

ARTFORUM

Torbjörn Vejvi

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Why is it that when you're a kid, you can imagine perfect things, but you can't make them, and when you're an adult, you can make perfect things, but you can't play with them? This deep if unlikely question is brought to mind by the work of Torbjorn Vejvi, a twenty-seven-year-old Swedish artist based in Los Angeles.

In a series of small sculptures produced in 1998 and 1999, Vejvi selected pictures from the pages of old National Geographic magazines, and glued them to foamcore, creating complex, three-dimensional objects that treat the images' reality the way a chandelier treats light. Each picture is cut into pieces and reorganized around the shape of a witty architectural model, such that the image splits apart, like child's clothes forced onto an adult's body. This transformation of the picture into sculpture instantiates an investigation of the image, refocusing its dramatic emphasis, modulating its tone, and reshaping even its depicted space--in effect transforming the image into a crime scene, in which its original purpose is simultaneously degraded and magnified in meaning, a la trace evidence. Sometimes the effect is severe, as in *Between races*, 1998, in which a nondescript shot of jockeys playing pool is weirdly dislocated. At other times, the interest lies in Vejvi's reverence, as in *Old house*, 1998, where an image of a rickety mansion has been rebuilt as a tiny (somehow flatter) movie set, while the group of people dancing around it meld into the facade as if decorative elements in a mural. Vejvi's genius lies in his ability to translate his emotional response to each image into a

unique, diagrammatic form whose empathic yet wary build causes one to think about the ways emotion can be distanced, which, in turn, inspires an unsettling intellectual disquiet.

Vejvi grew up in a remote forest in southern Sweden. One night, his parents took him to the city of Goteborg to see a major theater production. Vejvi was entranced, less by the play itself than by the elaborate sets. He began to build little theaters in his bedroom, first writing plays to justify the sets, and finally designing sets that suggested an accompanying narrative. Encouraged by his parents and teachers, he continued to draw, paint, and make objects without really thinking of himself as an artist. Eventually, he enrolled in the graduate program of one of Sweden's most respected art schools, Malmo Art Academy. At that point, he was painting and making sculptures and short videos, which he began to show in Malmo and Stockholm. In 1997, he was offered the chance to study at UCLA for a year. After he settled in Los Angeles, his work was quickly recognized and championed by local artists, critics, and curators. In a fortuitous coincidence, the LA art community's current, intensive dialogue around formalism's growth potential (through aesthetic decision-making that is less conscious than hallucinogenically intuitive) facilitated the decoding of Vejvi's brilliantly original attempt to turn advanced sculptural notions into workhorses for ideas traditionally relegated to photography and painting, and his success inspired him to remain in Southern California.

Having devoted himself to art at such a young age, and in relative seclusion, he cites few major influences, though painters Sigmar Polke, Luc Tuymans, and Peter Doig are among his favorites. Emotion and memory being his subject matter, Vejvi has sought out a variety of ways to control and minimize their “chaos” through a balance of “abstraction and realness,” and he mentions a crucial point in his development when he discovered that “space can be not just a volume, but a place of tension, too, and that negative space can be used as a point of contact.” In fact, it is characteristic of Vejvi’s work that its meaning is to be found in the spaces in between. Although known for working small, his newest, larger pieces, such as *10 feet up in the air*, 1999, an impeccably messy pile of inoperable paper airplanes, are even more impressive, as he seeks to create work that “demands a physical response equal to its cerebral one.”

To that end, Vejvi has recently abandoned found imagery to build an extraordinary series of box-like sculptures that utilize emotionally charged material in an emblematic way. Too tender and impractical to be architectural models, and too bemused and poignant to qualify as minimalist sculptures, these extremely attenuated memorials to Vejvi’s childhood incorporate simplistic, resonant iconography into optical illusions that simulate the tricky, doomed negotiations between past experience and memory, as though art’s rarefied process were a kind of magical force capable of reconciling them. In *Untitled*, 1999, two rows of trees made of contact paper bracket a white box, seeming to diminish forever into two of its sides, only reaching alignment along the walls of a narrow hallway that bisects the sculpture. The shadowed interior of the passageway is illuminated by a precious, melancholy beam of natural light that falls through a

circular hole cut into the ceiling. In another box piece, also *Untitled*, 1999, eight decals depicting a generic boy and dog face off across a closed hallway that circumscribes the sculpture, serving as portals to the conflicted nostalgia at the heart of the work, while a blank, open-ended hallway bisecting the box’s interior conveys a faint, disjunctive loneliness. Like the sublimely nonsensical images in the best of Robert Wilson’s theater productions, these spare, perfectly symmetrical juxtapositions of emotive signage and suggestively empty space create an atmosphere at once personal and so reduced and essence-free as to seem abstracted from the collective unconscious. As in all Vejvi’s work, an almost childlike idea of perfection is balanced by a mature acknowledgment of the limitations of materiality, resulting in objects that long to be explored, and which inspire an equivalent longing, even as their very configurations signal that impossibility.

The tendency in contemporary art is to gild an existing genre with some stylistic idiosyncrasy that extends its life span in a surprising fashion. Vejvi is that rare artist--like Joseph Cornell, Paul Thek, or, to cite a contemporary, Vincent Fecteau--whose work has such profound needs of its own that the painstaking process of divulging them in formal terms creates a bond with art that seems to destandardize it. Vejvi has found a way to convey feeling so unmistakable, yet so meticulously withheld, that the beauty of its absence is almost unbelievable.

--Dennis Cooper