
No place like home with JH Engström

March 28th, 2014 by [Josie Thaddeus-Johns](#) & filed under [Showroom](#)



JH Engström. Copyright Grundemark Nilsson / JH Engström. ©Swedish Photography

Home is where the heart is. No, wait, isn't it wherever I lay my hat? Or is it nothing more than the page I start with on my internet browser? The experience of homecoming is what JH Engström explores in his series *From Back Home*, which opens tonight at Grundemark Nilsson – Swedish Photography, Berlin. Engström returned to the area in Sweden he grew up in together with his friend and internationally acclaimed photographer Anders Petersen, who also spent his youth there. The resulting photographs are a moving portrayal of the people and places that evoke the subjective experience of home. Slek talked to Engström about the mixture of textures in his work and the vulnerability of being in your natural habitat.

How did the project *From Back Home* with Anders Petersen come about?

A long time ago I was his assistant. He spent a lot of his younger years in Värmland, where I grew up, so we always had this thing in common. In the beginning we just made jokes about going back to the region and taking pictures. At some point, someone at the Värmlands museum heard this joke, who actually wanted to make it possible for us. We did an exhibition and a book, at which point it stopped being a joke!

It felt very obvious to do it, especially since both of us work in a very subjective tradition, so it felt very natural.

Your subjective experience is very important to your work. How did you decide what you wanted to photograph?

I often photograph things that are close to me. It's basic stuff, people and atmospheres: banal things. I don't like it when it's too flashy or glamorous.

The subjective thing was just a starting point. It's a method to me, a way to explore the content in a way that's more interesting. For example, I love this area, because I know it. The book I did about Paris (*Sketch of Paris*, Max Ström, 2013) is about very different subject matter – it's the big city – but I also know Paris very well. For me, they are both love messages. It's very difficult for me to photograph things I don't like.

You've previously said that the idea of vulnerability is very important in your work. Is there something particularly vulnerable about the idea of home to you?

I think you have less protection as a person when you go back to something that's inside you. Home is linked with emotions and feelings, whereas being in a new place is like being on a stage, looking at yourself from the outside. It's more of an illusion.

This vulnerability of home comes across in the portraits I think. There's just this attitude of "Here we are."

Several of the pieces in this exhibition are rephotographed collages of photos. What was your intention in this presentation?

These are photos themselves, which reinforces this idea of them being a memory – if you photograph something, then it's a memory.

I like the idea of putting it up on the wall, sticking them next to each other. That's actually how I did it from the start. If it's a collage then it becomes a piece – whereas this is a photo that you can reproduce.

Your approach to tone varies a lot in your photographs. What is it that attracts you to this variety? I like the shift in energy it brings. I don't know why more photography isn't like that!

JH Engström: *From Back Home* opens tonight, 6-9pm, March 28 at Grundemark Nilsson – Swedish Photography, where there will be an opening talk by Kim Knoppers, curator of Foam Amsterdam. The exhibition runs until May 10.