

# SANTIAGO MOSTYN'S OPENING SOUNDS FILTHY



VICE Staff

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Santiago Mostyn is a young man from the West Coast who takes the kind of pictures Ric Ocasek would describe as either "soft and creamy" or "wet and dreamy." We are so in love with his stuff that we decided to ask him questions about it, then print those questions and their corresponding answers on the internet. Tonight he's putting on a show at Capricious gallery that we are cutting out of work a little early to go to. You should too, we guarantee it will be well worth your time time.

**Vice: Could you expand on your reasons for wanting to go to strange places where you lose your bearings? Have you always worked that way, or did you discover over time that that was the best method for producing your art?**

I had to deal with a lot of moving around as child, sometimes two or three apartments in a year, different continents, and never for any good reason like working parents or the army. So when I started making things in school I started by trying to say something about that transient history, and over time the process worked its way out into broader ideas about foreignness and place. I still like to let myself get lost and fall into strange situations, but at a certain point now the work takes over and I just follow it. Losing one's bearings is great, though, for being able to experience something fully. Only when there's a blank can it be filled in, and I always end up meeting wonderful people when I go away, people whose communities I fall in love with and become so much a part of that I end up almost performing a local version of myself while I'm there. Phillip Guston once said that in order to make good work you need to "render yourself unrecognizable," and I like that as a template, especially because it goes against all the emphasis that young artists put on self-hype. Make yourself a nobody, he seems to be saying, then things can really grow!

**How did you decide on Norway in particular? Did you know people there before you went?**

It was arbitrary. Two summers ago I made plans to visit a new friend in Sweden, someone I'd met once for a few hours in New York and gotten along with. When I got to Gothenburg, she had train tickets booked for Norway. I'd never thought about the country specifically and only knew the cliché of it as a cold and sterile place, but in principle I got excited. Cold places are so exotic to me, having grown up in the global south where everything's hot-tempered and wild. A trio of us took the train over and spent five days hiking through hallucinatory fjord landscapes, eating wild cloudberry along mountain ridges, and jumping into cascading pools of snow melt. I made a few photographs that I liked enough to follow up with them, so the next year I went back in the spring time, to an art center in Bergen called Flaggfabrikken, and stayed a few months to work and watch things bloom.

**I bet you have some pretty strange stories from your time there. What was the oddest thing you encountered in Norway? How would you describe the place to someone like me who's never been there?**

Their drinking culture is bizarre. Walking along the street during the day, everyone looks straight-faced and almost grim. People are hesitant to shake hands when they meet, and even the occasional black metal kid will be wearing his outfit like a uniform. Everything was perfectly out of place. But then, in the evenings and especially on the weekends, everyone drinks to incapacitation and staggers around the streets, yelling. You get the feeling that the oil money that's defined the economy is so recent that regular people, whose parents were fisherman or farmers, don't know what to do with themselves. When I finally broke through the barrier and made a few friends, there were a lot of late nights of drinking and house painting, or drinking and cooking food in the museum's kitchen at 3 AM, blasting Nordic techno or waking up in the constant rain and trying to take hungover pictures.

**I'm really interested in the description of the photos and texts in the show as "semi-fictional." Could you tell me how a photo can be semi-fictional?**

If you're in the world making pictures of people and things, instead of in a studio, there has to be something happening there to point the camera at just on a technical level. I was making pictures of people I got to know, pictures that went along with the way I felt from day to day, so these stories are held in the images in the most basic way. An anonymous young woman is lying on a bed, for example, and she is sexualized. That happened, but the framework for the experience of the photograph is only filled in when the viewer brings his or her cultural or sexual preconceptions to bear on the image. I try to provide a referential field for stories to come to life rather than make a statement about what I've experienced. It's the idea of the blank slate, of subordinating the role of the creator for the sake of a more challenging dialogue between what's on the walls and all the words and images that people carry in their heads.

**This is sort of a related question: I was looking through your old photos of New Orleans on Tiny Vices, and it seemed like many of the photos (the ones of people, not trees) were fragments of some larger narrative. Is that something you think about in your work?**

Storytelling is central to so many cultures that I've spent time within, so it does come up in the work, even though I'm never trying to tell any one story in particular. If I can represent the sensation of all the colliding and collapsing narratives that happen simultaneously in the world, and give a suggestion that these voices add up to something, then I think I'm on the right track.

**Your photos seem sharply divided between photos of trees and photos of people. Could you tell me about your interest in trees, and why you like photographing them?**

I got really specific my second time around in Norway, maybe because it was always raining. I had a simple idea to take some photographs of trees that looked human after taking, in the midst of an obsession, a picture of a wet tree in Sweden. It was remarkable—looking through the contact sheets from that first trip to find that image and be confronted by such eroticism in an object that I'd never considered to have those qualities. Eventually I started looking more closely and getting engaged with specific trees in Bergen that I would pass every day, and began to get beyond the look of the trees and into what felt like their character. I was obsessed with one in particular, in front of a church, and started thinking of it in terms of portraiture. Even when I didn't have my camera with me and happened to pass by that tree, and certain others, there was a tension that felt like a conversation. They each had an effect that was more salient than any interactions with the people I had met to that point, and they seemed to change moods according to the weather or the time of day. These pictures came first and then I started making portraits of people to complement them.

**The show isn't just photos. There will be sculptures and a three-piece orchestra. Are the sculptures yours as well? How did this show come together?**

The main piece in the show is actually a flag—so its sculptural dimension is really just its movement in the space. The flag is printed with a sequence of referential terms that range from Nordic folklore to the nuclear arms race and come out of some reading I was doing on the interconnectedness of those things. The orchestra is the project of Karen Skog, an artist based in Bergen whose artworks are these wooden instruments—a cello, violin, Theremin, organ piano—that she built herself using images of the real instruments found online. Karen and her collaborators then "perform the sculptures" in art spaces, and leave them set up when they're not being played. I heard them in Bergen and it was transformative: the sounds they were making made me feel exactly like the views of the mountains I had seen in the fjords. I made sure when the Sympathizer show was being organized that they would be involved. I wanted to carry the emphasis of my Norwegian tree portraits a step further by showing these functional sound objects built from Norwegian wood!

**I'm curious about the image on the flyer of the two men hugging. It's from the 1980s film Longtime Companion, right? What's the significance of that image for you?**

Well, just as images I think they're absolutely beautiful, the double take of the single moment of joy. And I love how they came to me: in a junk shop in Bergen I found two publicity shots for a film called Evig Vennskap, which I hadn't heard of and which translated from Norwegian means "Everlasting Friendship." I figured out the American title, and found out about the film and its significance as the first project to deal openly with the AIDS crisis. The images are from the climax of the film when three surviving friends are walking together and all the victims who have passed away, all their old friends, suddenly start appearing around them. That process—how a pair of small photographs in a junk shop led me towards an understanding of a large and deeply felt history—informs the way I hope my own images can engage with the world.