

# YIELD

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## YIELD | Award Nomination Simen Johan

Sara Fahling interviews Simen Johan about his artistic process and his solo exhibition, *Conspiracy of Ravens*.

*Interviewer: Sara Fahling  
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**Sara Fahling (SF):** Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today, Simen. Can you tell us where your interest in photography came from?

**Simen Johan (SJ):** Actually, my dream was to become a filmmaker, growing up. Inspired and encouraged by my step-grandfather, an American film producer, I went to film school in Sweden for two years before coming to New York to continue my studies at the School of Visual Arts in 1992. However, I soon realized that I didn't even have the finances necessary to complete the class exercises, and I was too shy to get my ideas across in a collaborative setting, so I changed my major to photography.

I had been attracted to filmmaking's ability to create an immersive experience. Movies by directors such as Stanley Kubrick, David Lynch, David Cronenberg transported me to suspenseful, strange, psychologically charged places that didn't merely entertain, but revealed complex truths about life, people, and the world.

Photography, to me, was the next best thing to filmmaking. I had taken photography courses in Sweden and discovered that there were also expressive ways to use that medium, and in photography I could do everything by myself. Since the beginning of my photography studies, I staged narratives and looked for ways to manipulate my photographs, initially through various darkroom experiments and manual cut-and-paste collaging techniques; and then in my second year I discovered Photoshop.

**SF:** You are currently preparing for a solo exhibition, *Conspiracy of Ravens*, at Yossi Milo Gallery in New York City. Would you like to say a few words about the exhibition?

**SJ:** While I don't consciously plan my images, they tend to somehow always speak to what's going on in my life and in the world around me. There's an overall menacing and predatory feel to this show, which I attribute to what's going on politically right now. There are grizzlies ransacking a pelican nesting ground built atop a scrap pile of car tires. There is a conspiracy of ravens (that's what you call a group of ravens, or you could also say a "congress of ravens"), where everyone is talking and nobody is listening. There's an image of two lions, "kings of beasts," intertwined in a play of domination and subjugation against a painted backdrop.

However, there are other ways to look at this work. I find the works' mysterious and open-ended attributes more compelling, and there's something just generally interesting to me about the intersection between nature and construct, because it's essentially where we exist.

**SF:** The works' ambiguity is what intrigues me the most. You don't give your audience all the answers, in the same way a good filmmaker keeps people guessing. Some may approach this work thinking this is just another nature photograph, but the closer one gets the more one discovers the constructed metaphorical layers to your images. It's clear that every element of the image is carefully considered.

Your work fits within the category of tableau photography. Within a single image a whole narrative is conveyed. Can you talk about your interest in the tableau and why you choose to work this way?

**SJ:** I think some of my work fits into that category, but other images are probably more in line with portraiture or landscape painting. My process is intuitive. I like images that have multiple layers of meaning, and that speaks truth to me about what life and the world are multifaceted, illusory, contradictory. A successful image for me is not one that I can necessarily explain, but one that generates meaning and interpretation possibilities when I look at it.

So, I vaguely envision the result, but I never know how to get there. Typically, I work on each image for several years, but keep many compositions in progress simultaneously. I have hundreds of compositions in my computer that I've started, but then had to pause for whatever reason. Maybe I need an element that I have yet to photograph or I just don't know where to take it next. Sometimes a composition doesn't work because I've photographed something in the wrong light or weather, or from the wrong angle.

**SF:** How do you source your images of wildlife? Do you seek out each species in its natural habitat?

**SJ:** The animals are photographed wherever I can find them, in zoos, safari parks, the wild, and the studio. Because you can't control what an animal is going to do, I tend to base my ideas on what I'm able to capture candidly. For instance, I captured the face of the wolf from

my current show maybe ten years ago at a wolf sanctuary in California. The caretaker was rubbing its belly when it made this face. I found it fascinating that this was the wolf's "happy face." I didn't have a good body for it. I tried photographing various dogs, but the body of a wolf is very specific—big paws, coarse fur. Several years later, I met someone who had a tame wolf that I could get close to and photograph. I composed the background from various photographs I took in Yellowstone National Park.

**SF:** Light plays an important role in your images. Your style is very indicative of cinema and even reminiscent of dramatic Renaissance-era paintings. While you mentioned earlier your interest in cinema, do you ever find yourself looking towards classic painting techniques for inspiration?

**SJ:** I do. A painter's understanding of composition, color, geometry, and perspective becomes essential when you're constructing an image from scratch. These are skills that I never learned in photography school, but had to learn from painting, by looking at paintings, talking to painters, and reading about painting. Whenever I have difficulty resolving a composition, I turn to my painter friends for advice.

**SF:** The image that was most striking for me was *Untitled #171*, the image with the yellow-headed birds contrasted against a dark grey landscape. It is so subtly dramatic and reminds me of one of Tokihiro Sato's light-painting photographs. The yellow-headed birds look like remnants of light during a long exposure. The element of repetition is overtly present in this image, as in many of your other compositions. Can you talk about the role of repetition within this series?

**SJ:** I built that background from random things I found in a junkyard, and there's some road kill in there as well. Then I covered it all in tar. The background is an Icelandic volcano. The bird is somebody's pet, a Peruvian yellow-hooded blackbird, that I chose because it became like a lightbulb in the blackness. I wanted the polluted environment to become beneficial somehow to someone, to become the breeding ground for new life, so there is a repetition of birds for that reason. Repetition is also a good way to move the viewer's eye around a composition, but there has to be some sort of reason for it.

**SF:** Junkyard finds, road kill, and an Icelandic volcano? I love that this image has all these different elements from various parts of the world. Are most of your compositions compiled this way? Do you make sets, or are you photographing everything separately?

**SJ:** Yes, most of my images combine far-flung places, including some simple studio or location set ups, into one. Over the years I've built an extensive image library of different animals, plants, and landscapes that I pull from to come up with ideas. I feel a sense of comfort with placelessness, perhaps because I moved around a lot growing up, from Norway to Sweden to NYC, and don't feel a particular cultural connection to any one place.

**SF:** How did this whole way of working come about? How did this project start?

**SJ:** It was the only way I could make photography work for me. Photography is really the only medium where it's not common to work this way. A painter has always manipulated and combined elements independently from how they exist in reality. A poet manipulates and combines words, a sculptor manipulates and combines materials. Maybe I should have been a painter, then I wouldn't be constricted by what I can first photograph, but I like photography's unique ability to render things truthfully, particularly facial expressions and body language, making the experience of the subject matter less filtered.

**SF:** Many of your images have a lot of tension in them. Animals are in very dominant or powerful poses. The shots feel like scenes from a climactic moment in a film or moments before something is about to happen. Did you ever think that your early interest in filmmaking would sneak into your work as a photographer?

**SJ:** My interest was never in “filmmaking” the medium, as much as in what it produced. I wanted to create worlds and tell stories, and when I switched to photography, I figured out how to create worlds and tell stories with still images. I also make sculptures, and they are narrative and of the same world as well.

**SF:** While some photographs are very dramatic, others are not. You said earlier that some of your work fits into the category of portraiture. The images that come to mind are the flamingos and the elk. How do you decide which animals should exist alone in the frame?

**SJ:** It happens naturally. In the beginning the elk image actually incorporated several elks in the frame, but as I kept adding and subtracting elements—as I typically do, being open and perceptive to what the image needs, while negotiating what’s physically possible—the composition changed from horizontal to vertical, and in the end, only one elk remained.

**SF:** Thank you for your time, Simen. It was a pleasure speaking with you and learning more about your photographic practice

