

blind



Simen Johan: Wilderness stories

By Hugo Fortin | December 22, 2019

Scandinavian photographer Simen Johan's latest series, *Conspiracy of Ravens*, is on view at the Yossi Milo Gallery in New York, which has represented him and supported his work for almost twenty years. Simen Johan creates baroque fictions populated by animals and wild, picturesque settings. On this occasion, Johan's world has become darker and more unsettling as human presence, although absent from these photographs, seems to paradoxically lurk in the background.

Conspiracy of Ravens plunges us into a fantastic universe populated by animals placed at the center of the composition like characters or totems haunting luxuriant or desolate wilderness. In these large-format images greens and blues dominate, attracting the eye with their cool twilight. Details abound, filling the entire surface of the photograph, while the sharp focus makes them all blend together. The viewer gets lost in the jungle, passing from a panda to a liana, to a ray of light or a patch of fur, to the immensity of the overcast sky.

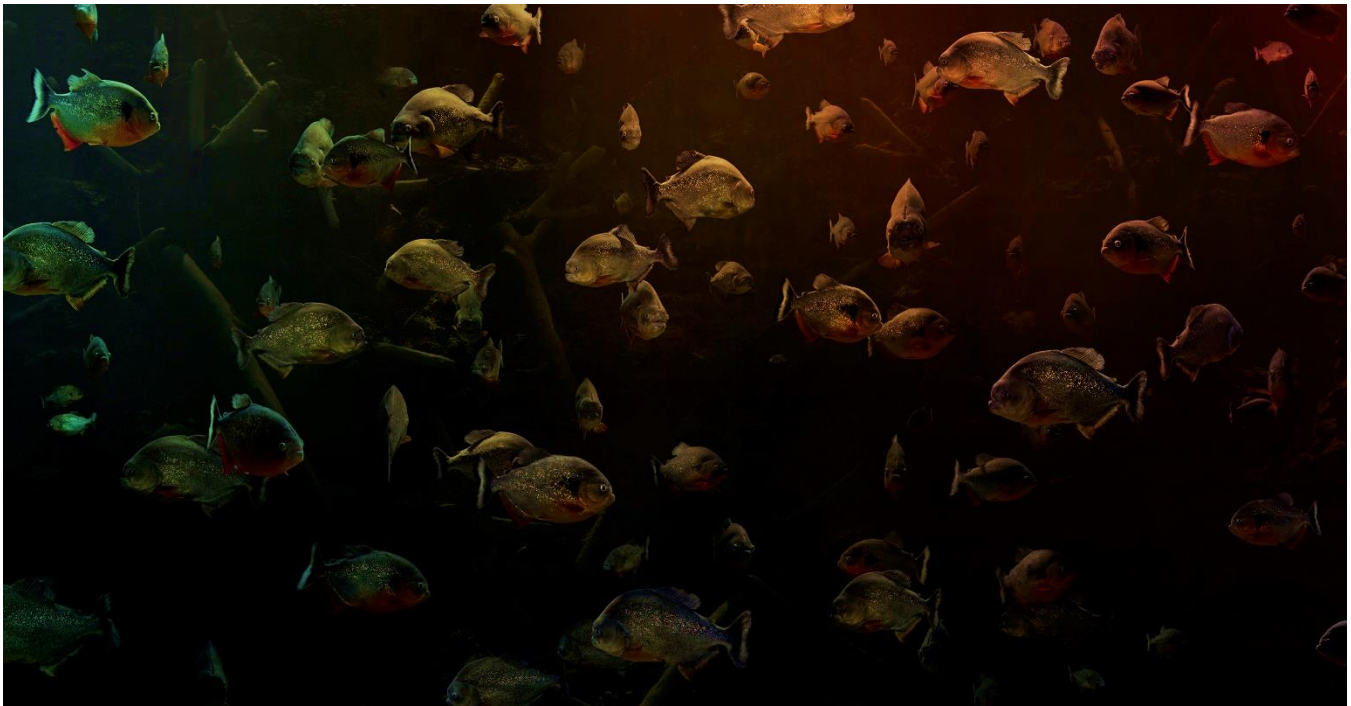
Since the early 1990s, Simen Johan has established himself as a pioneer in digital photographic retouching. He was one of the first artists of his generation to exploit technical possibilities in the field of fine art photography. He has worked in all genres, from portraiture to landscape photography, constantly working on transforming his images. Thanks to his technical expertise, creativity, and attention to detail, he is able to generate ambivalent moods by manipulating his images, light, and color. He is a master of chiaroscuro who produces dramatic compositions that reveal a very singular universe transformed in his own, distinctive style.

Transcending the classic distinction between reality and fiction typical of photographic manipulation, the artist's discourse goes beyond the desire to create fiction in the traditional sense. It is not a question of entertaining the viewers or playing on their perception in order to let them get lost between two overlapping, intersecting worlds; nor does Johan try to trip the viewers by playing tricks. Photographic retouching is not a magician's slight of hand, but rather represents the power of summoning a new world into being through fragments and visions.

Several images in one

Johan's work covers all aspects of photographic production, from shooting to retouching. For a long time he has primarily worked as a wildlife and landscape photographer who compiles and collects his elements the way a hunter would collect trophies or an eighteenth-century scholar unknown species. Johan travels around the world like an adventure-seeker and brings back the raw material for his future images.

Each image is thus the result of a long labor of assembling and collaging different photographs, each enfolding several places and temporalities. Simen Johan explores this commonplace of photography as a reunion of a specific space-time linked to the time and place of shooting. His photography is utopian and rewrites history: it is located nowhere, in no time, and transports us to an elsewhere. This is where the photographer becomes a true artist. He creates an imaginary world from scratch, certainly starting from reality, but without the need to stay there.



A world without humans

The effect of these photographs on the viewer is intriguing. Ancestral myths whose meaning has been lost come to mind, perhaps fables, or even dark and disturbing visions. These images seem to forget the human world; they place themselves in a mythological before or in an apocalyptic after. They present only an untamed world of instincts and drives, a world ruled by the law of the strongest and the instincts of survival and domination. The absence of humans is like a mirror reflection: are we these magnificent and terrifying lions fighting on a rock? Are these images merely a projection of our own anguish? What tragedies unfold here?

This photographic series follows the path blazed by the artist's previous work as he continues to hone his style and aesthetics. We find the same cool clarity that characterized his earlier images, the same sense of the picturesque and sometimes of the baroque, the same drive toward the sublime, in the romantic sense of the term as a reassuring vision of a distant catastrophe; however, the title of this new work adds to the enigma. *Conspiracy of Ravens* represents at the same time a swarming murder of crows and, more literally, a conspiracy fomented by these birds. These images are disturbing, even violent: majestic lions engage in a fight; dangerous piranhas swim in red-green water, as if waiting for their prey; a sleuth of bears devastate pelicans' nest perched among discarded tires—a last trace of human presence. Simen Johan himself evokes the current political, social, and ecological context, because even in fiction the real world is never far away.



Simen Johan, *Conspiracy of Ravens*
October 24, 2019 to January 4, 2020
Yossi Milo Gallery
245 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY