

Artist of the week

Painting

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Artist of the week 172: Gunnel Wåhlstrand

Swedish artist Gunnel Wåhlstrand reinterprets her old family photographs as a link to the father she never knew.



 Airless box ... Gunnel Wåhlstrand's New Years Day

Old family photo albums are lost worlds. They speak of yesteryear's styles, bygone ways, and who our parents were long before we were twinkles in their eyes. What Swedish artist Gunnel Wåhlstrand shows us from her family album is no exception.

Here's the artist's father as a child, with thick-rimmed Buddy Holly specs and a hesitant smile, posing for a passport photo. Here he is again playing the well-behaved schoolboy with a model aeroplane on his desk. And here again, smartly dressed in a shirt and neckerchief, perhaps for a party, or for the photo itself.

But Wåhlstrand's photorealist, black-and-white images are not actually photos. They're vast paintings, which translate the original snaps into pieces more than two-metres high. She goes beyond the average person's interest in family memorabilia, but then she never knew her father. He killed himself when she was just one; the family album was all she had of him. When she was a student at art school in Stockholm in the 1990s, she began painting portraits of strangers, based on anonymous photos, at a rate of one a day. Yet it was the photos of her father she looked at every morning.

It was so she could spend more time with these precious pictures that she started to paint them, not in the pacy style she was used to, but in the arduous, time-consuming medium of Indian ink on paper, and on a monumental scale. Far from a simple translation of photo to painting, her process is more like an autopsy of the past, involving computer blow-ups to study minute details, visiting the place where the photo was taken or researching the kind of furniture or artwork that forms the backdrop.



📷 By the Window, 2003-2004, by Gunnel Wåhlstrand. Photograph: Björn Larsson/The Michael Storåkers Collection

Wåhlstrand wants to go beyond the rigid smiles and artificial poses of photography's more formal setups. She strives to bring the past back to life, creating a different kind of relationship with her father, looking for answers. With its marble fireplace and gilt mirror, the middle-class dining room in her painting *New Year's Day* seems an airless

box, the girl at its centre tense in her neat suit. Posing with a book from the well-stocked shelves, the artist's father as a teenager is seen through an open door, a distant figure but at the centre of everything. Instead of a commemoration of New Year's promise, Wählstrand's painting seems to foretell a troubled future.

Why we like her: For the glowy, mysterious *By the Window*, where her dad and her aunt are caught in a white haze.

The kid stays in the picture: Indian ink is permanent, meaning Wählstrand can never take back anything she paints.

Where can I see her? At [Parasol Unit](#), London, until 12 February.

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