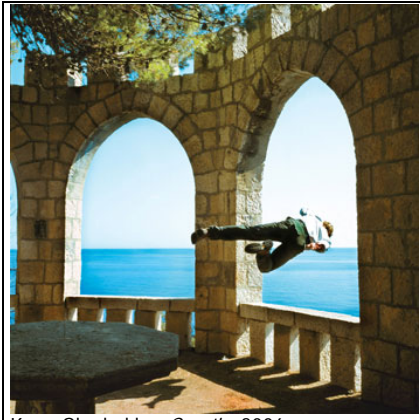


Kerry Skarbakka: Art that Takes Risks

By Henry Thaggert

I believe it was Gwendolyn Brooks--the sharp-tongued, African American poet--who claimed in the 1960's that black people couldn't afford to waste time on conventional "pretty green tree" poetry. Likewise, serious collectors of contemporary art should not waste time on "pretty green tree" photography. Important contemporary art worth collecting should convey the "shock of the new," and should reside at the conceptual and aesthetic edge, rather than in the boredom and safety of the norm; it should also communicate more than what is merely being depicted. This

is why I have been an early and committed collector of Kerry Skarbakka's (b. 1970) work.



Kerry Skarbakka, *Croatia*, 2006

This daring young artist has created his own visual language that freezes and isolates the instant when a hapless human figure falls from a building, tree, ladder or cliff. A variation on this theme records the pregnant moment when a person makes the conscious decision to jump from a perilously high perch. Rather than come off as posed stunts, these staged tableaux have the look and feel

of split-second randomness. The pictures have a heightened sense of reality because the camera's gaze seems to capture the falling person as if by chance or accident. Yet there is little that is random or accidental about these edgy photographs. Skarbakka's method reflects a sincere, deliberate and (literally) painstaking attempt at creating visually discordant scenes.

Drawing on his background as an experienced rock climber, martial artist, and former stage actor, Skarbakka's art is as much about performance and narrative as it is about photography. He plots out the

subject matter on storyboards, choreographs his jumps and performs them as many times as necessary to secure the desired image on film.



Kerry Skarbakka, *Studio*, 2002.

Skarbakka's pictures present a single character, always portrayed by the artist. Rarely do other individuals appear in Skarbakka's pictures, suggesting that this character is alienated from social relations or is alone in the world. The individual's identity is not emphasized, but he sometimes wears an anonymous black suit, or banal street clothes, or even appears nude. In effect, the artist has created an allegorical "Everyman" protagonist on whom a viewer can project their own experiences.

When the Skarbakka photographs are viewed as a series, a narrative unfolds in which the Everyman appears in various situations and settings around the world, thus evoking Classical mythology. Perhaps this character is on an epic journey or a rite of passage. Or, perhaps he is caught in a never-ending dream--each day a new setting, but always ending with his own (down) fall. And because Skarbakka's works feature this Everyman exclusively, one wonders whether there are parallels between the Everyman and the artist's own struggles.

In describing his work, Skarbakka has said that he is investigating

what it means to resist the struggle to simply let go, and the consequence of holding on. The [photographs] stand as reminders that we are all vulnerable to losing our footing and grasp, symbolizing the precarious balancing act between the struggle against our desire to survive and our fantasy to transcend our humanness. (Artist's statement)

I never tire of studying these pictures because they operate so well at both a conceptual and representational level. On the one hand, they are

conceptual works because they offer a means of visually describing one's place in the world. The photographs make tangible the intangible concepts of alienation, angst, displacement and uncertainty. On the other hand, the pictures succeed on a representational level because they visually objectify the pull of gravity, the sense of acceleration, and the force and propulsive power of the human figure in flight or freefall. As a representation, the falling, thrashing human figure *embodies* the precarious state the character is experiencing.



Kerry Skarbakka, *Office* (2005)

Skarbakka's generation of artists entered adulthood after serious art photography began to rival painting and sculpture. But it was a long transition to the status of photography today. The Whitney Museum of American Art did not even include photography in the Whitney Biennial until 1986 (when Skarbakka was 15 years old and living on a farm in rural Tennessee).

In the 1980s, artists explored questions about photography's authenticity as evidence of reality; and questions about digital manipulation of the medium were just beginning. By the time Skarbakka completed an undergraduate degree in Fine Arts and began an MFA in Photography, digital manipulation had already been validated as a fine art method and photography had begun to rival painting and sculpture as a credible media for contemporary art. Skarbakka's artistic interests are not concerned with determining "What is Photography?" He accepts the manipulation of the medium as an established fine art practice that freely borrows from other media.

Of course, as groundbreaking as I believe Skarbakka's work is, he is following an important tradition in photography which isolates and freezes the spontaneous pictorial moment. The legendary French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson pioneered in the 1900's a journalistic style called "the Decisive Moment." A well-known black-and-

white image depicts an anonymous man jumping over a puddle of water on a rainy day in Paris. In a blink of an eye, Cartier-Bresson saw the man, perceived what was about to occur and captured the spontaneous unposed moment just as the man skips over the puddle. By contrast, Skarbakka's pictures are the result of scrupulous planning, contemplation, and repetition.



Kerry Skarbakka, *The Shower* (2005)

For example, in *The Shower* (2005) the camera records an accident in progress. We view a human figure at the moment it flips head over heels in a slippery bathroom shower. This brilliant photograph has a Fluxus anti-aesthetic and awkward intimacy. Skarbakka did not stage this picture in his home or even in an actual bathroom. Rather, the artist designed and built the set complete with running water in his tiny Brooklyn studio. Tying a rope from the ceiling to his waist, he flipped himself repeatedly, hitting his head against the tub a few times, until he got the shot he wanted. Given the amount of energy and trial-and-error it takes to

construct such a photograph, it would be inaccurate to call Skarbakka a disciple of Henri Cartier Bresson.

I believe Skarbakka's vision and methods are more closely aligned to photographers like Jeff Wall (b. 1946), who combines a casual, snapshot style with painterly subject matter and figuration; Cindy Sherman (b. 1954), who dons wigs, makeup, costumes and props to create complicated self-portraits that can imply a narrative of exploitation and victimhood; Janine Antoni (b. 1964), a performer who uses photography to tackle societal taboos by documenting her own body's engagement in compulsive or repetitive physical activities), and Gregory Crewdson (b. 1962), who stages self-consciously artificial scenes, fraught with psychological tension, stillness and impending doom.

Skarbakka's work also recalls that of Matthew Barney (b. 1967), an accomplished climber and a former high school star quarterback who employs his natural athletic talents as a tool in creating performance. In his inscrutable video narratives, Barney features himself as an allegorical protagonist who undergoes a series of physical struggles or a rite of passage. In *Cremaster 3*, for example, he is seen attached to climbing gear and scaling the walls of the Guggenheim Museum. Similar to Barney, Skarbakka leverages his skill as a climber, martial artist and performer to create narratives that co-mingle physical endurance with art making.

Ironically, some initial negative responses to Skarbakka's work arose not because of the artist's use of photography as an index of reality, but because of the work's supposed evocation of the September 11 tragedy in New York City (as if national tragedies are not appropriate subjects for art making). This street-level interpretation is facile and too literal. For me, Skarbakka's images evoke cyberpunks, MTV's "Jackass," skateboard culture, martial arts, and *The Matrix* movies--celebrations of risk-taking as extreme performance.



Kerry Skarbakka, *Naked* (2002)

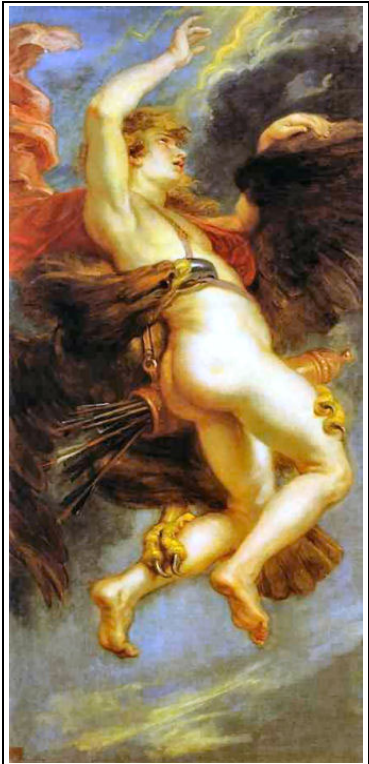
Still, other times I'm reminded of "Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner" and Charlie Chaplin films. As works of High Art, the images are dense with references, including Jungian psychology, the philosophy of Heidegger and Greek mythology.

Some of my favorite Skarbakka photographs seem to borrow formal and compositional elements from painting. For example, *Naked* (2002) shows an unembellished bedroom with a nude human figure mysteriously in mid-flight, as if ascending to Heaven (or descending to Hell). It is a masterpiece of visual

banality. The image is closely cropped to highlight the bare, white walls. A map of the world hangs haphazardly, perhaps a visual signal about the floating individual's tenuous place in the world. The small bed is

unmade and the floor is cluttered with clothes and old sneakers. The scene would almost lack for color but for the modest red-and-blue quilt indifferently tossed on the bed, and the pinkish skin tone from the suspended naked body. The floating character seems somewhat tortured, uncontrollably splayed with back arched. Thematically, one wonders whether the subject is a slacker in a drug induced K-hole, or perhaps he is one of the pious answering Christ's call on Judgment Day. Aesthetically, the size of the image, with the figure jutting out into the

viewer's space, mimics the aesthetically expressive poses of the nudes found in Baroque paintings.



Peter Paul Rubens, *Abduction of Ganymede*, c. 1639. Oil on canvas. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

I am reminded of Peter Paul Rubens' paintings of fleshy, muscular males and plump voluptuous females ascending skyward. In particular, Skarbakka's figuration resonates with the secular painting, *The Abduction of Ganymede* (circa 1639), which depicts the Greek myth of the capture and kidnapping of a beautiful young man to Olympus by Zeus. While *Naked* (2002) is probably not intended as a direct quotation of the Rubens painting, it nonetheless demonstrates Skarbakka's use of the human figure for similar aesthetic effect.

Skarbakka also draws on the aesthetic elements of painting in *Plato's Cave*, which portrays a character falling in front of (or perhaps out of) the mouth of a cave. In this picture, the human body flails with a gestural quality. Like painters who render personal emotions through the use of the brush stroke, the blur of the falling body suggests a painterly, neo-expressionist

effect, lending a static picture a sense of motion and emotion, realism and spontaneity.



Kerry Skarbakka, *Plato's Cave* (2002)

The first time I saw a Skarbakka photograph, I was astounded. The picture challenged me to accept the formal beauty of the composition with the perceived danger captured by the artist in mid-fall. I wondered what it would mean to be an artist devoted to art-making that involves difficult physical challenges and the risk of serious injury. A lot of contemporary art involves financial risk but often lacks emotional (never mind physical) risks to the artists. I call it "pretty green tree" art--bland and devoid of the artist's unique signature. I often wonder, are we contemporary collectors complicit in perpetuating this "pretty green tree" work? Is it taboo, like uttering the

name of a jealous God, to scrutinize the artist's process too closely, to question the personal investment and risk involved in the artist's relationship to his own work? We know that Skarbakka participates in the making of his work. The artist is, literally, present in each arresting image. Just look at the pictures.

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