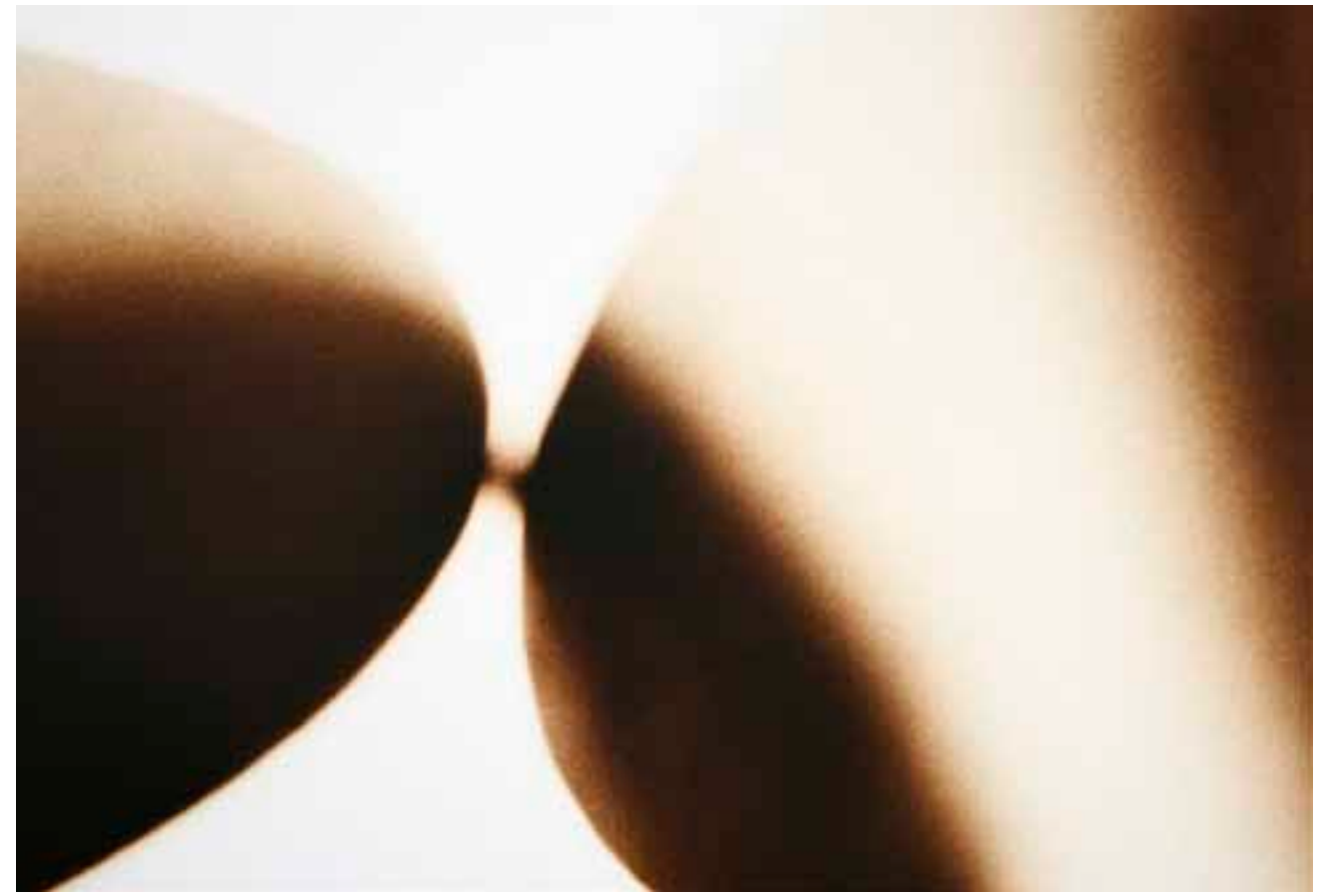


In Touch with Creativity

When talking to Swedish-born New York City-based photographer Kristofer Dan-Bergman, a couple of words keep coming up. One is yoga [more on that later]. The other is process. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, process is a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end. With Dan-Bergman you get the feeling that the process, which led to what he is and does – which in his case, as with most artists, is the same – began a long time ago. Perhaps when he was ten.

“I grew up in a theater family. My parents were both actors and they had a theater [Lilla Teatern] on Regeringsgatan in the center of Stockholm,” Dan-Bergman says. “It was a very stimulating environment for a kid. My friends and I used to go wild in the costume and make-up rooms.” At the theater Kristofer met actors – people like Nils Poppe, Harriet Andersson, Viveca Lindfors, Gunnar Björnstrand, and Inga Gill among others, “interesting, different people” he recalls, each of whom had an impact on the young boy. And at home there were always people around.





With that kind of background, Dan-Bergman seemed destined for a life in the arts. He enjoyed drawing and writing stories, but found himself increasingly drawn to sports. As an eight-year old, Kristofer initiated inter-school soccer tournaments, and began sailing dinghies. Whilst his passion for sports defined his youth, there was a seminal event that occurred very early on in his life. At the age of eleven he was selected, with other children from across the world, to spend a month at the Children's International Summer Villages (CISV) camp on Vancouver Island, Canada. "Looking back, I can see how important that was for me. I learnt, at an early age, to live away from my family, and more importantly, to develop a feeling of togetherness and friendship with children from other countries."

During his teenage years, his love for sports continued [Kristofer began competing in squash tournaments, and ocean sailing regattas], as did his open-

ness to other cultures. Kristofer represented Sweden at CISV international events, and in college, went worked with AIESEC, the world's largest international student's organization.,

THE BUSINESS MAN EXPLORER

With that sort of eclectic, rather free childhood it's a bit surprising that Dan-Bergman chose to study Business—first at the University of Stockholm, and later at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor from where he received an MBA. After Business School, Kristofer began working in the banking industry in New York. (Whilst in High School, he had been an exchange student in Seattle, and had fallen in love with the sense of freedom that only the States could offer, and was glad to be back here.) While Kristofer continued in the corporate world, he admits that he always "knew that it wasn't for me, that it wasn't right." He was waiting for something to reveal itself, some sort of calling.

In the meantime, Kristofer continued to explore his limits. Here in New York, he started running marathons, playing competitive squash and soccer, and of course, sailing: He participated in the World Cup in International One Design (IOD) as well as the World Cup trials in J24's. "I've never been the kind of person who could just sit still," he told me. "I think I learned that from sports – to never give up and to always move forward". Then in the early '90s Kristofer signed up, somewhat on a whim, for a weekend course in photography at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in mid-town Manhattan. He always had more of an interest in photography – he recalls – than most people around him seemed to, but it had never occurred to him to pursue the art. In the ICP dark room, when he developed his first photograph, he felt that he had struck gold: "It was like 'Wow! This is it!'"

He may have finally found his calling, but the transition from a steady job to

an unknown and traditionally uncertain profession was hard to conceptualize. So Kristofer waited some more. And then his firm asked him to take a new role in Europe, and this made Kristofer realize that he had to make a decision about his future. He neither wanted to work in Finance nor move back to Europe. So he quit. "I was terrified," he recalls. The next two years were spent learning about the camera, and trying to get work. It wasn't easy. He had no network in the business, and jobs as a stringer were infrequent. He became increasingly nervous.

Then, when life looked really bleak, Kristofer received another enticing offer from the banking world. He was considering it, and then one night, somewhere far out on the Atlantic Ocean [he was on a sailing trip to the Caribbean], he decided he couldn't possibly go back to the world of Finance. I said to myself: 'Who am I kidding?' The rest is history."

Not many of us can pinpoint exactly when our lives turn around. Few of us experience that moment of "wow" that Dan-Bergman had in the dark room with his first developed photograph in hand. But if we do, a leap of faith is usually required. It took Kristofer a while to get there, but now he was clear about this decision. "I was in a different place mentally after I had taken that decision. I had let go of all thoughts of money and so on." A few weeks upon his return from the Caribbean, Dan Bergman found out that he had won the Green Card lottery. Now he was also armed with a work permit that allowed him to stay in the U.S.

Now let's get back to yoga.

YOGA AND THE BUILDING OF A LIFE IN PHOTOGRAPHY

"I began taking yoga classes at my gym 15 years ago and it changed my life," said Dan-Bergman. "Now I do 10-15 minutes of yoga every morning, and always finish by doing a headstand. It's amazing! I tell

everybody to try it. If they had yoga in schools for little children, imagine how much we would save later on in terms of health care money!"

Yoga, he continues, takes away stress and makes him feel refreshed and ready to work. "It gets your entire system going in such a nice way. Through yoga I also discovered the power of the mind. You know, there have been periods in my life when I've been depressed personally but successful in work, and then periods when the opposite has happened. It's important to understand that it's all in your head."

With a clear focus on photography, Kristofer began slowly but steadily developing a clientele. Over the years he has photographed for publications including: *Corriera Della Sera*, *Dagens Nyheter* (DN), *El Pais*, *Esquire*, the *Source*, and *Verdens Gang* (VG). He has shot campaigns for clients including AT&T, Clarins, Kay Jewellers, Panasonic, Pfizer and Tag Heuer.

“With time, it gets more challenging. That’s how I knew I had done the right thing in choosing photography. I still have this feeling that I’m always evolving, and I know that if I just persevere long enough, something will happen, something new will come out of it.”



(Left) A representation of the artist by the artist himself, inspired by the newest installation by Dan-Bergman, Wall(k) / (Previous pages) Photographs from the series Space / (First spread) Photographs from the series Touch

Kristofer’s greatest joy comes from photographing people, “because it is always different – the relationship between you and the person you are photographing is always changing.” The most powerful element at play is that of the unexpected, the unpredictable. In conjunction with his commercial work, Dan Bergman has always devoted considerable time and energy to his own art. While he values commercial photography for the intensity (time-sensitive) it demands, the clear goals that it presents, and for the interactions with his team, the client and the agency, Kristofer also needs to pursue more open-ended personal photography which comes with “both the frustration and the freedom” that exploration entails.

What motivates him is the desire to feel that he is constantly developing. “In the beginning this was easy” he recognizes, “because everything was new.” “With time, it gets more challenging.” But the challenge is what he wants. “That’s how I knew I had done the right thing in choosing photography. I still have this feeling that I’m always evolving,

and I know that if I just persevere long enough, something will happen, something new will come out of it.” Is there a philosophy that he keeps in mind during this journey of experimentation I asked? “Don’t dwell on things too much” he said, “don’t fret, just go with the flow, with your own perspective and practice, and something will come out of it”.

With this open-ended approach to creating his work, Kristofer’s art projects start and find themselves in interesting ways. Lets start with the genesis for his exhibit, *Touch*.

HOW TO PHOTOGRAPH (A) ROCK

One desolate winter he locked himself up in the studio with a few rocks. He had wanted to photograph them for a long time, but had no clue how to go about it. How does one photograph rocks in an interesting way? “I had no idea. So I locked myself up for days, turned up the music really loud, and kept taking photos. Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. But I kept going, because I knew that at the end something was bound to happen. That’s always part

of the process.” After days of frustration and feelings of failure, something did happen, something quite interesting happened. “I showed these photographs to an artist friend of mine, and he told me I ought to exhibit them. So I had this exhibition *Touch* at my studio. The show was quite successful.”

The next year, Dan-Bergman received a book of short stories, *Amerika*, written by a grand uncle, and decided to photograph it. Same story: He locked himself up in the studio, turned up the music, and began – without any pre-meditated ideas – snapping away. The result: The series *Unbound*. “In reality I am not a still-life photographer” Kristofer states, “but I am an explorer in what I do. I have confidence in my head that something will happen.” This confidence that the process will run its course is a lead theme in Dan-Bergman’s career as a photographer.

FROM ‘HOLLYWOOD PORTRAITS’ TO ‘SPACE’

Some years ago Kristofer began another project in this improvisatory fashion. He

decided to invite his friends over to his Tribeca studio the week before Thanksgiving and photograph them. “I missed my friends. We had all hung out at my studio on Nineteenth Street and Park Avenue, and when that building closed, we were scattered all over the city. So I had the idea that I’d invite them over to my new studio, and photograph them at the same time.” He asked each of them to dress based on an idea that was specific to their person, but loose still. For example, he asked a friend who loves the movie, *Dr. Strangelove*, to dress up as the character, another who was Italian-American to represent that story. The evening was a lot of fun for his friends, and hard work for Kristofer, who created, *Time Capsule*, two long photographs pieced together by shots from that evening. The project was successful enough to be repeated the same time the following year. This time Kristofer used images from the book *Hollywood Portraits*, as inspiration, and his friends again served as models. The series was exhibited under the title *Yearbook*.

An invitation to Dan-Bergman’s studio before the Christmas rush has now become an annual tradition among his friends. By creating new conditions for the same actors, Kristofer takes a fluid continuously evolving approach to his work. “I am not a perfectionist,” he explains. “Also who is to decide when something is finished and ready anyway?”

Dan-Bergman’s next project was informed by the desire to represent images of different realities that physically co-exist side-by-side. His plan is to realize the root concept – one that he calls *Divided World* – through a documentary project. However, last year, for his annual November studio shoot, he decided to apply this concept to an indoor studio setting. And so built a set, with two connecting boxes, within which people could sit-stand-dance-glide, basically, do whatever they wanted. The result is *Space*, a creative, spontaneous and humorous document of friendship, togetherness, and loneliness. That year Kristofer took his photo project further. He created a film with the footage, and also began preparing for an exhibition

that intersperses “reality” with a new “reality” through exchanging people in and out of the two different spaces.

With this series, Kristofer starts collecting material without necessarily knowing what the end product will be. The end product is quasi-documentary and quasi-art. “It’s the process that is exciting, the journey” Dan-Bergman muses. “As long as I feel I am evolving and challenged I am happy”.

Some of Kristofer Dan-Bergman’s works is featured in *Embrace!*, a major art exhibition with works by over 30 contemporary Swedish-born artists who live in the United States. The theme is the American dream and the Swedish identity. The exhibition opened on September 14, 2011 in Utvandrarernas House (the House of Emigrants) in Växjö, Sweden, and will run through the end of January 2012. Dan-Bergman exhibits photos from *Yearbook*, *Space*, and from his latest installation *Wall(k)*, as well as films from these projects. ■■

WRITTEN BY EVA STENSKÄR

For more info, see: kristoferdanbergman.com, and embrace.se