

## John Skoog's "Sent på Jorden and Förår"

PILAR CORRIAS, London

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This darkened period following the new year, with only slim pickings of sunlight, is habitually described in the northern hemisphere by one succinct word: depressing. With the celebrations around the winter equinox to keep spirits up now over, people trudge glumly back to work, cheerless. Still, beyond existential gloom, this is a part of a natural cycle relating to our position on the planet, and we tend to accept it, along with all its rituals and associations. Dismal feelings, that is, are permitted.

John Skoog's exhibition of two films at Pilar Corrias gallery in London transports viewers to two less depressing seasonal moments. The artist's first film on show here, *Sent på Jorden* (2011), sends us hurtling to the days following the other equinox in midsummer. Its title translates as "late on Earth" and is taken from the surrealist work of the Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf. It is this sense of lateness, of impending gloom, which is powerfully conveyed in Skoog's strung together series of short, speechless vignettes filmed in the artist's birth place, the small rural Swedish town of Kvidinge (population 900). Each exquisitely constructed scene was filmed at dusk, with darkness continually threatening to close in, sending that unmistakable message to the senses that time is nearly up, running out. A lone girl in a red shirt pushes a bike through a field, the half-light picking out the gleam on her strong, jutting cheekbones. Suddenly she throws the bike to the ground and breaks into a run without looking back. Two young boys, one black, one white, round up cows for the evening using hand movements of near balletic grace to coax the animals into position. One boy reaches out to hold the other's hand, but a prolonged touch is shrugged off. An automated farm vehicle packs bales of grass in thick ribbons of white plastic in a hypnotic spinning motion until the crop is tightly packaged and hidden from the eye.

With each scene Skoog creates something of a photographic portrait, bringing to mind those influential images of people in isolated rural landscapes taken by the likes of Walker Evans and William Eggleston, but rather than simply animating portraits, this work situates its subjects in time as well as space. Time of day, time of year, time of life. If we take the central component of time-based media to be time itself, then Skoog proves himself as an artist able to make film reveal itself as profoundly temporal. In so doing he joins a lineage of artists who have made portraits of time: Christian Marclay's magnum opus, *The Clock* (2010), inevitably comes to mind, as do the films of Tacita Dean.

Grasses are high, the breeze has dropped to an eerie stillness, and agricultural machinery has taken on alien qualities as it attempts to gather and store crops before winter. The skies are a dull silky grey smeared with shades of pale pink and green. As a group of girls play football in the grass in bright kits, the sense that they are out too late, that they should be in before dark stirs powerful memories from deep in the bones. We become aware that the entire film takes place in extra time. Late on Earth—isn't it always, at every moment?

The second film we see here, *Förår* (2012), takes its title from an old Swedish word for a farming season which means "fore-year." This concept loosely approximates spring, and yet it is more closely associated with the sense that something is "to come." As with *Sent på Jorden's* lateness, this sense of almost fearful anticipation and foreboding is translated into every scene of the film. Rather than a dull glow, the light in this film is a thick white mist. We follow a young redheaded girl—one of the football players from the first film—as she makes her way silently around the town.

There's a heightened sense of violence in this film. The protagonist throws rocks at the wall of an underpass with two boys wrought by boredom and frustration. A scene in which a group of young children turn on a viciously circular saw in a quiet toolshed, dangling their hands close to its whirring teeth, creates genuine anxiety on viewing. We see men carrying guns through a wood and then later, looking out from inside a car; we see men carrying a dead deer by its legs. Rather than the images that we tend to associate with spring, what is depicted here is a small community that appears to be preparing for battle.

Skoog's protagonist, all niveous skin and messy ponytail, is curiously blank. When she puts her head on a bale of hay and stares at the sky, she might be experiencing a kind of ecstasy or nothing at all. Her age, pre-teen, compounds the foreboding sense that something is coming on the horizon: that she is a young unformed character—early on Earth. In the film's final scene she is seen walking down the road with a rifle, and it might be suggested that her qualities, and those of *Förår*, the fore-year, convey something clean yet ominous, innocent yet cruel.

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LEAVE A COMMENT



1 John Skoog, *Sent på Jorden*, 2011.



2 View of John Skoog's "Sent på Jorden and Förår," Pilar Corrias, London, 2012–2013.



3 John Skoog, *Förår*, 2012.



4 View of John Skoog's "Sent på Jorden and Förår," Pilar Corrias, London, 2012–2013.



5 John Skoog, *Förår*, 2012.



6 John Skoog, *Förår*, 2012.

1 John Skoog, *Sent på Jorden*, 2011. Production still. All images courtesy of Pilar Corrias, London.

2 View of John Skoog's "Sent på Jorden and Förår," Pilar Corrias, London, 2012–2013. John Skoog, *Sent på Jorden*, 2011. SK to HD digital film, 11:02 minutes. Edition of 5.

3 John Skoog, *Förår*, 2012. Production still.

4 View of John Skoog's "Sent på Jorden and Förår," Pilar Corrias, London, 2012–2013. John Skoog, *Förår*, 2012. 2K to HD digital film, 16:32 minutes. Edition of 5.

5 John Skoog, *Förår*, 2012. Production still.