



SLÄKTEN OCH SLAVARNA

Carl Johan De Geer
5/10 2019 — 9/2 2020

Kalmar konstmuseum

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(THE FAMILY AND THE SLAVES)

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PREFACE

In *Släkten och slaverna* (*The family and the slaves*), Carl Johan De Geer uses his personal family history as a starting point for raising questions about the industrialisation of the west, about guilt and about the writing of history. Who paid the price for our wealth? Can guilt be inherited? Whose history is the one being written? Can an art exhibition help create the space we need to make the world a better place?

Since 2017, Kalmar konstmuseum has returned to questions that have been collated under the platform *Deep Memory*. It was created to open up for questions about decolonisation, lost memories and the power structures of our history. Exhibitions, talks and residence programs have followed and the ambition has been to collect perspectives from a wide variety of sources.

The group exhibition *Deep Memory* (2017) became the starting point. It showed powerful contemporary artists from the African continent. We also delved deeper into Kalmar's deep memory. What local tales might we have overlooked? Which perspectives were missing? We found Sara Makatemele – the first black woman in Kalmar, arriving in 1862. Through our questioning she recovered her own name, where she had previously gone under the moniker "Black Sara". We started something. An explanatory note was added to her epitaph on

the southern cemetery in Kalmar, giving an explanation to why the derogatory term “kaffer” is still in place on her gravestone. Discussion breeds change. What artists do and what is shown and discussed in museums does make a difference.

In *The family and the slaves*, the perspective is Swedish, but it is interesting to find that Europe and Africa constantly share stories. We must not forget that Carl Johan De Geer’s exhibition is part of a wider conversation taking place on several levels within art and our society. Here, light is being shone on colonial repression, unprocessed global trauma and the writing of history.

The Modern Art Museum in Stockholm recently showed an exhibition by the artist filmmaker Arthur Jafa. He investigates the historical and contemporary conditions of Afro-American visual culture. He delves into American history and the traces that the transatlantic slave trade left behind. His imagery is violent and nasty, but he emphasises immaterial but important heritage, how music has sparked both resistance and liberation. When the African continent and its people were defiled and robbed of their material cultural heritage, the art forms that could be carried within bodies: the spoken word, music and dance, became crucial for healing processes and redemption.

Carl Johan De Geer asks himself if he – a white, Swedish man – can tell the story of the Swedish part in the slave trade of the 17th century. I say that he can. Because different perspectives are needed. After that, it is up to the viewer, or the reader to process visual impressions and rhetoric.

We are very happy to take on this exhibition from Södertälje konsthall where it was last shown. Norrköpings Konstmuseum is the producer and we are grateful to Carl Johan De Geer and exhibition curator Helena Scragg for letting Kalmar become a part of *The family and the slaves*.

Sara Hemmingsson,
Curator, Kalmar konstmuseum



Carl Johan De Geer, *Adelns hemligheter*, (*Secrets of the Aristocracy*) 2018

CARL JOHAN DE GEER

In Carl Johan De Geer's exhibition *Släkten och slaverna* (*The family and the slaves*), furniture, textiles and images have been assembled into seven different installations. They tell the tale of his confronting his own family's involvement in the 17th century slave trade. The physical work of nailing and cobbling the installations together can be seen as a way of processing this disturbing discovery. For the people of Norrköping, the exhibition became an opportunity to get to know a different side of the history of our city. Louis De Geer, also known as "the father of Swedish industrialism", was on the one hand a successful businessman who opened up new markets for Swedish goods, but he was also a child of his time – a time when the slave trade was a way of making fortunes.

Up to 70 million people are estimated to be descendants of the slaves who were transported across the Atlantic to North and South America. The fact that we take an interest in the history of colonisation is thus no coincidence, it affects a great deal of people. The question I ask myself is: what are the blind spots of our own times? Time will tell.

Carl Johan De Geer (born 1938) sees it as his life's mission to investigate societal wrongs. In the 1960s he opposed war and injustice, highbrow snobbism and the narrow-minded lifestyle of his parents' generation. Despite claims of wanting to avoid the personal, he returns to it in many of his works. Perhaps it all started with the

film productions? In *Mormor, Hitler och jag* (*Grandmother, Hitler and I*) (2001) he asks himself if it is possible to love a committed Nazi. “Grandmother was the only person in the family who understood children”, he notes.

Film, photography, textiles, painting, literature, graphics and scenography have all played a part in Carl Johan De Geer’s over 50-year long practice. In the 1960s he wanted to create completely new home interiors with his colourful, distinctive and simplified patterns. With time, Meyerateljéerna (the Meyer studios) in Stockholm became the base of his and his friend Håkan Alexandersson’s (1940-2004) dream of their own film studio. Together, and with small means, they produced films such as the children’s program *Tårtan* (*the Cake*) (1972) – now considered a modern classic. In the exhibition project *Trivsel* (*Comfort*) (1991-1992) he created scenographic installations. The tableaux became a sort of self-portrait, saying something not just of Carl Johan De Geer himself, but of the times they represent. In *Släkten och slavarna* he works with a similar method.

The exhibition *Släkten och slavarna* is produced by Norrköpings Konstmuseum where it first opened in December 2018. After being shown at Södertälje Konsthall, it opens at Kalmar konstmuseum on 5 October 2019. Once more, the constant rebel Carl Johan De Geer seems to have his finger on the pulse and a sixth sense for what pedestals need to be torn down.

Helena Scragg,
Exhibition Curator
Norrköpings Konstmuseum



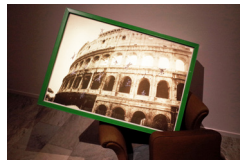
Vanishing point



Secrets of the aristocracy



Pedagogical family portrait



Exodus of the gladiators



The palace and the basement

*Grandmother,
Hitler and I,
2001
17 min*



Defended school desk



The horrific discovery

Soundtrack:
Carl Johan De Geer
about Louis De
Geer
16 min



Carl Johan De Geer, *Pedagogiskt släktporträtt*, (*Pedagogical family portrait*), 2018

THE FAMILY AND THE SLAVES

One day in the early 2000s, a tall black man approached me in a grocery store. “Do you know that your ancestor owned a slave station in Ghana?” I received a mental blow that day. His name was Sydney Onayemi, and he looked at me. “You don’t need to feel sad or have a bad conscience. The De Geer family sold it to the Danes in 1663, after 15 years. The Danes made a fortune from it.” We talked for a long time.

The building is still there, now called Cape Coast Castle, once called Carolusborg. Can a white, Swedish man talk about the Swedish part in the 17th century slave trade? I doubt it. But concepts such as appropriation, representation and identity disintegrated for me when I met the Brazilian Antonio Geraldo Costa. He was the descendant of an African man who Louis De Geer had had transported by slave ship to Brazil in the 17th century. Costa told me that his ancestors’ horrific destiny was forever connected to the surname De Geer. He knew his family tree all the way back to that ancestor arriving in Brazil in the 1650s.

Vision of the slaves’ horrendous existence haunted me. My first action was to sacrifice my desk. Antonio Geraldo Costa is now visible through the hole I made in it.

In 2015 Herman Lindqvist published the book *Våra kolonier: de vi*

hade och de som aldrig blev av (Our colonies: the ones we had and the ones that never happened). Louis De Geer's financing of the Swedish colonial companies in Africa is described under the heading *The scramble for Africa. Inhuman slave transportation:*

“Black people were not considered real humans. They were somewhere between humans – the white man – and animals. Far into the 18th century, Carl Linneaus describes hottentots and other wild people as a particular fifth race, below all the other ones. /.../ Against this background there was no contradiction for 17th century people like Louis De Geer to on the one hand consider themselves good, religious people, supporting charity and loving members of their own faith, and on the other organise inhuman slave transports and have slaves and prisoners of war tortured to death.”

Carl Johan De Geer
Artist



Carl Johan De Geer, *Palatset och källaren*, (*The palace and the basement*), 2018

LOUIS DE GEER AND NORRKÖPING

Louis De Geer got involved in the affairs of the Swedish state through Willem De Besche. De Besche had received an assignment by Duke Johan of Östergötland to make an arms manufacture in Norrköping more profitable. A brass works was started in the early 1620s. De Besche needed financiers and contacted an old partner, a young, ambitious banker and businessman in Amsterdam.

The Swedish treasury was empty, but new wars were easy to find and Swedish metal ores were the finest and purest in Europe. The forecast was good and De Geer generously lent money both to the king and to the Swedish aristocracy. The Swedish state was also granted access to De Geer's large European business network, and the arms trade soon gained momentum. Most of the manufacturing took place at the works at Finspång and Norrköping was the export harbour.

Louis De Geer arrived in Norrköping for the first time in June 1627 and settled there. He was given land on Saltängen, the fishing rights for salmon in Strömmen, and he took over the running of both the brass works and the arms manufacturing. In addition, he started a number of other businesses, among them a forge, a shipyard, a rope and a tinplate manufacture. He also founded a mill factory producing wool fabric and a brewery with a monopoly on brewing beer for the Swedish navy. In 1649 De Geer founded *Svenska Afrikakompaniet* (*the Swedish Africa Company*) with the ambition of gaining a share

of the triangular trade across the Atlantic.

De Geer brought many family members to Norrköping. Siblings, brothers in law and cousins moved here. His wife Adrienne gave birth to three of the couple's 16 children in the city. Yet, he came to spend large periods of time in his home country and Sweden's richest man died in Amsterdam in 1652. The De Geer family left the Holmen works in 1666 but kept property in Norrköping.

Anette Kindahl

Curator

Norrköpings Stadsmuseum

OPENING HOURS

Monday: closed
Tuesday: 12noon – 5pm
Wednesday: 12noon – 8pm
Thursday: 12noon – 5pm
Friday: 12noon – 5pm
Saturday and Sunday: 11am – 4pm

Guided viewings every weekend at 2pm and Wednesdays at 6pm.

EXHIBITION PROGRAM

Släkten och slavarerna

Parent and baby viewing, 15 November, 1pm

Film screening, 20 November, 6pm

See our full program at:
www.kalmarkonstmuseum.se

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