

# C - print

A journal about contemporary art

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## The Protest, Stumble and Chaos

*Ahead of his awaited new solo exhibition at Galleri Magnus Karlsson, C-print contributor Carolina Bergquist sits down with painter Carl Hammoud in his studio for a conversation about how a chance encounter with film director Ruben Östlund led to revisiting a past work of his own which in turn lays out the framework of his entire new exhibition. Moreover, Carl addresses the notion of chaos which appears omnipresent and is commonly attributed to large parts of Carl's body of work.*

### Do you want me to take my shoes off?

No, no that's not necessary. I spend about an hour a day on cleaning in here, especially the floor, so don't you worry about that.

*I take off my coat, but I leave my sneakers on. I enter into the rather clean studio where Carl starts his working days at about seven o'clock in the morning. The working days start with him having a cup of coffee and the cleaning procedure, he tells me. Kind of like a ritual to procrastinate the painting. The lightly grayish green floor is indeed very clean and shiny and so are his black shoes. We chitchat about it being too late in the afternoon (half past four) for drinking coffee, so we both have a glass of apple juice and we take a seat. I sit down on the only chair in the room and Carl on a stool in front of three yet to be finished paintings on the wall with empty space between us.*

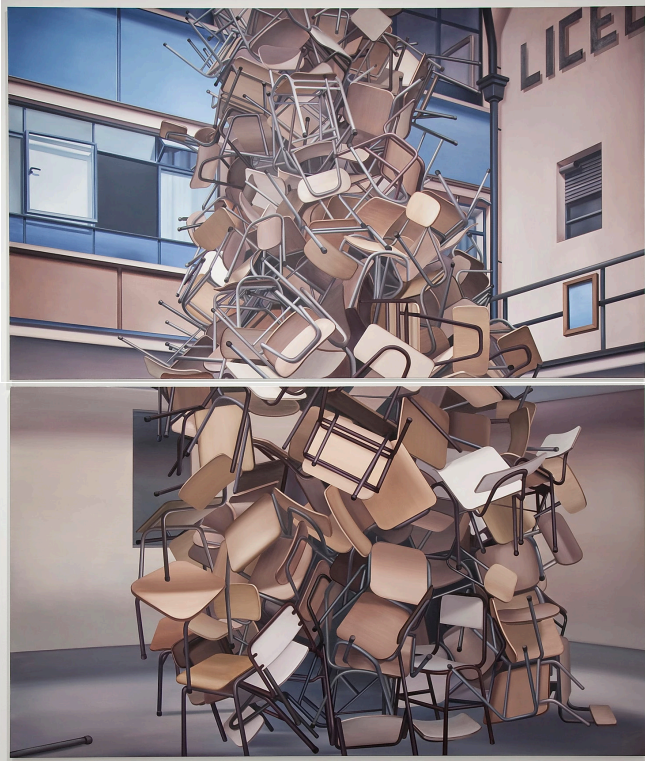


### So, tell me about the title of your exhibition. What is the story behind naming it *Stumble*?

The title has actually been with me for a long time now. The idea came to me in connection to my latest exhibition, *Anti Image* (2016) at Lora Reynolds Gallery in Austin, Texas. It was in the final stage; when decisions had to be made about the composition of the works that was going to be *Anti Image* and I had a hard time fitting some paintings into the collection. The inspiration for these paintings was found in an instructional video from the sixties about safety in workplaces. It made me think about stumbles, faults and mistakes, and I took stills from it to paint. However, I couldn't fit them in with the rest of the works and decided to save them and the idea of *Stumble* for a future exhibition.

When I started working again after *Anti Image* – it usually takes a while to sort of re-load after having completed a collection for a solo exhibition – I had somehow lost the feeling for the saved paintings that was supposed to be the fundament for *Stumble*. At the same time a painting from my exhibition *Analysis, Method, Unfold* coincidentally recurred. I then decided to go back to it and explore it more. And as you can see, the motives depicted in *Stumble* all derive from that painting (*The Protest*, 2013) Either as a close-up or seen from a slightly different angle, but all in the same scale and with the same proportions.

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**What kind of coincidence was it that brought *The Protest* back to you?**

Well, it is a rather funny story I'd say. It started with Ruben Östlund (Swedish director and screenwriter) contacting the gallery (Galleri Magnus Karlsson) because he wanted to borrow a few of my paintings for his current film project. So we set up a meeting and he told me more about what he was working on.

**Was that the first time you met?**

Yes it was. But it turned out that in 2008 we had actually participated in the same exhibition at Göteborgs Konsthall; I as a painter and he as a reviewer of the art. It was a group exhibition and I contributed with some five paintings or so and Ruben had chosen my works to review. No one ever told me that, but he did when we met. But yes, this was the first time we met.

**Maybe the two of you should have met sooner, then! But how did he come across *The Protest*, was it also sort of coincidental?**

Well, I think that since that time in 2008 he had kept his eyes on my work. When we met we talked about his project and started looking at a variety of my works and eventually – without giving away the plot of his film – he presented an idea of using *The Protest* as well as constructing a real life version of it. All of this of course intrigued me, especially since I did not have the chair pile as a model when making *The Protest*.

**That's hard to believe since it is so figuratively well painted. What was your inspiration to *The Protest*?**

I stumbled upon it a bit haphazardly as well, while searching for images on the internet. Something led me to a blog belonging to a marine biologist stationed in Chile. And in this particular blogpost there was the picture of a mountain of chairs and a short text commenting something like: "The protests are still ongoing". After some research I learned that the protests that were mentioned was the Chilean student protests (2011-13) which included non-violent marches but also some violence and that mountain of chairs was built during those protests. All I had was that photo which was kind of difficult to paint from. Sometimes during the process I really wanted to take a look at the pile from another angle but of course I couldn't. So when arriving to the location of Ruben's movie and seeing the huge pile of chairs which the prop stylists had built, it was the first time I could walk around it. I took some photos and sort of realized that I wasn't finished with it... or at least that there was more I could do with it.

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**That's so interesting! And in different ways a twist of fate how *The Protest* is the key to what *Stumble* is about?**

Yes exactly. *Stumble* is basically only a repetition of *The Protest* and close-ups of some parts of it.

**Basically, the only thing left of the original idea of what *Stumble* was supposed to be is the name, right?**

Well - haha - yes that is correct. There are no traces whatsoever of the paintings from the instructional video. But this in itself is also interesting as part of the whole process and it aligns with my ideas and thoughts about *Stumble*, where the circumstances of chance create new perspectives and offers new ways when you think are stuck.

**And how, as an artist and more specifically as a painter, do you know when it is time to abandon an idea or stop working on a piece or even put it in the trash can?**

Good question. To me, the most apparent sign is when I know almost exactly how the piece will be in its final version and I can see every step of the way. If there are no challenges or question marks, then there is nothing to be straightened out - and then it is probably not that interesting and won't be in the end either.

**When considering the content of *Stumble* and maybe more importantly the process in making *Stumble* what would you say that *Stumble* represents in comparison with your previous work and especially the previous exhibitions at Galleri Magnus Karlsson and Lora Reynolds Gallery?**

I guess my previous work has been more narrative, and there has frequently been some streak of surprise or an underlying message in the paintings. But before starting the process with *Anti Image*, I felt that I was tired of this narrative structure, it just did not interest me. My method in itself was, and is, a rather demanding way of painting and it had built up a stressful pressure. It was the pressure of always having a story told in each separate work and also having them all being part of a story as a whole and in relation to each other. It was starting to feel very strenuous and in the end, or at least at that point in time, and it felt unrealistic for me to continue working like that. So with *Anti Image* I took a step away from it, and instead I choose to depict more random objects, aiming to abstract them from their context. I wanted to give them another meaning than the one described by the words we have for them. Of course, the dynamics of seeing still stays with the viewer, who can choose to interpret what he or she sees the way they want to.



Another important thing to me was that the objects in the paintings were isolated from each other, that there was no interconnectivity between them, even though they were bound together by a few specifics, such as the light. With that said, the most apparent difference between my prior work and *Stumble*, is that I have subtracted even more, and added repetition. *Stumble* is basically paintings depicting the very same thing. And the fact that I am painting the same object in this scope is indeed new to me. It's as if the process of repetition has caused me to forget the object and forget that I am actually painting chairs. The meaning of the object itself has vastly been diminished. And in that sense, the paintings in *Stumble* are almost completely abstract to me.

**How funny and also paradoxical, since your work in general and especially the oil-paintings are as figuratively painted as figurative art gets.**

Haha, well I guess so. But to me, abstraction in my work is not really that new, at least not when taking in consideration the thoughts and ideas that lie behind my works. Even if they are figurative paintings, I have abstracted the depicted objects and questioned the content of them as well as the power in seeing other things in them and giving them new meaning. For instance a vase of flowers which; when we look at it, is a vase of flowers. But when we don't see the actual vase, how can we be sure that it still is that same vase with flowers? By really looking closely and separating it from content and context, you can break it down. It is in this chain of thoughts that the figuratively painted objects become abstract. *Stumble* is entirely composed of figurative paintings, but I did have an idea of painting the chairs as an interconnected series and gradually let them transform into something more visually abstract.

**I think I see how you mean and to me that sounds like an idea worth saving for some future exhibition. But talking of the power of seeing, which now has been mentioned a couple of times. Do you aim to explain something to the viewer through your works, or is your work more about having it all making sense to yourself?**

Well I guess that I hope my paintings affect the viewer, making him or her think. But we are all individually affected by motifs and colors in paintings, and also by settings and composition. What we see simply depends on how we see it. Take Mark Rothko for instance; he painted seemingly uncomplicated paintings merely of areas with different colors. But in making them, in the repetitive process, he was also making all these emotional explorations. And he progressed. Both as an artist as well as on a personal and intellectual level. And at the same time the viewers were seeing them and interpreting them in their own way.

**It sounds like it comes down to being a little bit of both for you, then?**

Yes, that would probably be the shorter answer.

**As a preparation for this interview, I read some reviews of your exhibitions and I couldn't help but notice that writers of different texts have this one thing in common in describing you as an artist who narrates the chaos. What is your approach to being artistically defined in that manner?**

That's an interesting observation which I have taken note of and thought about. And of course it is true that some of my paintings, especially some of the oil-paintings narrate a scene in which there is some chaos. But I wouldn't say that the majority of the paintings in my collected works or even in every each exhibition are related to chaos. I would rather say that it is as much chaotic rooms being narrated as there are rooms or places in full order. Both the order and the chaos are present to the same extent.

**And why is that?**

Well, haha, I have this sort of amateur semi-psychodynamic theory about it. When I grew up my father was a tad



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unpredictable which brought in some chaos to my childhood. My mother on the other hand was and is a very calm person and a safe haven, maybe especially when being compared to my father. I think all my siblings would agree with me on this thing. And as a child, and while growing up, your parents are your point of reference for how things work and for the way you relate to the world around you. Since I had these sides of both order and chaos in my life I guess it's not that odd that it occurs in my work.

**That was an interesting explanation. What would you say chaos is to you which order is not?**

The short answer would be that chaos is absence of prediction. For instance, in our time and age and in society – at least the so called western society – we continually organize and create systems to set things in a specific order and to establish predictability. But when chaos occurs, when the unpredictable happen, things are disorganized for a short period of time. Until we find a way to organize under the new set of circumstances. Then everything goes back to order and becomes a new

form of normal. I guess you can say that progress comes in these kind of circles of order to chaos to order... now I guess that I'm a bit off the track from the issue here. What was the question again? Oh yeah, it was about chaos. Simply put I would say chaos is an unpredictable state or unpredictable set of occurrences.

**Sounds like you've thought a lot about it. Do you prefer chaos to order?**

I wouldn't say I prefer either one of the two, but in chaos there is more possibilities than in a state of order. But they wouldn't really exist individually.

**So regarding sources of inspiration, you have mentioned Mark Rothko and also film. What else inspires you and gives ideas for your own progress?**

I find inspiration in different places and in different kinds of things, amongst other things movies and literature. But also pictures from different contexts, from anywhere really, which I cobble together to create the composition for an image I have in mind for painting. However, what interests me the most is reading of other artists approach to their artistry and process.

**Why is that? Is it because you already have a clear idea of your own attitude towards your artistry and want to revise it or are you a seeker when it comes to that?**

It's probably the latter, which feels a bit strange. I mean, I'm 40 years old now and counting from when I graduated from the Valand Academy, I have been working as a professional artist for 12 years. I thought that by now I would feel confident about my own process, and basically always know what I am going to do. But I feel as if I know less now than I did before.

**I think we're running out of time. Maybe I should've asked you when, why and how you became an artist but I'm not sure I find that relevant right now.**

Well, I understand how you mean. But the simple answer is I've always wanted to become a painter. What might be a bit odd is that I grew up in a rather simple environment without any clues whatsoever about what this profession was really about and how to go about to become an artist.