

Interview Julie Nord

By Kristin Farr for Juxtapoz magazine august 2013.

Julie Nord leaves trails of breadcrumbs that wind through her work – Little secrets and symbols that appear to lead to a destination, but they don't.

She isolates feelings of unease, and distilling those feelings into puzzling vignettes, working persistently to leave clues for which there is no case to solve. If you want to know what her work is about, you're on your own. The meaning is up to you and your psyche.

You must be thinking a lot about good and evil forces in your work. It's pretty much a plague. If I'm making something very sweet, I'll have to make something to contradict it. Or if a picture gets too scary, I have to make a stupid little bird with a scarf blowing bubbles. It's a little bit like playing chess with your self. If it gets too much on one side, I have to do something that moves it toward the other side.

Does living in Copenhagen influence your work?

It's hard to say. For many years I was traveling through the third world, but more and more, I think my images have a Scandinavian feel to them. My colors were much stronger and vivid, but now they are more calm and laid back, and maybe more Scandinavian.

Where have you traveled?

When I was young, I traveled to Africa for a couple of years altogether, and I've been to India, Tibet and other places, but mostly Africa.

I noticed the cultural influence in the pattern of the blob character that often shows up in your work. Let's talk about the blobs.

I've been interested in outsider art for many years, and especially compulsive patterns. In the beginning, I made them as a contrast to these very polished child images. A lot of my work is very controlled, and it's important to have these slips of something that is

out of control. It can be ink blobs, big white spaces, or the blobs of patterns. I don't plan them. It's like an automatic drawing that keeps going and fills the space between two figures. I just flow with it. You get lost when you do it, and it's very hard to leave any space. You have to fill it up, and it's a mesmerizing way of working. It can be pretty hard to find home afterwards because you make these small patterns in your head, and if you sit with them for six or seven hours, you get really weird, but in a nice way.

Tell me about your upcoming show at the Kunsten Museum.

It's in November, and it will be traveling to Copenhagen afterwards. It has a family pictures theme. So far, the title is *Just Like Home*, and I'm building three rooms where the installation part will be quite important. I'm trying to design some wallpapers and carpets, so you actually enter my work instead of just looking at it. I'm getting closer to making some sounds for the rooms. I really want you to be swallowed up by my work. It gets more and more important for me to drag the viewer into the works instead of having this distance that gallery and museum walls give. I would like the emotional impact of the work to include the people who see it.

You mentioned the family theme, and I noticed that recurring words used to describe your work are childhood, family, identity, and reality.

I'm questioning reality, and I'm using pictures that we normally combine with a safe zone, like pictures from childhood and family, Romantic era children's book illustrations, and cute animals. That's my base. I use children the most because they invite you in in a different way than if I were to make some big guy standing in the picture. Of course they're also playing with the whole aspect of innocence, and there's always a blur between reality and illusion. Sometimes these children are not so innocent, so there's always some insecurity involved.

Do children and animals play specific roles in the pictures?

They do different things. In one work, an animal can be very cute and comforting. And in another one, it gives you this feeling of impending doom, like something is about to happen, because animals are supposed to feel these things a little bit before people

do. They give this nervous energy and emotional instability, but they're rarely the main characters.

What are your thoughts on anthropomorphized animals?

I have a weird passion for everything that is really absurd and perverted, things like animals driving cars—it's pretty mad! I like to put these kinds of animals in a picture where you also see more natural-looking animals, just to give this change in reality, and make it look somehow normal that they're standing beside each other.

Do you work with an ongoing narrative?

No, I don't. The only ongoing thing is that I want to show that reality is a betrayal of some kind. I'm very fascinated with re-arranging all these photos and images we've grown up with that we take for granted.

Let's talk about the identity aspect in your new work.

I've been doing family pictures for two years now, and they consist of three things: identity, patterns, and the empty space or white paper. It's interesting to see what it takes to create this feeling of identity. Sometimes I've spent a lot more time on the wallpaper, patterns, and clothes, but the faces are blurred. This person may only be existing because of their hair and clothes and the wallpaper behind them. I like to make the surroundings create the person's character. It's an examination of where identity starts. And in family patterns, there is also this construction of who you are.

Do you obscure faces in your work for reasons other than leaving things open for interpretation?

That's part of it, but also if you've seen photos where people have scratched the eyes out, or cut someone out of the picture, that tells you a story—the mystery of disappearing people. Identity is not a very steady thing, so that's why it's funny to play with some finely drawn faces together with faces that are not existing, or faces that are just blobs.

What are some weird aspects of families that you're interested in?

I think everybody has known the feeling of being in a family—especially when you're young or a teenager—and feeling totally out of it, like you're from a different planet, or they are. You're supposed to have things in common with them, but it just seems like an

illusion. To make it simple, I guess it's based on that feeling of strangeness and identity confusion, which is very strong when you're a teenager, but still follows all of us. It's a very normal issue, but I think there is so much to find in it. With my newer work, I needed to find a simpler frame. I got tired of all the storytelling and different elements, so I tried to narrow it down to just identity, patterns, and empty space to see how I can explore my theme in a more simple way, and dig a bit deeper.

It seems like you became more focused on the empty space in the last couple of years.

It's coming back a bit now, in the faces. It's so nice to leave the face open with no eyes and mouth. For a while, the empty spaces were overridden by the blobs, which are somehow the same as blank space because there is no narration or certain meaning.

I'm so interested in our need to find meaning and understand things. I'm interested in creating a new confusion, and I think the empty space is the base from where all these stories and meanings are derived. It's just as important to leave the white space open as it is to put down all the meanings and figures.

Let's talk more about your intricate patterns.

I'm very interested in wallpapers from history, and the need we have for patterns that is very concrete. In a philosophical way, we put things in order and have repetitions, and we put ourselves in patterns and routines all the time as a way to have a fixed identity.

Some of the clothing in your work seems very '70s.

I like to mix time a bit. The pictures are influenced by the '70s and '80s, but also sometimes by the 1800s. Just like with the animals, you have flute-playing animals together with natural animals to make you feel a little bit insecure about where you are when it comes to time.

Some people approach timelessness by making everything non-referential, but you do it by combining references from so many different eras.

It's also because I think patterns are like music. For instance, my grandmother had a certain wallpaper, and I'm sure if I entered a room with the same wallpaper, I could almost be able to smell the

food she made. Patterns are full of emotion in a very subconscious way, just like sounds, music, and smells. Maybe you don't remember how a certain shirt looked, but the pattern is stuck inside you somehow. You mentioned the '70s, and if you've grown up in the '70s, it'll awake a lot of feelings in you when you see patterns from that decade. If you see patterns from the Romantic era, it gives you a feeling of innocence and the good old times, even if you weren't there. It goes into your brain without you really noticing what it's doing.

Are you working from photographs with your family portraits?

Yes, I'm working from photographs of people I don't know. It's quite important that I have no relation to these people so that I can change them. I might take the eyes from one person, and so on, like Dr. Frankenstein. I make up characters, and I get to know these people while I'm working on them. I don't know their story, but I get a feeling of what had been happening to them, and I make up a name. It's quite funny, like making up your own family.

If you find an old photo album from a family you don't know, you start thinking about stories, like, "Why does she look so sad?" Or "What a coy smile he has," or "He doesn't look nice." You make up these stories, which are probably somehow related to your own family. They're strangers, but I get sort of voyeuristic. I get to know them, and I spend maybe two weeks with this person, and they somehow come to life, even though I don't know them like my own family. But of course I put myself into it. Every so often the faces look like me even though I don't want them to. I like that I don't know them. I need that distance to feel free when I work.

Tell me about your own family.

I'm sorry to say it's not that unusual. Maybe that's why I have to make these pictures!

Anyway, If I go back in my family history it does have its share of secrets. Shamefull events nobody wants to talk about, strange death, restless outsiders and abandoned children... If you look close enough there's always something hidden in the cupboards.

What are some of your darker influences?

I'm really into horror movies because of this very banal thing where

you start with a happy family—a boy, a girl, a golden retriever, and a mother and father in a nice house—and you just know it's going to fall apart. That's exactly why you watch that kind of movie. In horror movies, it's always evil that pulls things apart—that's how we see it. If you have a steady system or pattern that actually works, then it must be evil.

I'm very interested in the building up of suspense: how a window or a cat can be made to seem really spooky or scary. I think these small things in horror movies that make you fear something is going to happen are really interesting. I'm never interested in the end when the monster is actually coming, but the whole buildup part is really inspiring. It's also funny and so dumb sometimes, and I think there's that aspect in my work. There's a certain amount of humor that plays with your expectations of good and evil.

Do you think about nightmares when you're working?

Yes, in the sense of how reality starts to melt or break down. That's always a nightmarish feeling because you can't control it. I'm fascinated by that aspect—if I totally understand the work I've done, then it's not working; it's not good. I'm not supposed to fully understand what it's about myself. If it's not disturbing me a little bit and keeping me wondering, then it's just not fulfilled. I think that's what nightmares and dreams are like. You don't really understand them, and the narration is always abrupt and changing very quickly and naturally because you're in a dream.

In your earlier work, the compositions were really full, and you seemed to use a lot of symbols or secrets.

Through the years, I've been building a whole toolbox of figures, and maybe by chance, they have shown up in one work or another. You can always find repetitions. For instance, a helicopter has been used quite a lot. In some of the works, it's odd because they seem old fashioned and nostalgic, and the helicopter makes some kind of disturbance because it really doesn't belong. It can be a helicopter for war, or for rescue, or maybe surveillance, and it obscures things a bit. Then maybe a few years later, I'll put it in a shirt pattern, so it's like a little friend that keeps occurring. For me, it makes everything go together. It's like a glue in my production, but also like

a foreshadow in a crime novel. There are always these little parts where you know a needle or a match is going to be really important later on in the story. A secret is a good word for it. They have to have this meaning that you're trying to find, especially if you go into a big exhibition, and you see these symbols used in different works in different ways.

Like clues.

Exactly. But then there's nothing to figure out.

No. There's no ending or solution. There are just a lot of clues. This Rorschach thing is really important for me. You feel like there has to be some meaning, and you really want to find it. I get a lot of emails from people who have been reading different things into my work because it feels just like their lives, or something they've been doing. It's really important for me that the work is open to interpretation. And at the same time, there are all these clues, so you feel you have to find out what it's about. But it's not anything special. It's really up to you.

What have been some of the unusual things people have said about your work?

After my last big museum exhibition, I was contacted by an 82-year-old woman who was a transsexual and had the operation when she was 40—before anybody else was doing that kind of thing. She wrote me her whole story, and she had been to my exhibition seven times. All these transformations in my work really appealed to her, and she thought I knew her story, which I didn't. But it made me sort of proud to know she'd been living a long life, and she could use what I do to dig up meaning for herself, so all the work is not totally worthless. The same day I got a message from a high school student who was nervous for her exams, and she was sure that I knew how she felt. It was kind of amazing to get these two messages on the same day. I like the idea that I send something out with a lot of clues, and people can take them and use them where they need to. Some people think my works are very scary, and some think they are funny. Some people just pass by and think it's a children's book illustration, and it's not really art. They recognize everything in the picture, so it's not very interesting to

them. It's different from person to person.

I noticed the European robin showing up in more than one piece, and I want to ask what it's about, even though I know it's an arbitrary clue.

I just really like birds because they're so cute and colorful, and it's a sweet thing of comfort in a nice garden—a bird singing. I'm using a robin mainly because of the red chest. Sometimes I make decisions because of the graphical issues, and, again, it seems like a clue if you use it a lot. It's an old Christian symbol, but that's not what interests me. When you make something appear many times, it becomes important, even if you don't know why. You think it's really important, but it's actually just a stupid bird hanging upside down. But we want it to mean more.

I have another question where I'm trying to figure out the story that doesn't exist—you have a piece with a little girl holding scissors, and two figures asleep in the background. What happens next?

I don't know! It's a play on all the horror movies about evil children. It's a fantastic, basic way of describing anarchy. You have this child that is ruining the world. It's interesting that we find that so scary because it tears apart what we believe in a very banal way, but it works.

If you were a horror movie character, who would you be?

Carrie is the first one who comes to mind.

I love your drawing with the big blob head wearing a beautiful dress. I was doing a lot of ink blobs at that time, and so the figure ended up having that head and very tiny feet, and then the dress was pretty wild with crazy patterns. It was actually inspired by my daughter because she was drawing princess dresses at the time, with all the little bows, roses, and pearls. I remember making those kinds of drawings myself as a child.

Are you a very nostalgic person?

I'm not romantic when it comes to the old days, but I think it's interesting to trick your own memory. The emotions combine when you recognize something from the past, like I mentioned with my grandmother's wallpaper, and it's like a time gap suddenly dissolves. I like that because it questions time in general.

Tell me about the documentary where your paintings were animated.

It was so cool because a museum wanted to make this “portrait of the artist,” and I wanted it to be a little bit fictional. I asked this really great director, Phie Ambo, to do it, and we thought the works could come to life. She decided to focus on one particular scene from my studio where I have a problem with a picture that just doesn’t feel right, and I’m sort of angry at the work and talking to it. And then I solve it in the end, actually, by making a stupid little bird in the corner.