

# JONAS LINDSTROEM

56

Photography Design





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DESIGN FRIENDS



(Cover picture)  
**Show, Don't Tell.**

“Ultimately social media is the devil  
and real life the antidote.”



Photography is often said to be the most powerful story-telling tool.

Jonas Lindstroem has come to master that craft with work featuring the strange quality of oscillating between surrealism and raw realism. Most often it's about the photographer's acute ability to portray the beauty of a moment, and to offer a glimpse of life including all its imperfections, grit, subversiveness and pain. If it was left up to him to tell the visual narrative of our times, we would be in good hands.

**AFSANEH ANGELINA RAFII — I have read that your photographic journey began when you were skateboarding as a teenager with your friends. I found that interesting because it means you had to train your eye to catch spontaneous moments that were moving constantly, and when you don't have the luxury of time. In your photography today, you seem to have an uncanny ability to catch those spontaneous moments.**

**JONAS LINDSTROEM —** There is a way of seeing the world when you skateboard that is unique. How you read a city, architecture, people, places. I don't know how the act of

skateboarding itself influences my work, but definitely the culture as a whole was hugely influential, and remains so. When I started, it was still very much a subculture. Access was limited, and the circle of people was small. There was no social media - yet it was always also an incredibly visual world. Everything around it, the graphics, the clothes, the videos were hugely inspirational. The videos especially were such treasures, that is when you could get your hands on them. US imports to the one local skate shop were rare and too expensive to buy more than one at a time, or you'd just watch them for hours and hours on

the small TV in the shop. I was always drawn to them, only later to find out that some of my favourites were made by Spike Jonze.

**There is a quality to your photographs of them being like large-canvases. The environment around the subject always seems to melt away, because your eye is drawn to the subject itself. Yet the environment elevates the whole image because there is such a clear eye around composition, dramaturgy and intensity.**

The more I got into filmmaking, the more it influenced my whole way of working.

I started as a photographer, but was always interested in story-telling. How I learned to approach filming a scene gave me the tools that I use in my photography. I approach it all the same way. It's all ultimately staged, imagined, but there is a deep sense of reality and catching a moment that I'm interested in. And I think my photographic roots shaped me in thinking about how to narrate as much as possible in a single, grand tableau. The reality aspect is also the reason why I try and rely on visual effects as little as possible. I like to do, feel and experience things for real.

**You started getting jobs within the fashion industry while you were still finishing school. Today when I look at your imagery, what makes it that much more powerful is its representation of diversity. I know that this stems a large part from your clients, but especially in advertising it is often coupled with tag lines that convey a legacy. Given how little diversity there was until a few years ago, it is an interesting**





Portrait by Christoph Mack

“I like to be shown a world  
that hasn't already existed,  
but the way our world works  
is the total opposite.”



**claim from brands. Can you say something about this progress being made in the industry, changes that you have witnessed, and how you are helping to shape its new visual codes?**

It's a marketing tool like any other, let's not be fooled by that. If it helps to sell, it's useful. So, despite every effort being made by the industry, I still take most of it with a grain of salt. I've always represented the world I see around me as authentically as possible, having lived in cities like Berlin and London. And I do appreciate that industries are opening up to diversity, nevertheless I'm cautious when approaching projects or clients' requests, as I insist that this is done in an authentic and truthful way. I'm not into surface cosmetics. The audience deserves to be properly represented and depicted.

**Throughout time there has always been changes in our understanding of beauty. You are someone who celebrates and represents your times. You say that you are not interested in depicting nostalgia. What is your definition of contemporary beauty?**

Beauty is a vibe. An energy that somebody gives off. Simple as that. And it translates into imagery on and off screen. Apart from that, there's no boundaries.

**There was a time when fashion was entirely rooted in the aspirational. There remains a degree of convergence between creativity, craftsmanship, psychology and business. In the past decade, the movement towards the democratization of fashion (catalysed by the emergence of blogs and influencers) has created a space for voices that you may not have heard from in the past. In the process this aspirational element has been bastardized. The aspirational no longer aims to reach for that creative element, but rather for what seems to be purely commercial ends. What has been discovered and what has been lost in your opinion in the process?**

I don't agree that the aspirational element has been bastardized. But instead of the aspirations of a select few, we are able to dream through many different eyes.

There is however a much bigger commercial angle in

all projects. This process is defined by endless marketing departments, audience testing, and so on, and that kills creativity.

I believe exceptional work comes to life via uncompromised talent.

And I don't mean the idea of the single artistic genius, as I think that notion is overrated and outdated. It's always a team effort, and the better the synergy and understanding, the more the outcome is larger than life. But I do believe that truly new things only come when you take risks. I like to be shown a world that hasn't already existed, but our world works the opposite way. That tiny screen in your hand doesn't point you towards a future. It's the echoes of our collective past behaviors endlessly remixed, curated, re-individualized. But in the end, it's still the past tense. I'm more interested in something I didn't even know existed, but you only get there through the bravery of a few, not the market research of the many.

**What first drew you to fashion photography? It does seem to have endless possibilities in terms of translating one's vision of**

**what is both worldly and other-worldly. But so is fine art photography. Sometimes the boundaries between the two can be blurred. More broadly, photography also serves to document a moment in history.**

When I started out, I was interested in working with people, photographing them to tell stories. And fashion seemed like the biggest venue for this. Especially when seen through the larger lens of the social construct it is, it's a place of endless possibility. Having said that, I've always felt a bit like an outsider in this world. I've always been doing so many different things, and sometimes I like to dip into it. I much prefer that way of working rather than only being a fashion photographer. I'm a photographer and filmmaker. No sub-category is necessary.

**As a photographer, especially when you are starting out, you have to hone your visual voice, and respond to the financial component of turning it into a business. You have said that a budding photographer**





Above  
**One Dollar Dreams**

Below  
**Excerpt from "Believe"**







Excerpt from "Believe"

Excerpt from "Believe"







Left  
Excerpt from "Believe"

Right  
Excerpt from "Believe"

**should try to keep their work under wraps until they have gained confidence in defining their visual style, otherwise they may come to be swayed and distracted by outside voices. This advice seems almost surreally unrealistic given the times we live in, where success in the creative fields seems to be largely driven by abilities to create online and offline personal brands. What is that advice based on?**

It's deeply rooted in the one thing that makes work better: time.

The moment you show your work, especially now, it's out there, never to be forgotten. It's inescapably linked to you and it defines who you are, for better or for worse.

And if that work isn't fully developed and not a true representation of the standards you aspire to, you're fucked. The smaller your voice is, the more people will use it and bend it into ways you don't want to. That's why I keep telling all my students to keep your work under wraps and offline as long as possible, as long as it takes for you to be comfortable with it or proud of it. That doesn't mean you can't show your

work, but be careful to who. Depending on the feedback you need, ask teachers, fellow students, friends. Choose your audience, don't let the audience choose you. And then when you truly feel confident, get out there. This way it'll be much easier to convince people to get on board with what you're doing. As for money, make it somewhere else. Don't link this necessity to your creative process. Werner Herzog once said the best film school is working for a year as a bouncer in Bangladesh. Find other ways of making money and learn about life at the same time. Everything else leads to unhappiness.

**How is a photographer to build their own visual vernacular when they are constantly bombarded with other people's imagery? How can they immerse themselves sufficiently to develop that artistic integrity? In everyday life we seem no longer to experience moments. They have become a footprint that is to be documented and showcased, then submitted to a popularity contest.**

Everybody has always been inspired, and will continue to be by living in an era of

sampling. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with that. But you need to learn to walk the fine line between inspiration, appropriation and straight-up copying. I'm constantly inspired by the things around me: films, exhibitions, architecture, performance, dance, opera, people in the streets, travels. But I try and not get inspired by things that are too close to my own projects. Inspiration is fine as long as there is a translation process, that adapts the work to your own world to make it yours. This is the problem with social media. Yes it's a great tool for discovering new people, and it allows kids living in remote locations to participate and be exposed to a world that would've stayed hidden from them 15 years ago. Yet too often this is very superficial. It's just a baseline of inspiration, but it's not enough to be something truly inspiring. Ultimately social media is the devil and real life the antidote.

**You have worked with quite an extensive roster of leading brands. What do you enjoy about creating a visual narrative for a brand? Where are the limits? And to**

**what extent does it afford you more freedom?**

There are brands that have built such a strong narrative over the years that just by placing their logo on a film or an image, you open up a cultural dialogue. That's why working with these brands becomes interesting, because you get to shape global culture on the biggest stage and with the biggest audience possible. And you get to bring your own ideas, discourse, ideals into the messaging, so that you get to move the goalposts.

**What elements were you able to draw on in your advertising work that you can then apply to creating music videos? There seems to be no better marriage than that between music and imagery. What kind of experience do music videos and working with musicians afford you that you do not find in your fashion photography work? On the other hand, what are the parallels?**

Music videos and advertising are less different than one might think. I'd argue





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it’s out there, never to be forgotten.  
It’s inescapably linked to you and defining  
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“I’m all for a beautiful shiny, glittering surface  
when it helps you draw people in,  
but you have to have the depth to back it up.”

they are fairly similar. And in both cases, they can either come with many restrictions, or with the lucky coincidence of meeting people with whom you create something special that breaks through boundaries. In the process you lift each other to new heights.

**As you mentioned, you work through both film and photography. Can you talk about how you experience these different ways of telling a visual story? As a magazine editor, I tend to have a very visceral and emotional approach to choosing photography. In a split second it evokes something very strong in me: like a sort of emotional adrenaline. I take a much less intellectual approach, where you seek a narrative in the details of the image. Though video actually provides you with a greater landscape to explore a narrative and emotion, it can also be a much more intellectual medium, because you have several sequences to stir emotion and tell a story. It makes me think of the movie *A Single Man* by Tom Ford. The whole movie was an endless sequence of beautiful imagery – an endless ad**

**campaign of sorts – but from an intellectual perspective it was lacking. I questioned if it was the imagery that was driving my emotional experience or if it was the story.**

Surface is surface, and depth is depth. But without a shiny glittering surface, nobody wants to explore the depths. I'm all for beautiful shiny, glittering surfaces when it helps you draw people in, but you have to have the depth to back it up. Also, nothing really makes me think much of that Tom Ford film. But I think making beautiful images is not the ultimate goal, it's the basic requirement.

**In *Es War Gut Aber Das Ist Besser* you draw a portrait of a generation for the *Die Zeit* newspaper. Is it more important for you to stir emotions in the viewer or to tell a story?**

I hope to do both. But in some of my earlier work I try and tell a less concrete, linear story, and a much more fragmented set of emotions that mean something different for each viewer. So I have no final message, just good questions.

**You have said that you are interested in people at the core of your work. What does that mean really? What is it about human ambiguity that you are trying to unpack?**

Everything. One image at a time.

**You are based between London and Berlin, beside the practical aspect for your work, what is it about the nature of these two cities that gives you creative fuel?**

I need to tell my agent to change my bio. I've been based in Berlin for the better part of the last ten years, but then again have been traveling most of these years for work anyway. London, like some other cities have always been strong connection points for one reason or another, and I try and go there regularly because they serve as sources of energy. It's also got a lot to do with the people.

**This past year has been unusual at best and devastating at worst for most people around the world. What have been some of the feelings you were confronted with and what kind of lessons did you pull from it that**

**you could apply to your creative journey as a visual communicator?**

Humbleness.

**What are some of the projects you are currently working on?**

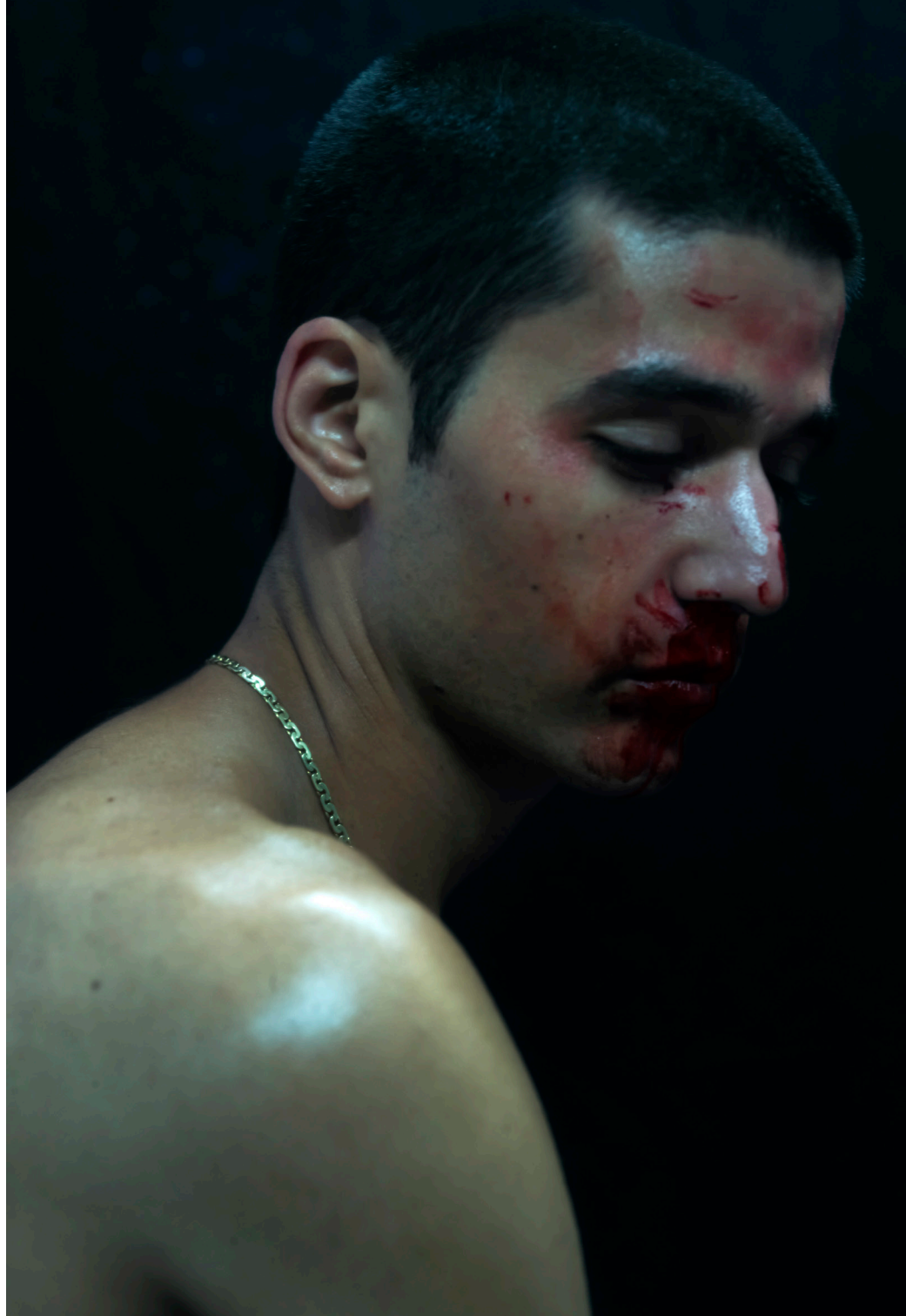
I'm working on my first photographic book titled *Believe*. It's a series of imagined images. A story about when life just happens. Not in straight lines, but curvy, bent, unexpected, yet always connected. Dreamt up from different parts, characters, storylines and emotional states of our world. Coming together for a new way of physical inspirations. Brutally Real Life. Social Media Antidote.

**You achieved fame and admiration for your work at quite a young age. What is there left to explore for you? What are some of the challenges that you would like to set for yourself?**

I've barely scraped the surface. You'll hear about it when it's ready. Show; don't Tell ;)



Excerpt from "Believe"





Excerpt from "Believe"



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