

The first thing I see from my hotel window is “Relaxwell. M/s SIDDHARTH ENTERPRISES”.

Is the sign on the Hopperesque facade in Goa City a joke? Siddhartha advertising mattresses?

Siddhartha is the Hesse novel I brought along purely for its ideology. Together with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Christopher Hitchens’ *Mortality*, Svetlana Alexievich’s *Second-Hand Time*, Johan Tralau’s *Monstret i mig* (*The Monster Within*), the collected short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, and various texts by Tacitus, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer ...

Books that all prove to be about amorhousness. And death.

Then it strikes me, down there in the stinking, burnt yellow street. Why not use “M/S SIDDHARTH ENTERPRISES” as a title for Jan Håfström’s art? At the summit of his life, he daringly lets go of melancholy and instead searches for the essence, through melodrama, burlesque.

I went to India with the intention of finding sideways perspectives on his oeuvre. And I’m travelling lightly. Without the shelf-metres of literature generated by Håfström’s artistic output, either by novelists, critics, colleagues, scholars, or the artist himself. For is there anyone who has hidden his works to the same degree behind layers of myth? So fascinating that we tend to lose sight of the material itself.

One could ask if this mass of explanatory texts hasn’t built walls rather than doorways. Or was that his plan? Are the interpretations actually crucial to his works?

“SIDDHARTH ENTERPRISES” opens a secret entrance. Otherwise, writing about Jan Håfström would be like following a set route in a museum, where the artist has not only collected and manufactured everything you see, but even made all the cabinets, created the classifications, and acts as a guide and a critic.

My attempt will involve as many wrong turns as those of everyone else. You barge in and get stuck halfway. But right now, that sign is as luminous as if it were in neon and affixed to the prow of a ship sailing between the moon and the underworld!

Can he be read in that way, mixing banality with philosophy, comic strip characters with a death wish, abstract librettos with childishness, political commentary with tombs, and enigmatic ciphers with nature lyricism? To test if he is not an emblematician, forever searching for ideograms or cryptograms for the same old questions. Or perhaps a director who repeatedly makes new versions of the same plays. Dramas he only wants to understand to a certain degree, since that which is obscured urges him to create. And recreate.

In some sense, this is no stranger than the sea forever throwing itself in new wave constellations against the sandy shore, which also changes from one minute to the next.

“Art is a place,” as Jan Håfström says. But a metaphysical place to perpetually return to.

His works change their meaning over the years. And yet, I can easily recall their time of origin. They allude to perilous voyages yet emanate an intense hominess and make me experience everything all over again. The longing and anguish. But they also entice new attempts to interpret, to add a new comment to a lifelong dialogue. They have that challenging quality that art history occasionally offers. It is

not merely a matter of art but of action.

“Du musst dein Leben ändern!” is a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke that Jan Håfström often repeats.

Art can induce us to change our lives.

ULF LINDE called him a “turncoat” artist in a small booklet called *Clinch* (1993). But he added that “his coat never flapped like other coats. It may have flapped in the wind, but always in its own way”.

I will take that flapping as my second point of departure. It is hard, in a gale, for the viewer to stand up straight. So you need to be bendable.

While I am writing, I commute mentally between Agonda and Stockholm. After a few weeks, my dreams are set in Jan Håfström’s deranged imagery. My trip to India was preceded, however, by long talks face to face. Sometimes in the gallery, occasionally in a restaurant, but usually in the artist’s studio in Liljeholmen.

He is eager and communicative and enjoys showing me around his “Stasi”, where old paintings and objects are stacked on shelves and wrapped in plastic (as though the warehouse were an archive of crimes). The studio spaces are linked by black-painted wood floors, so that the rooms lead to each other like a row of tiny houses with porches. The walls are white and filled with pictures. Always framed and hung together with photos. I think I see a small C. F. Hill – a tree, a snapshot of the painting *The Inner Station*, hanging in Ilya Kabakov’s Moscow studio, and mementos from travels and family. A book on the table is a 19th-century illustrated product catalogue. Some of the drawings – the foot, leg and hand – I recognise from his own body of work, where everything is gradually reduced to signs.

He dresses in soft shirts and Moroccan or Indian scarves, preferably in the same pale, burned-out hues as his paintings. To start with, he looks a bit scruffy. But gradually, as his toothache eases and he gets back to work in the studio, his hair puffs up. It is still mainly red. He moves vigilantly and can suddenly resemble a rascal with his squinting eyes and thin white fingers.

Our conversations are open, we just let them happen. Our starting point is Jan’s latest gallery exhibition. He paces around, pointing at Mr Walker’s mask, coat and plaid pattern. I notice it’s the same comic strip figure he has been painting since the turn of the century – but here Mr Walker (never the Phantom) is sat down to look at art.

He has become Jan Håfström’s avatar, so what is the next step, with regard to the admonishing quote from Rilke? Is there no limit to what the artist can make Mr Walker do as his *doppelgänger*?

I immediately want to embark on discussing emblems and archetypes. The ur-themes and cryptograms permeating Håfström’s oeuvre. Away from the long, detailed, theorising analyses. To get at the poetry, rhymes and alliterations that cut through everything he has created.

But Jan wants to talk about his life and to shed new light on it. All those early years striving to get *away* from the self, out into the wide, impersonal ... Now, his quest is back to his own life, to existence itself. *To* the self and the personal!

Why?

We just have to look for where it hurts.

BÖCKLIN'S *ISLE OF THE DEAD* is the mythical 19th-century painting that Jan Håfström always returns to, having freed it of sticky banality, parcelled and reshaped it. Classified like a collection of archaeological relics, complicated, simplified or undermined, with Mr Walker and a submarine as a scout from the subconscious.

The ferryman, his back reminiscent of the viewers in the foregrounds of Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, the steep cliffs, the secret cave, the abyss ...

Is it about absorption and longing for death? Or eroticism and rebirth? Would the island then be woman/the great mother?

In 'The Isle of the Dead' the locations merge for me. In the end, the only place that remains is that of childhood. Our whole life is a search for our childhood. As soon as I feel a whiff of childhood, nothing can happen. Then all is perfect ...

Thus, this vulva-like death painting is the origin and end of all, I think to myself on the stairs in south Goa, where yogis, joggers and hippies flock at dawn to perform their ritual sun greetings. Many of them have probably read Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, the cult novel about the Brahmin's son who sets off into the world to conquer his self, is tempted by mortification, authoritarian doctrines and the delusions of the sensual world, but finally finds peace by the river. To serenely "feel and inhale the oneness".

The river laughed and Siddhartha laughed ...

Can meaning also be sought in Böcklin's rock tombs?

From here, at least, a bridge built to Jan Håfström's childhood.

HIS CHILDHOOD HOME was chaotic. His father was his idol – a charmer, "rogue" and drinker. Adulated and typically unreliable. He worked at hotels and on ships. Went to sea and sometimes took his family along. Painted now and then. Money was scarce, and the family's class identity remained unclear.

Home was grandmother and the countryside at Svartsjölandet. Jan used to stay there as a boy, and the adult artist's portrait of his grandmother (1972)

an aged Mona Lisa or the world's gnarled summit – is unforgettable.

But his father represented flight, imagination and storytelling. "He saw me."

Memories are stored in the body. My eyes flit between the studio wall with the photos of his father, that dark, mythical charmer, and his ginger-haired son. I also recall all Jan's family portraits, often on deck, and charged with the shadow of his father ...

In a corner high up on the studio wall is a small cardboard figure of Mr Walker running.

Is that his father?

I'm 78 now. My father died at 70. We are approaching each other. Like me, he had a few hobby horses he operated with. He cultivated romantic heroes near the abysses.

As a child, Jan was a bed-wetter and they took him to the doctor. And there, in the waiting room, he saw his first print of *The Isle of the Dead*. Since then, he has occasionally drifted off on Böcklin's greeny-black waters as though in a sarcophagus – a recurring shape in Håfström's art.

It happens even now, on good days in the studio. Like looking at the island with the rock graves.

And his obsession with the suitcase he recently found, containing his boyhood drawings of comic book characters animated by heroic stories of action and violence? All these brilliant children's drawings that he now exhibits next to the works of the grown man?

They seem to harbour a heat and presence that fire the older artist's creative energy.

The child's drawings, like a subterranean link to *The Isle of the Dead*. And vice versa?

You need to work like a detective and create an offender profile!

The Håfström family soon moved from Örebro to a one-bedroom flat in Gothenburg. His mother took care of the home, and Jan's paternal aunt also moved in – a mentally ill artist.

These were chaotic years – a dazzling mixture of misery and celebration. The boy's daydreams of escape are reflected in the comic book drawings, which served as a shield for a child who felt left out. A method to keep the world at bay and a road to freedom, rolled into one. Both a flight and a way of staking out his territory.

But he stopped doodling in puberty. Instead, art came along. Eventually, Jan found his way into an intellectual group of students in Lund, took his BA in literature and philosophy and worked as a Latin teacher for a while (remember Tacitus and all the allusions to classical Romans in his texts), while attending Pernby school of painting, followed by the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm.

His father was religious, liked charismatic preachers, Isaiah, Job and Ecclesiastes ...

I have always regarded Jan Håfström as a spiritual seeker – albeit a secular one. Before, I had not connected him with theosophy or Christianity, despite his painted references to the crucifixion (in one the crucified body merges with the head of the Minotaur) and the dead Christ in art history.

Now I get a brainwave.

Mr Walker as a living Christ?

Jan is not averse to the notion.

I see Jesus as a utopian, one who makes impossible demands and absurd statements. Who takes everything to the edge. He also has traits of others I've been drawn to – Ekelöf, Duras,

Camus, St John Perse ...

On the windowsill, in boxes with palm trees and desert sand, stand small cut-outs of Biblical figures – the kind that stoked his imagination in Sunday school as a child. And Mr Walker is a broad character. Both father and son. Both “dad”, the figure with his back turned in Böcklin, and the stranger in Camus, or in Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* (Jan’s first great literary experience).

He is also the very act of watching. Like the girl with the match sticks (H C Andersen) who gazes in through the windows of others. And freezes to death.

Mr Walker, the stealthy, hiding under his hat brim, coat and dark glasses, connects outer and inner and becomes whatever we fill him with.

THE INNER STATION was painted over a long period of time, from 1984 to 1999. It is a dragon-green cesspit to fall helplessly into. A hellish world’s end, which harbours all Jan Håström’s previous evocations against evil, and which, despite its boiling and bubbling impression, feels so physical that it could be a slab of lead-like metal.

As I stand in front of the painting, I am also enveloped by the horrific forest – full of shot-down vehicles and young men wielding Kalashnikovs – that Jan Håström and I, together with a small artist group, travelled through in 1995, taking a detour to get to Sarajevo, which was besieged.

There, in the misty titanium white, Naples yellow, black and burnt umber of the canvas, in the decorative vertical trickles on loose asphalt background, bone-white glowing forms emerge. These flecks of light resemble Håström’s earlier descriptions of the Roman corpses found in the Teutoburger Forest (Tacitus). But they also evoke the dead bodies of the Paris Communards in their rows of coffins in photos he has often reused in texts and installations.

In the gloom of *The Inner Station*, Kurtz from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* also appears. With the title, the artist brings forth Marlow on his journey on the Congo river to the inner core of Western colonialism. The yellow-white flickers suggest the novel’s heads on sticks outside *The Inner Station* where Kurtz lives:

“The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen – and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids – a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber.”

(Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*)

The Inner Station never seems to settle. It does not congeal into a political cabinet of horrors but expands infinitely into a stage for existence itself. It is also wonderfully beautiful. A sublime vessel for life and death, good and evil, *on the same level*.

The gravity and ambiguity of the painting hurts like an open wound.

The Inner Station is generally regarded as a turning point in Jan Håfström's oeuvre. After this compelling work, he appears to have changed his style completely, abandoning his romantic excerpts, ditches and bleeding and wrapped rags, in favour of flat, pop comic book characters, headed by Mr Walker and his blond spouse Diana.

But *The Inner Station* only marks a keeling, rather than any real change of direction.

In the darkness of The Inner Station, Mr Walker was forced to appear. There, I found daddy, in Kurtz, who ran away from everything. So did Dad. He was extravagant and always moved into the bachelors' wing. He was a Gösta Berling [from Gösta Berling's Saga by Selma Lagerlöf]. Both Kurtz and father drew close to danger. Therefore, I have not dared venture into dad's political life. There are indications of a sympathy for the Germans. But I'm letting that be ...

THE FATHER FIGURE

I am astonished at how fast we ended up here. With the grandiose Father who was unable to settle in a boring world. Who went foraging beyond the grey mundane life, forever on a voyage and forever making contact with eccentric places and people, actors, millionaires.

Writer was the finest occupation Father could imagine. And now Jan Håfström approaches yet another painful topic:

His father used to read *Sjöliv* [*Life at Sea*], a book he ordered from a library in Stockholm. It included an illustration that has remained one of Jan's most charged ur-images, a dead sailor in a half-disintegrated and overgrown coffin being dug out of a slope.

Shape/unshape ...

When he asked his mother if she had any idea why this illustration had moved him so profoundly, she handed him a drawing he had made in 1948 for Father's Day!

So Dad was writing a book! A novel set at sea! Suddenly I remembered that he had read parts of it to me and mummy. And there, in my childish drawing, the novel is completed! So I was hoping that one day it would be a real book! Its title is "The Privateer Brothers" by Erik Håfström ... As soon as I saw my drawing again, I understood that one of my purposes in life is to rehabilitate my father.

Art as casting out demons, exorcism and mourning.

Louise Bourgeois also expressed it in those terms. We process and sublimate our internal conflicts, and art is a way of keeping them in check.

THE CRIME

As early as 1987 (in a catalogue text for an exhibition at Lunds konsthall), I was intrigued by Jan Håfström's "crime". By how his art seems to both "hide and reveal evidence of a crime that has been committed". A crime that is covered up, put

away, painted over, buried and repressed, yet always chafes through the dry surface.

That was nearly thirty years ago!

I referred then to a production I had recently seen in Romania of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, where a bundle lay at the front of the stage throughout the performance, like a physical symbol, a portent of the student Raskolnikov's bestial murder of the pawnbroker:

"Crime and Punishment is about hubris and mercy and surrender. /.../ Possibly, life itself is the crime that corrodes Håfström's objects. So horrendously angelic and monstrous that it cannot be depicted but has to be obscured to even be sensed."
(*"Svenskt 80-tal. Kritiker väljer konstnärer"*, DN.)

Fifteen years later, in the exhibition *Nattens industri (Industry of the Night)*, Jan Håfström exhibited a series of night paintings with shady characters in the throes of getting rid of the evidence of crime and murder. Magritte-like, hat-wearing fugitives in the bone-yellow moonlight, scaling the facades, wrapping what could be corpses into oblong parcels in the dark of the night.

And today – another fifteen years later – still these paintings of criminals and assassins! And all this talk of evil, of "Stasi", of crime scene investigations, of my role as a detective ...

Does this romantic image of crime stem from the adventurous world of boys' fiction? Is it engendered by rage over the state of the world?

Or is the "crime" the act of creating art, powered by an uncompromising thirst for reality and the conviction that the artist has the capacity to create a new world?

The processing of the "crime" is associated with strong sensations of pleasure. And the desire to rehabilitate, to remake him (father). That's also where the comic strip character comes in. Because that other, real, father figure, is so damned flawed ...

REHABILITATE. CREATE, RECREATE

A comic book character is clearly imaginary. Clear fiction. Especially Mr Walker, to whom most people in Jan Håfström's generation can relate. The artist puts out clues and red herrings. But no truth or solution is offered. Art is not a code that can be cracked. Not an explanatory model.

Rather, a propositional model.

Nevertheless, everything would indicate that the battle between good and evil is a primary conflict throughout Jan Håfström's oeuvre. As in Dostoevsky.

Daddy was contentious and would quote John Milton in 'Paradise Lost': "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven ..." His stand in life was in between God and Satan.

Jan seems to assume responsibility for some of his father's wrongdoings. And gloom

feeds his imagination. I usually see the gigantic Walker statue – the eternally running Walker/Father with a dark reverse side standing at the crossing near the Central Station and Vasagatan in Stockholm – as Everyman. But it could also be Jan Håfström's monument to himself.

As it turns out, Vasagatan was his parents' street. They met there. He sat in his pram there, and that's the location of Mr Walker, who is much older than *The Inner Station*.

An image from memory:

As a child, Jan looked through a window. It was snowing, and suddenly he saw someone rushing by with a suitcase. His dad? A Walker-like Daddy, with a suitcase and strangely sideways glance, also sneaks past in a childhood drawing from 1945. And in Douglas Feuk's essay *Att måla sitt liv (Painting one's life)*, a similar shadowy figure in black coat and hat appears in *The first oil painting*, from as far back as 1951.

A draft version of Mr Walker is also included in the seminal work *The Return* (1976), in which a man painted from behind is looking in through a window, and sees himself in the room, sitting in a chair.

Both indoors and outside. But perhaps mostly outside.

You can't stand the daylight, but you have to survive so you withdraw into darkness.

SKULLS

More recently, Jan Håfström has been painting them fast and furious. Big and small. Solitary or gathered in ritual processions across the walls. Eerie (like Nazi helmets) or beseeching, like infants with round eyes.

The emphasis is always on the eyes, which, together with the lines for teeth, form a kind of skull masks.

The latest craniums are framed by blood-red stars and remind me of the little angels in my childhood bookmark collection. The artist is no longer afraid of the unsophisticated. These new skulls turn out to be a tribute to the terror victims in Paris.

Jan Håfström seems on the threshold of leaving the temperate hovering of Romanticism for a warm, Baroque-like emblematic. The skulls are painted in like the thumbprints of death in bodies, household utensils, rakes and tools. As emblems of vanitas with a depth in both time and space, but also as stamps or pirate seals.

Remember that you are mortal!

"The flag of the death's-head is hoisted in all engagements," writes Edgar Allan Poe in his short story *The Gold-Bug* – a definite parallel story to Jan Håfström's art, I realise as I read it nonstop from cover to cover in India. It has everything – the mystery, the log book, the clues and red herrings, the secret writing, the incantations, the ciphers, the niche in the cliff, the shimmering skull and the parchment with the death's-head that appears only when it is near a fire.

The gold scarabaeus in the story has two black dots on its back that links it to the

black eye sockets of the death's-head.

All at once, I see that the skulls on the studio walls and the small running Mr Walker figure resemble “tags” for an artist who wants to be related to the street artist Banksy!

“M/s SIDDHARTH ENTERPRISES”...

THE CLUES.

In December, we meet at Restaurant KB in Stockholm. Jan triumphantly puts a small sculpture of a tree trunk on the table. He has brought it wrapped in a cloth. Then he quotes the poet Werner Aspenström, who, he claims, was thinking along the same lines as me in his book *Ögonvittnen (Eye Witnesses)*.

“On my way home, I think: It’s going to be hard to write something short and to the point about Jan Håfström. This proves to be true. For it is not merely a matter of technique and subject matter and settings, but a slowly evolving way of life, perhaps an artist’s means of using paintings to go beyond paintings.”

Aspenström was right. It is ridiculous, here, to focus on an oeuvre. It has to be about a transitioning way of life ...

... as I was saying. You need to make an offender profile!

The shabby tree sculpture stands there on the restaurant table staring at me. This is yet another one of Jan Håfström’s ur-shapes. Or should they be called stage props?

In the 1960s and 70s, he painted several ornamental forests of trees with entwined branches like a rambling mind. Both a Tarzan jungle and nature romanticism. Both outside and inside. Both sign and image.

The holes in the trunk of the small tree sculpture have contours that rhyme with the anonymous figure seen from behind in *The Isle of the Dead*. And in an article in “Paletten” (from 1968), Jan Håfström accompanies one of Caspar David Friedrich’s solitary wanderers who bends towards a hollow in a similar tree. “The trunk has a large black hole shaped like a human being facing towards the one who listens,” he writes.

Such secret connections are found throughout Jan Håfström’s entire artistic output. Everything points to everything in outer and inner circles. The method is allusions, echoes, links, correspondences, patches, fragments, rags.

Trees, shadowy figures and Mr Walker fall into each other in a movement that harbours your own eternal longing to dissolve and disappear, I fumble...

Then Jan offers yet another clue, this time in Robinson Crusoe – maybe the first book he ever read – and points at an illustration in which Robinson has slumped and fallen asleep on a forked branch.

Do you see a death wish? A sleep that is death and a death that is sleep.

And now the tree trunk turns into a boat, a sarcophagus, Jan Håfström's archetypal vessel for disappearing. I also remember a painting in which Mr Walker (beyond death or waking) appears like a submarine periscope in a forked branch similar to the one Robinson Crusoe fell asleep in.

Ulf Linde found my preoccupation with death hard to take. So I told him the whole point of my life is that I'm dead... That made Linde laugh!

The great laugh permeates the world. Hesse's Siddhartha laughed too, I think to myself.

Death in Jan Håfström's art is not the end but an opening. "Death kills, but the idea of Death gives Life," as the India traveller J M Forster wrote.

Håfström touches on Indian reincarnation. I sense that the ancient Egyptians are nearby.

THE ETERNAL RETURN was painted in 2003. It is an atlas, an encyclopaedia of all Jan Håfström's critical junctures and reminds me of the 19th-century product catalogue with typical advertising illustrations I saw on the table in his studio.

It features all the ur-elements – disguises, masks, bones, skulls, palm trees and pyramids, towering blocks of ice (Friedrich again), uniforms, tanks, fragments of Egyptian gods and tomb imagery, submarines and weapons, Mr Walker in various running poses, and *The Isle of the Dead* as an ur-scene. An ur-backdrop.

Everything is stylised into signs in a pictorial from which the artist now chooses ever new variations, with a light touch, scattering them across different backgrounds.

Like ciphers in a secret language?

Like places on his inner map?

Like two-dimensional objects in his curiosity cabinet?

"Wunderkammer" is fittingly the exhibition format that he has come to prefer, with cabinets, shelves, compartments and fantastic cross-links between objects and images and oscillations between different states of mind and levels of meaning.

For Jan Håfström, the tombs of the kings in Luxor must be the ideal display! The hieroglyphics on the walls there are staggeringly beautiful – the absolute, maximum beauty. The alternation between written and visual narrative, the dissolving differences, the objects chosen to carry the deceased to new worlds, and all the faded textile-like surfaces ...

The Egyptian tombs also feature the bow-shape of the descent he dreams of. Descent, transformation and deliverance. And around the mummies, the cloth bandages, the rags.

Jan Håfström's works are always tactile, physical. Mr Walker's coat, which hides his body with a flat, shadowless, modernistic chequered pattern is no exception. Even if the artist is not currently engaged in layered painting and frayed, gooey fabrics as imprints of suffering, he still paints clothing as shrouds.

His art is fetish-oriented, morbid and material in the same natural way as Egyptian tomb art. He also seeks the same everyday magic as in Tutankhamen's grave.

And he collects remarkable objects.

When I visit Africa, India, Ethiopia, I buy things with a magical aura. When I see photos of Freud's room for his patients they seem so damned familiar.

Exotic, mystifying objects.

The Eternal Return is a collection of emblems that can be combined into different stories. But Jan Håfström refuses to offer any focal point. The viewer's eye should be forced on and on, in an excited, ecstatic state.

The separate parts are essential, but ultimately it is the spaces between them that are important.

You set your course in some direction. Then things happen. Some kind of agreement arises between the eternal and the temporary. You add pieces to your own life puzzle. The more levels, the richer the work. You turn into a sort of icon painter, making the same picture, yet never really the same ...

And then we've had enough, we clink our wine glasses and head out to the Christmas shoppers.

In the doorway of the restaurant, I ask Jan if he thinks our talks have been a drag. On the contrary, he says. They're like lying there on the couch ...

THE MISSION

After New Year's he calls me again. He has embarked on a new, large composition!

I catch the tube to Liljeholmen. I find my way to his studio, past all the new, noisy building sites and up the stairs to his inner room with the brand new sketch, *The Making of a Prophet*.

Here, printed kitsch Jesus figures circle around a spring and seem to be trying out a few tentative gestures.

This is something totally different. And yet the same vacuum. What will the sketch be like as a painting? I get associations to opera and tableaux, to the stylised gestures in Yukio Mishima's drama *Madame de Sade* and to 19th-century textbooks in acting and theatrical poses.

Jesus' gestures are also a training to be an artist.

The Making of a Prophet is about staging oneself. Christ is training to be a sacrificial lamb, like Gandhi or Martin Luther King. But the work also concerns the role of the artist ...

Is Jan Håfström alluding to *The Holy Painter* by Carl Kylberg?

Suddenly, I have to pinch myself. Because it becomes clear that he is suggesting that the artist has a mission, or even a calling.

The notion of the artist's "Orphic mission" was part of an idealism that high modernism inherited from the romantics but which the more journalistic or theoretical artists of our time tend to reject.

But not Håfström, I realise, and do an internet search – a flickering in the pitch-black south Indian night – for a text on Kylberg and the calling:

"The artist is perceived as a messenger and an instrument for spirituality. He is a chosen tool and holds a special position. Faced with being chosen, Kylberg repeatedly prays for humility in his many diary entries, a selection of which were published in 1959 by his widow under the title *Ur ett livs dagbok* [From the Diary of a Life]. His identification with Divinity stands out clearly in these entries and are a recurring theme. *The Holy Painter* is the first painting that reflects Indian thinking in Kylberg's oeuvre. It is also, in that sense, the most unambiguous of his concept paintings. The impact of Indian philosophy can also be discerned in many other paintings, but often leaning towards pantheism or Christian ideas."

Kylberg's prophetic stance had a decisive influence on Jan Håfström when he began painting, and I suspect that he has remained faithful to that stance over the years.

I have been in a mighty flow ever since childhood. I live this. Life and work merge. You need to rid yourself of expectations. You create your own life. It is filled with catastrophes. A painful path.

THE EMBLEMATICIAN

Mr Walker is to Jan Håfström an emblem or an ur-image, like Marilyn Monroe or Elizabeth Taylor to Andy Warhol. But where the American pop artists based their work on contemporary commerce and advertising, Jan Håfström goes back to characters from cult or cultural history. To him, art history is signs with meaning, and time charges these signs over and over again.

For him, Walker is not primarily an enlarged comic book character, as he would have been to Andy Warhol. Jan Håfström's Mr Walker can also be an Ahasver, a migrant, or why not an art critic?

An emblem has to pound, has to harbour history and open itself up for future purposes. It should be timeless but not gormless, and it must be authoritative. An imperative. Like *The Inner Station*, which undeniably smoulders like a disaster painting in the tradition of Tintoretto or Titian.

The cool and entirely abstract print series *Landscape Score* (1978), however, was too much like elegant fine singing for my taste. With all the magic removed that can otherwise transform Jan Håfström's smooth, layered paint surfaces into invocations of wounded skin and physicality (or transform comic book characters into emblems), the *Landscape Scores* seemed to settle *between* image and text. Instead of *on* them both.

Works and viewers change over the years. But in order to be effective, an emblem has to burn and remind us that time is short, just as time burned for August

Strindberg, when he feverishly wrote down all the correspondences and signs in *A Blue Book* (which I know Jan Håfström has read).

And how does violence relate to the emblem? Is it the combustion engine of the image?

Violence drives fiction. It makes things happen. Violence is a way of moving ahead and reaching a destination. Both Rilke and Jesus say so: Du musst dein Leben ändern!

THE PORTRAIT

We pull out a full-size sketch for a portrait of Horace Engdahl, former Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, commissioned by the Bonnier family for Manilla the first portrait assignment Jan Håfström has ever accepted. The sketch is partly a montage. It includes a glued-on photo of the face (taken by Lotta Melin), a small Mr Walker running and a quote in fine print from the author's recent book, which I can hardly make out:

“... the last respite while Death turns away and blows his nose”.

Horace Engdahl's features are also captured in a small pencil sketch on the wall. Most distinctive are the eyes – with ecstatically elevated pupils – and the mouth. Malicious. A horizontal line.

The portrait is magnificent. The writer and critic is suddenly present in the room, striking fear in his surroundings, as though he were the prodigal son in Ilya Repin's painting (yet another of Håfström's ur-images). He is painted with a slightly mocking tone, like a copy of the great romantics. A character from his own novel. An equal of Goethe and Schiller, with something wild and otherworldly in the corner of his eye.

Again, a mask ...

The secret of the work of art is that you suddenly don't know what you're looking at. That you ask yourself: What the hell? Violence, suffering, death.

And then, after a pause:

You have to get at the suffering. 'La douleur'.

Then Jan digs out his big exhibition model of the proud German battleship Admiral Graf Spee (sunk in 1939 off the coast of Uruguay) and holds it up to the wall behind the portrait, raises it towards Mr Walker, whom he now suddenly calls “the World Soul”.

The World Soul??

In that case, the Graf Spee is also “the World Soul”, with its lurid, amoral power. Drip-painted in grey, black and red, as though by Jackson Pollock!

Jan plays with the boat. A little boy, playing with his tin soldiers ...

Can I understand this? Can I even begin to understand the life-long impression

that heroic war stories from the Second World War, B movies about spies and crooks, Jules Verne's and Edgar Allan Poe's adventure stories, or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* have made on male artists such as P O Enqvist, Jan Håfström, Juan Pedro Fabra, Carl Michael von Hausswolff ...? Me, who was brought up on Mrs Piggles-Wiggle and Gösta Berling.

There aren't many women in Jan Håfström's imagery. But there are signs for the feminine. And Walker is not a typical male hero, unlike, for instance, the Phantom. Under his disguise he could be of any gender – that of the Father, the Son, the Madonna or Diana.

Mr Walker's gender is as enigmatic as Mona Lisa's.

Jan Håfström always tries to transcend simple dualism. And "emblematician" is a resilient concept. Everywhere this searching for iconic images, mystical emblems charged with both past and future.

"Ut pictura poesis". Poetry resembles painting, wrote the Roman lyrical poet Horace in *Ars poetica*. Yes, this is Jan Håfström, I think, and try to compile my own catalogue, starting with a list of his classic paradoxes:

DENIAL/AFFIRMATION

Mortality/resurrection

Death/fertility

Vanitas/holiness

AND THEN THE STYLISTIC CHARACTERISTICS. TODAY:

Paintings as stories

Previously romanticism – now baroque

Previously the sublime – now the infantile

Previously the impersonal – now the personal

Repetitions, like poems or songs with choruses

Comic strip figures like altarpieces

Bed down, reawaken

Detachment/hunger for reality

Previously milky, sperm-like colours – now burned, "dried"

SIGNS AND EMBLEMS, APART FROM IN *THE ETERNAL RETURN*:

Books/the universe.

Plaid, classification, culture.

Textiles. Shrouds and transcendence

Wunderkammer as an ur-form, an interpretation of the world

STUMBLING BLOCKS:

Jesus, war

Male world, violence and weapons

Primitivism, longing for unity

New age dopiness
Colonial dualism
Fetishism

THE WORLD SOUL

Going *against* expectations and political correctness may be Jan Håfström's contrariness method as an artist and visual director. But what, then, is his iconic play, his iconic drama?

He bandies the World Soul (Brahman, Weltseele, anima mundi) as though they were old buddies.

The World Soul is a blind will, as defined by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*). Schopenhauer wrote that the world of the senses is merely an illusion, a human idea, and that we can never attain knowledge of the thing in itself. Everything exists within everything. Everything is both subject and object. Our striving is born from lack and suffering but there is no goal. The goal is an illusion. Crime, evil and poverty determine the course of history.

Arthur Schopenhauer was a pessimist. But in the darkness he found light: art. The work of art helps us forget the futility of our striving. In art resides eternity.

That is how I imagine Jan Håfström's approach to art.

We see and feel the death wish in his works. But death and darkness bring the promise of new life. His death paintings in fact increase our appetite for life.

"M/s SIDDHARTH ENTERPRISES"

Once again, he calls and asks me to come to his studio. There's something else he wants to show me.

I've just been laughing at the scandal at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, where eight museum employees stand accused of having illicitly glued on the "beard" that had fallen off Tutankhamen's death mask.

Did they just smear Superglue on a mask from 3000 BC?

Jan Håfström has a leg from an Empire sofa tucked under his arm. He recently named it a sculpture and covered it with chequered fabric. Then he takes out a photo from an antique shop displaying a painting of Mr Walker hanging above a gold Empire style table.

"Empire style means Napoleon and Egypt," he chuckles:

... and Walker knew a thing or two about Egypt! He travelled on the Nile. That is perfectly clear ...

Now he pushes me towards a pile on the floor and starts removing the bubble wrap and lifting something that resembles the lid of a sarcophagus. A tomb. Underneath it are three human-size mummy shapes he has made; three disguised Mr Walkers with gleaming skulls and stripy, insect-like bodies in typical Håfström colours.

Then he hooks them up on the wall. All three in a row.

I'm dumbfounded.

They are utterly simplified – but what precision! Hieroglyphics! These mummies (mothers ...) contain his collected works. They are simultaneously dead and incubators of new life. Like great pupas. They scrutinise me as greedily and curiously as I scrutinise them.

They also observe themselves and the way they were created. Sort of like the travelling players in Hamlet commenting on Hamlet ...

I recollect the tombs of the kings in Luxor.

“You live all the more if you have one foot in the valley of death,” mumbles Jan, as though this were the most obvious thing to say.

Meanwhile, he scatters the floor with some twenty flannelgraph pictures, found by a friend, from the series he recently started working on, *The Making of a Prophet*. He then moves them (in the manner of a Sunday school teacher?) like mobiles across the canvases. Studying their mutual influence.

These old-new picture puzzles are confusing. All the manuals of civilisation seem to have evaporated. The “bookmarks” and the spaces between them resound with loss of meaning. And yet, there is an undercurrent here that is terrifyingly relevant to the present situation. The Biblical figures resemble us, and vice versa. Their gestures and body language remind me of today's refugees, in boats or overland, wrapped in swathes of cloth, apprehensive, intimidating, beseeching. Faced always with walls and closed doors.

Moving across the white backgrounds are emblems of authority, suffering and submission. All are tried by Jan Håfström in new constellations. Boiled down to a stock that can also be read as an ornamental tomb inscription.

Pantomimes? Surrealistic choreographies or hieroglyphics of our time?

Ascensions ... When I came to India, the landscape reminded me of Gauguin's. To me, the boundary between Christianity, Indian religions and the Egyptian ones is hazy. The Christians probably adopted the Egyptian concept of death. That you can descend into the valley of death and then return ...

We sit for a long time browsing a magnificent book on tomb paintings and hieroglyphics in ancient Thebes. “Now that's what I call paintings!”

And Jan Håfström is excited. The captain of “M/s SIDDHARTH ENTERPRISES”.

When I text him from India to tell him my title, he replies promptly:

Guess what Alf Lindberg said: “A painting starts as a statement and ends as a question.” The

title is spot on! A ship, could anything be sharper? Plus a saint!!!