

Övre galleriet
Tom Cullberg
Världens mått
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Öppettider: onsdag - lördag kl. 12-16

Measurements of the World

A rich assemblage of the iconic, obscure, mythical and naïve, the paintings and painted wooden carvings composing Tom Cullberg's *Measurements of the World* immediately beckon us to come in closer and question what it is we think we understand. Anchoring the collection are four plywood cabinets. Each a world unto itself, the images and objects within are engaged in a dialogue that shifts and deepens under one's gaze. A montage of painted panels and canvasses pull us into landscapes mythical and real; pan over ancient and contemporary buildings; and spark the mind with musical and literary inspirations. Inhabiting the scenes they silhouette, painted carvings — from tiny figures and vintage cars to analogue relics like watches, cassette tapes and cigarette boxes—seem to be captured in a nostalgic loop of arrival and departure, connected to the paintings they foreground, yet also distinct.

Borrowing its title from Daniel Kehlmann's novel that melds fact and fiction in its reimagining of the lives of two 19th century scientists seeking creative ways to measure the world, Cullberg's work, too, evokes questions around the measurement of a time, a place, a life. Speaking to the distance between people, places and things, physically manifested on the shelves, the work also takes measure of that distance and in so doing, erases it. Existing in the present, it also references a past brimming both with yearning and stillness. A time capsule of places (known and unknown), artefacts of (sometimes made up) music, literature and popular culture, and pre-digital objects, it is in the juxtaposition of the pieces that connections emerge, reaching out to the viewer and asking, how did we get here and where will we go?

While certain elements clearly evoke a specific time and place (Cullberg's Gen X associations are immediate and strong), others are likely mysterious (you only know if you know), and a few even reverberate with the rich associations of the iconic. This is nowhere clearer than in **"The Small Garden/Fields of Joy"**, where a darker version of Bob Dylan's hard *Blonde-on-Blonde* stare challenges the viewer with its "who remembers *this?*" wink, before bowing to a dream 1960s-era Joan Baez playing her guitar in a field (the image serves as cover for Baez's 2025-produced *Newport Era* collection). Evoking the duo's status as symbols of political upheaval and collective

gathering while also reminding us of the diamonds and rust of love lost, the pairing surfaces a tension indicated in the work's title: that is, the necessary truths of self, versus the pull towards wider engagement.

That push and pull sparks from the titles of many of this work's creative references (both real and imagined): from *I Just Can't Live Here Anymore*, *Blood on the Tracks* (aka Dylan's "divorce" album) and *Painting as Action* (an exhibition catalogue) to the prominent font of *The Last of Us*. Transforming the apocalyptic video-game-turned-HBO-series into a book title, Cullberg speculates on humanity's breakdown should we fail to engage, but also points to how that fracture would return us to a more analogue ("real"?), if life and death, existence. On the shelf above, next to vials of pills, a mix tape titled *Allt är glömt* ("everything is forgotten") serves as a warning.

However, the quest to remember is not some inventory-taking exercise, but rather inextricable from the universal search for sense-making and connection. In "**A Brand New Friend**" Cullberg recasts the pyramids from The Cure's 1980 album *Boys Don't Cry*, suggesting the answer ('the cure': a friend as cure; music and art as friends and thus cures) to the question posed in the Lloyd Cole and the Commotions' eponymous song:

*"Am I asking oh for so much?
I'm not asking to be understood
Am I asking oh for so much?
I'm just looking for a brand new friend."*

A pearlescent warmth literally reflects in the glass and wood dream house on the panel next to *The Cure*, in front of which two figures stand, possibly deep in conversation. Nearby, Richard Scarry's iconic children's classic, *What Do People Do All Day?* recalls the blissful innocence of imagining adult life as defined by one's profession or tools. Meanwhile, on the topmost shelf, a different dialogue with self is evoked by *Ziggy Stardust*, David Bowie's titular alter ego who arrives on a dying earth to give people a message of hope through music. In front of that album cover, a full band composed of Cullberg's roughly hewn figures looks ready to jam, while on the bottom shelf, a faceless girl stands out from a crowd at a concert. Alone in that mass of togetherness, whom does she seek?

The lifeblood that is music — the magic of creating something that can be communicated individually (the tape, the vinyl) or with masses of people (the concert) — and 'the cure' of that engagement, reflect in two of the collection's four painted canvases: "**Övervåningen**" (in which an elegant, empty foyer seemingly offers a choice:

to the left, a staircase winds to a bright mystery; to right, a lounge filled with endless albums and the glimpse of a TV beck- ons) and **"Concert"**. Taken from a YouTube video of the 1985 Live Aid gala, the latter is a tribute to the belief in the power of music and collective gathering as protest, born of a time when millions of people simultaneously tuned in, all watching the same thing from home. In centring this kind of connection — the dynamic force that a performer playing to a huge crowd can generate — Cullberg manifests a yearning for people to meet where they are, alongside a fear that we have entered an age in which such moments are harder to come by.

As a Swede who has called South Africa home for over three decades, Cullberg's own complex relationship to connection, place and movement are very much in dialogue throughout the works, all of which incorporate scenes and references from contemporary South Africa: kids playing soccer, recognisable buildings from the working-class neighbourhood of Woodstock that is home to Cullberg's studio, and landscapes like **"The Bay"**, with its serene view of open sea. Other references to Cullberg's adopted home are found in **"Architecture of Self"**, where Ernest Cole's *House of Bondage* (a vital collection of photography documenting the violence of apartheid) and Damon Galgut's *The Promise* share space with *Helen Sebidi*, an imagined title inspired by the South African artist whose paintings "disappeared" for three decades following a residency in Sweden.

Like so many of Cullberg's touchstones, their valence — all three draw lines to European depredations in Africa, and the cruel disposition of the creative process — only lands for those who know. But this is equally true of **"Architecture of Self's"** transformation of the Louvre into a Swedish department store; a feat accomplished by plastering the once-ubiquitous Scandinavian logo of co-op commerce across the façade of that Parisian palace of Art. Meanwhile, paintings of a wild empty crescent of beach and sailboats anchored in a moody harbour (the beach happens to be in Mozambique and the harbour is South African, but either could be Sweden) offer a cooler, more remote challenge to the notion that anything — including the self — is fixed or irreplaceable.

Cullberg does not leave us unmoored, however. A sense of expansive peace if not homecoming radiates from **"World Party"** (a band from the 90s), simultaneously referencing global (world) politics (parties), and a (debauched, joyful) world party (buoyed by titles like *Wild at Heart*, *Bonnie Prince Billy*, and *Japanese Erotik*). The titular painting is a fictional album cover picturing a glacier flowing down to a lake, its universal icy beauty mirrored in the painting above, where three figures on horseback traverse a beach at the tide's edge under the black and white of starlight. A quiet magic envelops the trio (*Beach People*) making tracks in the sand (*Miss Smilla's Sense of Snow*),

encouraged forward in their quest by titles like *Cults and Divinities* (a reverent nod to the authors and musicians who inspire Cullberg), and *Suspension of Disbelief* (the viewer's agreement to accept a creation on its own terms).

Constantly in dialogue, the many pieces that comprise *Measurements of the World* continuously echo one another, compelling the viewer to keep looking and listening, their meanings and connections morphing alongside our experience of them. Just so, the painted riders in **"World Party"** are mirrored on its bottommost shelf, where a carved figure on horseback passes an old red-brick turreted structure (a castle? a prison? A fairytale-dwelling?), which is reproduced in a more vibrant iteration in the canvas, **"This Must be the Place"**. Also lending its name to a mix tape found in **"The Small Garden/Fields of Joy"**, the source title comes from the Talking Heads song, whose lyrics wonder:

*"I guess that this must be the
place I can't tell one from another
Did I find you, or you find me?"*

Playful, nostalgic, humorous and earnest, *Measurements of the World* reminds us that the particulars may not really matter, so long as we keep looking.

Lee Middleton

Lee Middleton is a writer and freelance journalist based in Cape Town, South Africa.