connected to packing objects in every possible way. But while I'm awake, I usually manage to keep my focus on

the project I'm currently working on, and avoid fantasizing how to make my entire surrounding into a major piece of art, no matter how appealing that idea may be.

In this light, what is packing a suitcase like for you?

I tend to pack my suitcase as light as possible. Perhaps since I am normally surrounded by a large collection of objects in my daily practice, I prefer not to carry much with me when on the road.

What do your wardrobe and drawers look like at home?

From time to time, they do follow a certain order, but I don't think my apartment lives up to the general idea of how I'm supposed to live from the perspective of my works. It is more of an ongoing interplay between order and chaos; between good and evil. My apartment tends to become less crowded for each work I finish, though. It happens quite often that I have something in my bookshelf that magically finds its way into one of my pieces instead.

Your installations appear as kind of a systematization of the unique, though mass produced, objects of everyday life and consumption. How would you describe the sociopolitical intentions, if any, embedded in your works? I certainly hope that my works can add to a contemporary dialogue, otherwise I would never spend all this time making them. Even though the visual aspect is important to me, I rather regard aesthetics as the starting point for a dialogue with the viewer. It is the use of ordinary objects, all the different things that most people recognize from daily life, where a deeper point for wider discussion lies, covering themes such as history, memories and tangibility, to name a few. The humorous undertone in my work is also a way to catch the attention of the audience, compelling them to spend a longer time exploring my work, while hopefully finding other levels of interest as well. For me, it has been highly fascinating to experience the reception of my work throughout the world, as it differs a lot. In Tokyo, the unstable reality of living with earthquakes, for example, adds a completely different layer to how the work is read.

What do you wish that the viewer should feel, think or experience while looking at your work?

The interpretation of the work will, and must always, vary from person to person. Everyone will bring something different to the dialogue with the work. But the most important thing I actively hope that people will bring away from a meeting with my work is the rediscovery of things you neglect after seeing them too often. Things so ordinary that you just don't notice them anymore. I want my work to break away from such daily patterns as a reminder that it is possible to reinvent yourself without necessarily visiting new places. I know that I constantly need to be reminded about this myself, appreciating art by other artists, which tricks me into looking at things with a new set of eyes. I hope my art can offer this to others as well.

Most people, especially artists, have an extreme dream, a project so massive they only dare to fantasize about it. What would your "Ikaros Project" be?

Well, I do have a dream project I hope to be able to realize someday, but the problem with dreams are that if you say them out loud, there is a chance that they will never be fulfilled. Especially the big ones. So I think I'd better keep it for myself a while longer, just in case.

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Michael Johansson currently has new public works in both Norway and Sweden, as well as work in group shows throughout Europe. His solo show at the Gothenburg Museum of Art in Sweden opens in April 2014.

For more information about Michael Johansson, visit michaeljohansson.com

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