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REVIEWS

## Hjelm and Wizén at Hillström

EVA ASP

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Mats Hjelm's latest work, "Memories of Lakes Lost", is a 29-minute long four-channel film projection, a massive tribute to the progress of life, alternatively a hopeful dystopia. To the sound of Bach's cello suites and breathtakingly beautiful tableaux that flow into each other, it fills the lower room of gallery Cecilia Hillström. The scenes are filmed in North Africa and India, a lying moon also suggests that we are in these latitudes. Long sequences visibly void of living things – the occasional bird streaking across the sky at times – but with lots of vegetation, fascinating unknown trees and aquatic plants.

Because the water is constantly present, in an almost archetypal way. As an inscrutable force, as the origin and end of everything. It exists in the ocean's never-ending rolling waves and in more still bodies of water, where reflections and reflexes

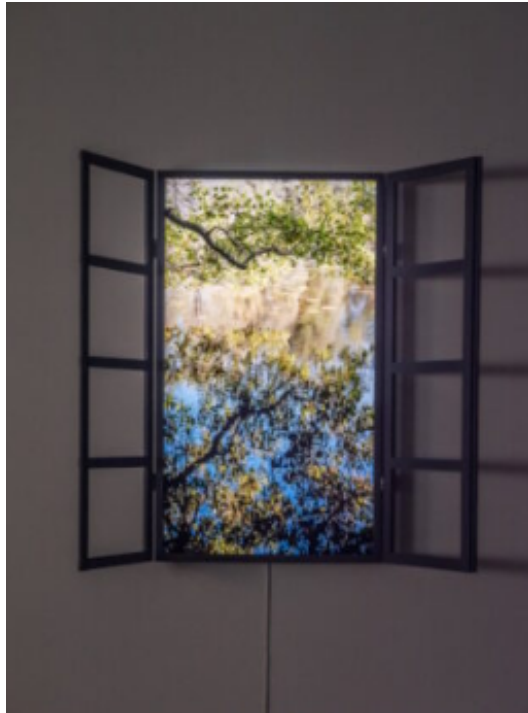
provide an exquisitely choreographed reflection of nature's details, a movement in the still.



My first associations go to the science fiction film "Avatar" or one of Judith Schalansky's essays. The latter often portrays the conflict around nature's almost sublime forms of revelation in relation to man's poor aspirations. In Hjelm's work, ruins occasionally change places with the all-encompassing sea, as a being in its own right, memories of grandiose constructions. And even if the scenery can be seductively beautiful, there is still no rest in the beautiful, the garbage that civilization excretes is just below the surface.

There has consistently been a political involvement in Mats Hjelm's work, from early works such as "White Flight" from 1997, where in a poetic and personal address he follows in the footsteps of his father, the documentary filmmaker Lars Hjelm. It will be a contemporary dialogue with the father's images that depicted the Black Power movement in the USA in the 1960s, while Hjelm's epic film work that we know from later years has its roots in the consequences of the colonial systems.

But in "Memories of Lakes Lost" it is no longer about saving the world, or even that it is worth trying to understand it. "We talk all the time about saving the planet, but it is the people who are perishing," says Hjelm when I meet him at the gallery, and believes that in this work he has released the narrative.



I feel it's just the opposite. Although the words have disappeared, the texts, the recitations, the human voices have receded, the story itself has strengthened, in his typical way of presentation – a sinking into what is, into what is. Like a resignation or meditation, another kind of recording. The spirit comes across even more clearly.

The world Hjelm describes has now been almost completely freed from human presence. Shadow figures sometimes appear, in scenes that can almost feel staged, as insignificant supporting characters, as silhouettes around a probably Indian temple, or as small swarming bathers in the majestic swells of a twilight sea. They do not feel at all natural or self-evident in their context, as if they no longer belonged but had just come to visit confused.

Man has been diminished, or as he himself says: "I depict a posthuman state, where only the memory of man remains." What will remain is nature and the work evokes some kind of quiet sadness or possibly comfort - it is up to the viewer to decide which.



At the same time, the gallery is showing Per Wissén's exhibition "Still Life", with some similarly quiet works. They consist of three collages transferred to photography, as seamlessly joined as the scenes in Mats Hjelm's film work. As in the previous series "Reworkings" from 1998, Wissén has taken his starting point in paintings by Caravaggio, an artist he returns to here as part of a personal mourning work.

The elaborate and very time-consuming technique of creating new images through cutting and meticulously joining details from reproductions of other artists' works, he acquired early in his career as an artist. It becomes a dialogue with art history, as previously with John Tenniel's depictions of Alice in Wonderland, or with Disney's depictions of the same motif.



Even in this presentation there is a meditative or sad mood, in the carefully respectful dissecting and compiling of the works of the historical colleagues. As Wizén found himself in the line of painters who all communicated in different ways with their contemporaries, but where the intention in the end may have just become a kind of writing in water. As if he wanted to save something, or capture, wash out an underlying meaning, for fear that it would otherwise be lost.

***Eva Asp***

*Cecilia Hillström Gallery, Hudiksvallsgatan 8, Stockholm. Runs 3 October – 1 November 2024*