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Interview with Artist
Erik Johansson
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Topic: Discipline

Phil -   (We had been chatting about sports and activities in our lives) Do you think your work ethic comes from growing up playing sports? Like the knowing and understanding of pushing through difficult moments to keep carrying on?

Erik -   That is interesting. Totally interesting. Because when people post their work, you just see the work. I totally understand what you mean. A lot of the work is just work, hard work. I see the connections to sports, the discipline, forcing yourself to go out and do things, and it's rewarding that it feels good afterwards. But for me I think it comes more from that I grew up on a farm, in Sweden. My parents always told me that I shouldn't sleep away my youth. They would kick me out of bed early in the morning. They really showed me that working is normal on a farm, you don't question it, you just do it. And I feel like that is something I have with me. I have the work ethic of a farmer that I bring into my art.

Phil -   Oh, that's interesting, yeah, I can see how working on a farm you'd simply learn to just do the work. No choice, someone has to do it. Would you mind talking a little bit more about discipline? Cause it's easy from the outside to look at an artist and wonder how they are so productive. Like when I look at you, you seem very productive. Can you talk a little bit about your own discipline?

Erik -   Erik - Yeah, and I agree. I also look at many other people and feel that they are productive. It's a vicious circle I guess. So I'm trying to be disciplined, I'm trying to always go to work even if I don't have projects. I have a little studio here (in Prague) and everyday I try to get up in the morning and come here even if I don't have projects or have less motivation because there's always something I can do. Like working on the website, or you never know, sometimes inspiration can come, or I'll spend time sorting through my boxes like I'm doing right now. Hahaha. So I think that sometimes it's about forcing yourself to go to work everyday. Because when you have a free flowing job it's a little bit easy to get out of it, to get a little bit lazy, to procrastinate and do other things. And with the personal work I don't really have a deadline either. So sometimes I just have to force myself to finish stuff.

Topic: What is real?

Phil - I was surprised to find that the photo of the people in the hole pushing the big button was basically real. How do you decide what to physically create and what to digitally create?

Erik - This is a constant question for me. What is reasonable to make? (hahaha) My goal is to shoot everything on location if I can but you have to make a trade off of what is practical. Since realism is important in my work, I find it's better to try to make things even if it takes a little bit longer and more work. It usually looks a little bit better and is more fun.

Also, one thing that people don't consider is if you actually create an environment, if you create a hole and put a button there, then the models are more able to understand the story and interact with the scene, instead of them just standing in a studio pretending to be in a hole pressing a button. So doing it this way is partly more fun, more challenging, and I think it looks a bit better.

Phil - Oh it totally does! It's interesting to me also because I feel like some people would just make the huge button and say "there's my art, done, I made a gigantic button".

Erik - Ha. And I just end up with a bunch of weird props everywhere. I have stuff filling the studio and stashed at my parents farm. But I can't save everything.

Phil - So how do you choose what to save?

Erik - Well sometimes when I'm doing an exhibition they want to include some props. So some of them have been used again. It's actually quite nice because when people are looking at the pictures then see the prop they will say "oh! This was actually made!". It's a nice way to bring the picture into the real space.

Topic: Inspiration and then Failure

Erik -   I think inspiration is about creating an environment where you can come up with ideas. I like to go running to clear my head. Avoiding stress is important too. I find that being stressed makes me come up with less ideas. And it's not that idea is born in an instant or that I can decide to sit down and come up with an idea when I want. But I find that if I have a good balance in my life, good ideas come to me. It's not usually in a final form of an idea but I find I'm better at seeing interesting things in my surroundings. My work used to be more focused on how much I could change an image and still make it look real but now it's more about the story, so sometimes an idea can even start as a title.

Phil -   A title? Like a phrase? Can you walk me through that?

Erik -   Yeah sure, so one project I had started with the words "a soundwave looks like a forest reflected in a lake", then I thought about what can I do with that. And that eventually lead to his image Sound Scapes which is a forest coming out of a gramophone. I'm trying to tell a story in one single image, and that's the challenge, to make that single image ask questions, such as "How did it become like this and what happens next". Then people have to fill in the story with their own imagination.

Phil -   I can follow but I think I'd struggle with starting with words. Ha! Well, then that leads me to failure. I'm guessing you don't fail as much as you used to?

Erik -   Right, and… hahaha… I guess that's the boring part, that I plan a little bit more, it's not as much rock-n-roll as it used to be. I would say I spend the most time before I start working on something, so when I start I'm quite confident that it will somehow become good. It's hard to say what percentage of ideas fail but I'd say it's lower than it used to be. I'm more likely to discover early on that an idea won't work and it won't be worth pursuing.

Topic: New Tech

Phil - How much do you look at new tech? Are you always looking at the new latest and greatest thing

Erik - So I am self taught when it comes to both photography and post production. I was always someone who wanted to know "how does the flash work, how does the camera work, why is the exposure like this and what can I do to change that". I feel like being interested in the technology and understanding the limitations of the camera has really helped me. Because I don't want to be limited by the technology, I want to be limited by the ideas. So in that sense I am really curious to explore the tools to the maximum. But I also can't say when a new feature comes out or a new effect, I'm not jumping right onto it. Because I think the way that I work in post production is rather traditional, it's more about layer masks, adjustment layers. But I'm always learning because I want to make sure I'm limited by my ideas and not the tools. So in that sense I'm always following the latest technology.

Phil - What about AI? Have you seen the stuff being made these days? It's wild. What are your thoughts on potential uses?

Erik - I think AI will definitely make the workflow generally faster in the future. Cause if AI can understand what it is that I want to do it would save time. Because a lot of my time is taken up with cutting things out in photoshop but I find the automatic tools not good enough yet. But if an AI could watch me do things and then imitate me it would be super helpful.

I also feel like AI isn't really able to come up with ideas. This will become a philosophical question at some point. What is art and can AI actually make art or can it just imitate art. I think to make art is to be human, I think it's more interesting if a person made a decision to come up with the art versus a machine. What do you think? How do you see it?

Phil - Some of the technologies are insane but I'll admit I haven't thought too much about how it might affect me. But one thing I was just thinking about is how an art generating AI could be used by a collage artist to make the elements that they use in their collage. Rather than tearing up adverts or other people's photographs or artworks they could use AI to generate lots of pictures with the color schemes or imagery they are looking for. I think a lot of artists will find really interesting ways to use it.

Erik - Yeah, or what if an AI could go through my image archive of over two hundred thousand pictures and could suggest "what if this could work with this" or something like that. They might suggest ideas that I would find but could do it more quickly. But then it becomes tricky because who made the idea? So that might be erasing the border some. Or one other way to use AI is sometimes I need to search for a picture of the sky and I have to just search and search through my archive. Sometimes when I import pictures I add words like sky to the metadata but sometimes I don't. So if an AI could just find what I'm looking for when I type it in. They kind of already have that on the iphone but if it could be more advanced and I could use it on my archive.

Phil - A worry I have with AI is that someone will go plug a prompt in like "an oil painting of a glowing gummy bear in a sword fight in neoclassical style" then the AI will generate some images, the person will pick one and go paint it. So it's kind of their art and kind of not.

Erik - But even today, if you take a photo of a can of coke that has been crushed then project that photo on a canvas and trace it and paint it in a hyper realistic way. Isn't that almost the same thing? It's a photographic painting but it's a copy of a photograph. I don't know. Maybe it becomes a question of what is the technique in how you got there. But what is important… what you're looking at or how you got there?

But I will say I haven't thought about this enough to have a well built opinion. I'm just thinking.

Phil - Me either. Fun to think about. Still the early days of seeing how people will use it.

Topic: Sharing behind the scenes

Erik -   I think the biggest misconception of my work is that it's just photoshopped art. Like completely made in photoshop. So I share the behind the scenes to show the effort that went into it. But I don't share the behind the scenes with all of the work but sometimes I show a part so people see tat there is a lot more behind it. I hope that it makes people wonder, when I don't post a behind the scenes picture, what is real and what is not.

I also remember when I was learning, well… I'm still learning, but when I was starting out I found it really interesting to watch other people's processes. I still find it super interesting. I sometimes assist my photographer friends just to see how they work because I'm curious about it. So I want to share some of my process because you never know what someone will get out of it.

Phil -   That's cool that you help your friends out with their projects. I'm sure there's a lot to learn because we all work in different ways.

Erik -   Yes absolutely. So I always plan my projects really well. Like the worst thing I can imagine shooting would be a wedding or event becasue it would be so stressful for me to try to find the right angle in a split second. I'm also not the best in the way that I interact with models. I have a portrait photographer friend here in Prague and she is super talented in the way that she communicates with the models. So I feel like, even though we are completely different styles you can always learn something because we all have a different style or way of doing things. And it's not like there is not one right way to do things.

Phil - This is a wide open question but do you have any general philosophies about working? Or more specifically, how do you get yourself to work on the things that are not super exciting?

Erik - Hm… Well my photographer friends think I'm very efficient and do a lot of work. But I don't know if I'm more efficient, maybe I just seem efficient, I'm not sure. But we all are afraid of failure and people always say "don't be afraid of failure, it's part of the creative process" but the hardest part of the process is just starting. You can have an idea for a long time but if you don't have a deadline you don't have to get started on it. And I think one thing that I do is I force myself to start, I say "okay, now I'm going to do this project" and I just force myself to start doing it. There are only two outcomes, either it becomes good or it becomes bad. And if it's bad you learn something and if it's good then it's good. I just feel like to get started is the hardest thing and I struggle with that a lot and I try to force myself sometimes. I think it's hard to force yourself to come up with ideas but you can force yourself to start working on an idea.

Phil - Now that's interesting.

Erik - But what was the question? Hahaha.

Phil - Ha! Yah, do you have a general approach to creativity.. do you have things you tell yourself…

Erik - Yah. Nothing is impossible. The kind of work that I do and is true for many other creative fields, is it's all about problem solving. For me it's about figuring out how to capture something and make it look as if it were photographed even though it can't really exist. And that problem can be broken down into smaller problems. That is basically how I can approach an idea. Not being afraid of a challenge. There's always a way somehow. That problem solving aspect of it is something I really enjoy.

Nostalgia is a big driving force in my work.

- Erik Johansson