

## Just Like That

A Conversation between Mamma Andersson and David Shrigley

**David Shrigley** What year was it when you met Stephen?

**Mamma Andersson** My absolutely first meeting with Stephen was very special, because it was during the opening day of the Armory in New York. I think Patricia (Kohl) had seen some of my works in Basel at the Liste fair, and she saw some of my paintings at Magnus Karlsson, my Swedish gallery's booth in New York, and she wanted Stephen to say hello to me because she wanted to include me in a group show. I came to his booth and he was so nervous because it was the first day of the fair. The second time I met him was in Stockholm. That was in 2002. When did you start working with him?

**DS** I first met him in 1996, and I did the first show maybe at the beginning of 1997.

**MA** So you have been there since the beginning.

**DS** Yeah, I think myself and Yinka and maybe Stephan Balkenhol, we have been with Stephen the longest. But when I first went there, the gallery was just the one space which is now the private viewing room.

**MA** My first show was also in that space.

**DS** There was also only one person working for him, a woman called Leslie Heitzman who is an old friend of Stephen's. She was just doing it to help him, as a friend. There was Stephen and there was me installing my own exhibition with Sellotape, on the wall.

**MA** I remember my first show after we arrived from New York. Jockum and I came to London and we brought the two boys with us – Rudolph was twelve and Valentin was fifteen. I came into the gallery and Stephen asked me, 'how do you want to install the show?' I was so shocked because I was not prepared, but I said 'I want the indoor painting in this room and the outdoor painting in the other room.' Do you remember it was two rooms? It's the only thing I remember from that show. And we also went to the Groucho... It seemed very glamorous to go to the Groucho Club.

**DS** In those days... I'm a member of the Groucho Club now, and I never go there because I'm not cool enough.

**MA** If I met myself today as a twenty-year-old Karin, what would I think about the person I am and what sort of art I do now? What do you think? Do you understand what I mean?

**DS** When you're at art school I guess you'd like to be a successful artist. Then, after a certain point, which was maybe 25 years ago for me, I started to make a living as an

artist. I guess it's almost that long since I started showing with Stephen. I remember at the very beginning when I did the show in Mayfair, in that space we're talking about, I was walking around the streets and I was thinking, 'wow, this is really cool. I've got a show in this fancy gallery in London. And this is one of the things that I really wanted in my life.' But somehow I couldn't really process it. The thing you notice about success is its arrival and its departure. Once it's here, it just becomes normal. And this life is normal, and this conversation is normal. And the work we do every day is normal. It's almost as if I can't see myself now through a younger person's eyes anymore.

**MA** I had a feeling I had no future, that I wasn't going to be successful at all in the 1990s. I was a landscape painter and I was so out of the art scene. It was just small, boring galleries where all the artists were around twenty, thirty years older than me. Then I had a studio in an old closed mental hospital outside of Stockholm and I was there with some guys from the art academy in Stockholm, and they were so much more focused to be part of the art scene. They read art magazines like *Flash Art*, and they were always up to date. They talked about Barbara Kruger and other names. I had no idea who these people were, because I was most interested in art history. So the first time when I came to Basel, to Liste, I understood it was a platform even for me. I could see other artists around the world who also painted and used a sort of old process to come close to what they wanted to say. So it was a sort of eye-opener for me, but it took a long time before I thought it could be something. I think I have only had this feeling in recent years, when I sold a lot of paintings. I can see myself looking at other artists and understand what I would have thought about them when I was twenty.

**DS** The greatest pleasure, the greatest privilege of making work is just being allowed to make it, you know. Over the years hopefully the work develops, gets better maybe. But that's the only privilege. Everything else, all the fancy things, the champagne and the art fairs, somehow it's not very interesting.

**MA** I am split, because I have a lot of discussions with Stephen – and also with David Zwirner and the people I work with about all these fairs – because it's very annoying for the artist to feed the fairs all the time. Now with Corona, for me it's so much about the material of the work, and it's about the structures of course, and in reality the work is very different.

**DS** I think it is a different experience for you. My work, putting it on Instagram and all the things works really well... I do lots of merchandise and my work looks good on a tea towel. Your work does not look good on a tea towel. You really need to see your work on the canvas.

**MA** Don't you think my art would work well on an umbrella?

**DS** I think it could do. But I think the best place for it is in the gallery. But talking about the art fair, I think it was the Basel art fair, I was there for some reason and Brad Pitt was there. Everybody was going a bit crazy as Brad Pitt was there, right? Anyway, I walked along and I eventually saw Stephen at the booth and said: 'Oh, Stephen, did you see that Brad Pitt was here?' And he was like: 'Brad Pitt came to the booth and we had a chat.' And I was like, 'Wow, did he buy anything?' And he said, 'Yes, he bought some work.' And I went, 'Did he buy some of my work?' And he said, 'No! Not some of your work, he bought some of Karin's work.' He's got one of your paintings. Doesn't have any of mine.

**MA** You asked me if I had a special story with Stephen. I have a very funny story with him, because every time I go to London I have a drink with Stephen and David (Hubbard) at Dukes Bar. It's my favourite bar in the world. One time I was there together with Jockum and our best friend. He is a musician in Sweden and he's also working as a producer. So he made an LP with Chrissie Hynde from The Pretenders, and she was also at Dukes. David arrived before Stephen, he likes The Pretenders and he knew exactly who she was. And then Stephen came, he was very polite and he said 'Hello, my name is Stephen.' And she said 'My name is Chrissie', and they sat down and after ten minutes he asked her, 'And what do you do? Are you an artist?' And she said 'No, I am a musician.' And then he asked her about what kind of music. David tried to tell him she was in The Pretenders, and he said 'The Pretenders? I don't know them.' It was a really fun moment, but he was so cool. I have one hundred percent respect for him, because he was never embarrassed about that.

**DS** Quite right. I think Stephen is always a bit of a mystery. While on the one hand Stephen is a close friend, and I know him and Edward really well, and we have shared a lot of personal things together over the years, he's still quite a mysterious character. That anecdote probably illustrates that I have no idea what music Stephen listens to.

**MA** An interesting question... maybe it has to do with the fact that he is very open-minded. I mean, he loves art and he likes different styles of art: if you look at his office, it is always very tidy and it has an air of the 1950s with the furniture, some art piece and the flowers... it's very stylish.

**DS** I always used to think it was interesting that he is so fit and healthy because he takes such good care of himself. But I realised that in a way, doing what he does he has to. You have to be really fit and healthy, because he's just travelling all the time and... Whenever I go and have lunch with Stephen, he always wants something really particular.

**MA** He wants fresh things.

**DS** He always has neat vodka. Just with ice.

**MA** That's the reason we go to Dukes Bar.

**DS** I've been there. I just associate it with him and as somewhere where you have to go. You go there and then you have to leave. I am always waiting. I am always looking at my watch, waiting for the train.

**MA** But don't you think that goes for every town? You are not free. When I'm here at Gotland (at MA's summer house), I don't wear a watch. I don't care about it. I don't read my mail. I don't do anything. I'm just floating around. If I am not pressed for any work, then we stay here for three, four months. It's really nice. But in the autumn, when all the tourists and summer people have disappeared, that is a very good period for me. I am always very focused on what I do. It's the radio and my studio. And the dog. Do you also have a dog?

**DS** I do, yeah. I have a miniature schnauzer. Her name is Inka. I named her that because when she was a puppy, she was black like ink.

**MA** My dog's name is Aslan, which means lion. He is a Lagotto Romagnolo, an Italian waterdog. He has very curly blond hair like me and light brown eyes. In the beginning, they were water dogs. But then they understood they are terrific at finding truffles. So he is a truffle dog. Here in Gotland they have a lot of truffles. So every autumn, we find a lot of truffles. He has to dig them up. Then he leaves them and goes on to some other place and seeks some more. He's very skilled. Fresh truffles are really good. And here in Gotland we also have the black truffle. In Italy they have the alba truffle, a white truffle. But the most useful truffles, also in Italy, are the black truffles.

**DS** Wow, that sounds great. My dog doesn't do that.

**MA** But maybe she does something else, she brings your morning paper and gives it to you.

**DS** We don't have to have a doorbell in the house. She barks, that's what she does. She is always telling me things.

**MA** Do you have her in your studio?

**DS** Yes, sometimes. We have a dog walker who comes to take her out in the fields and they go for a run around for a few hours, and then she comes back and she's quite tired, otherwise I never get any...

**MA** Having a dog takes a lot of time. Are you reading a lot of books?

**DS** Well, recently during lockdown, really long ones. Big thick books, because I know that there are no distractions. There's no football on the TV or anything. So I read... I guess

I read a lot of middlebrow literature, like Paul Auster. There's highbrow literature, like *Ulysses* by James Joyce, and lowbrow literature like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

**MA** So not books that English students really read.

**DS** What did I read? I read the Joseph Conrad novel, *The Secret Agent*. I love Joseph Conrad and I'd forgotten that I'd never read this one. And I read Charles Dickens. I read *David Copperfield*.

**MA** Wow. I have never read Charles Dickens. Did you like it?

**DS** It's great. It's such a good book, so funny and so beautifully written. How about you? What do you read?

**MA** Right now I am reading Coetzee. J.M. Coetzee. He is from South Africa. The book I am reading right now is about his childhood, *The boy who...* or something. He is really good. I read other books by him many years ago. He's dry but he is also a very good storyteller. Serious and slow, you cannot read him fast. But, you know, I don't have any hobbies. The only hobby I have is that I am a member of a book circle. And we see each other every six weeks. We read more contemporary books that have been discussed in the papers. It's interesting to be a part of a discussion on what's going on. But now I can read what I want, the book circle does not exist in the summertime, so I read older books.

**DS** Every year I get asked by the newspaper what my book of the year was. And I have never read a book that was published that same year. I might read one book in a year that is actually published in that year. But everything else I've read is published in the last three hundred years. So it's Charles Dickens and books from the nineteenth century, and then books from the 1960s and the 1940s.

**MA** It's also a sort of key to come closer to history, to come closer to a time before you were born. I remember I had a conversation with a friend, which was maybe twenty years ago, and I said to him 'do you think about how interesting it would be if you could go back and be in Stockholm four hundred years ago? Walking around in the streets and meeting people and seeing how it is?' And he looked at me with a big question mark on his face and he said, 'but you can read books and you can be in that time.' And it's so true, it's so interesting and nice, because they also describe everything around you. But it's also about the feeling and the thinking, how people think in another time. It's a sort of treasure.

**DS** I feel the same. I always love reading a book when you live in a certain city, and the book is set in the city where you live. When I used to live in Glasgow, I really enjoyed reading books that were set in Glasgow. There was one book by Alasdair Gray, who is

quite a famous Scottish writer, called *Poor Things*. It was set like twenty metres from where I lived. So a scene was set at the entrance to the park near to where I lived. It was like a Frankenstein novel that was set in Glasgow, around the corner from me. I loved reading it, because I could just look out of the window and see the place where Frankenstein was wandering around.

**MA** Interesting. Have you been to Glasgow after you finished art school there?

**DS** I lived there for 27 years, but I left in 2015. Been gone for 5 years now. I live back in the south, where the weather is nice.

**MA** Are you longing to be back there again?

**DS** It sounds like a very British preoccupation to talk about the weather, but the weather is so crap in the west of Scotland. I really miss people and I miss the city, I think it's a great place. But here it's actually sunny outside and there is a palm tree growing in my garden, and I'm wearing a T-shirt. Whereas in Glasgow I would be wearing a sweater.

**MA** It's a little bit like in the north here. Both me and Sofia come from the absolute north of Sweden. We are from Luleå, which is very close to the polar circle, so we know what you're talking about. But it's not so much the wetness. It's more about the coldness. It's so fucking cold and dark.

**DS** Yeah. I've never been in Stockholm in the proper winter. I've been there in November, when it's getting chilly.

**MA** Stockholm is really nice in the summertime, but in the winter it's very, very dark and wet. I prefer the north of Sweden in the winter, because we have the snow and the snow reflects some sort of light. It's dryer and you can put on a down jacket and you are warm enough to walk around. But in Stockholm, whatever you wear, you are always freezing. And it's wet and windy and dark. I don't like it. I don't know why I'm still there, but we have all our friends and the studio and home and everything here...

**DS** You have to live somewhere.

**MA** I remember I met a woman, an old woman and she used to live in Los Angeles. And I said, 'it must have been lovely to always have good weather.' And she said to me: 'that was the reason I moved from Los Angeles, because it was the same all the time, there was no difference. I wouldn't know if it was summer or winter, spring or autumn, it was the same all the time.'

**DS** I know what you mean. I love the seasons, particularly where we live in the countryside, in Devon. You really notice the seasons and right now the tourists are there on the beach. It's nice. When the autumn comes...

**MA** Are there a lot of people on the beach?

**DS** We live in a village so there's only so many people here.

**MA** And people cannot go to Greece and Spain.

**DS** Yes. I don't want to travel. I want to travel less. I'm much happier staying at home.

**MA** I saw three of your small films: in the night with the horse, the artist who paints and the door. I think the artist who paints modern art was really good.

**DS** I had a conversation with somebody once... I often meet people at dinner parties, as you know, like Chrissie Hynde and Stephen Friedman. They said, 'what do you do?' And I said 'I'm an artist, blah blah blah.' And then they said, 'Oh, can I see your work?' And I say, 'I have a website, blah blah blah.' Then they look at the website, and they are like... 'What? You make a living doing this?' 'Yeah...!', I say.

**MA** Have you done a lot of films?

**DS** Probably fifteen or twenty. You can find them on YouTube mostly. But I haven't made so many. I feel like I ran out of ideas somehow.

**MA** Are you doing cut outs on paper with ink, or are you doing them on the computer?

**DS** On the computer. I make one drawing and then sort of direct it and the animator puts it all together. It is pretty easy, but then it's also very difficult to make one that's good.

**MA** Yes. Both Jockum and our older son have done some animations, but with cut-outs and they draw paper after paper and move things on the background and take photos. But it's nothing for me, because I am not that type of person. It's too slow for me.

**DS** I get bored. That's why I work with an animator.

**MA** And what are you going to show at the anniversary show?

**DS** I have made a painting, which is called *Time*. I guess you need to see it. But we made it as a multiple painting. They wanted to make it as a print, as a screen print, but it was too difficult to make as a screen print, so I just painted 125 paintings all the same... It's slightly crazy. I had some help doing it, needless to say. But it took three weeks. Actually, today the truck arrived and took them all away.

**MA** How big are they?

**DS** They are maybe 75 centimetres high.

**MA** Do you think all the artists at the gallery are going to be included in the exhibition?

**DS** Only the good ones.

**MA** Oh, thank God.

**DS** It will be interesting...

**MA** They will show across the three different spaces, won't they? I made a horse, a ghost and a sun. It should be lovely, one painting with these three things. The ghost is a very big girl, she is bigger than the horse, and they're meeting in a field. And the sun is like a big eye, it's an omen for what's coming. The next 25 years. I don't know, I'm just kidding, but it's true. That is what it is. It's a black horse. It's a ghost. And it's a sun.

**DS** It's always interesting to describe artwork, isn't it?

**MA** Well, yes, because when I'm doing it I never have a very clear idea. I have a sort of feeling for it, of course, but I haven't formulated it in words. It's much more like a crazy idea. And half the time I can create different lies about it, because what is true, I don't know. I always serve different stories if people ask me, because I forgot what I said the last time.

My favourite exhibition over the past twenty years with Stephen was when I exhibited together with Andreas Eriksson. It was so nice to do a show together with a colleague I know. I really like Andreas and I think I also was very happy with my own works for that show. I was proud about that show, and it was really fun.

**DS** Probably the first one was the most meaningful one for me. Even though I can't really remember what I showed, it was the most exciting.

**MA** I understand what you mean, because for me, it was also the first international solo show I did. So it was a big, big thing. But I don't remember my artworks.

**DS** I remember we went to The French House upstairs to have dinner afterwards and my girlfriend got really drunk.

**MA** That was always a problem for me in Sweden with my first shows. The first time I actually met with Magnus Karlsson I was so drunk, I slept in the wardrobe in the middle of the dinner. One year earlier, Jockum had a show there and he was so drunk he fell asleep in his plate. We were young and drunk. Today I am sober.

**DS** When I have an opening, I have to be fed. I'm more interested in the dinner than the wine. It says something about your life as you get older.

**MA** Yeah, but it's always nice. I mean, when you have an opening, Stephen does these dinners. It's always so, so perfect. So well planned with the menu and the text and delicious food. He is very good at that.



**DS** One thing I like about Stephen, is that he always has a seating plan with name cards where everybody sits. I like that because then you can remember people's names.

**MA** And you can steal the names. I always steal them, but then I forget them in my handbag. So after two years I find them and I think 'who is that guy? I don't remember.'

**DS** I only keep my own name. I've just got a collection of my own name.

**MA** So you don't forget your name. That's good.

**DS** It's a collection, I am always looking for things to collect.

**MA** I am very, very sad that I haven't collected all the menus. That would have been nice.

**DS** You can start now.

**MA** It's never too late.

**DS** Although there will be fewer dinners these days.

**MA** Hopefully I have some years left.

**DS** In 25 years' time we will have...

**MA** It's just 25 years to the next anniversary.

**DS** It'll go past just like that.

*This conversation took place in July 2020.*