

















# Salad Hilowle, Vanus Labor The Royal Academy of Fine Arts 16.2—14.3 2021

## **Salad Hilowle** Out of the Silence

**Spring 2018. The time is 1:04pm.** County museum of Gävleborg has opened after two years of renovation. I look hastily in to the department that showcases paintings from the 17th and 18th century. The place is the permanent exhibition, Rettig's art gallery. It slams in my eyes. See a painting I've never seen before, even though I've been here multiple times. Here and now, in front of my eyes, a painting that I'm trying to understand. Seven children where six white children try and wash off the color on the seventh, black child. Or are they tenderly taking care of their dark friend?

The title of the painting is Vanus Labor which means labor of vanity. I look at the year when the painting was made, it says late 17th century on the sign. The artists name was David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl. Thoughts start to run in this delirium. Words like: It's speaking to me. It says: I have always been here. Here I am.

It is in this moment that I decide to create, negotiate and propose an addition to the Swedish art history. An addition that will weigh as heavy as the one that's already there. Vanus Labor shows another history, but how can that history evoke and be understood? Is this something we have seen before? The Vanus Labor moment awakens something inside of me even if it's history. We can look back and ask "what would have happened if we had gone in another direction?". If Vanus Labor was considered as Ehrenstrahls key work and been given another place in art history?

I'm not trying to rephrase what one knows. Instead, I'm trying to see what ways there are to pass by what we already know. We are familiar with Anders Zorn and Carl Larsson. We've heard of Gustav Badin. Slavery is well-documented. But what do we know of black subjects in the late 17th century in Scandinavia? To find out, very simple things are required, such as seeking and paying attention to what is different, the deviant. But also to observe the familiar like it was the first time we saw it. It's about being patient, to take the time to find different entries.

**Fall 2020. The time is 10:30am.** The Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts Library. Me and Eva-Lena Bengtsson, curator for The research library at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, browse through the student registers from 1778-1795. It makes me think of the silence in Swedish art history. The silence is enhanced when we study the student register closer: there were three dark-skinned men (moors) enrolled in 1780-1784. Their names were Jean Louis, Simon Orosman and Philip Andersen. The silence around these three peoples history can also be seen as absent. But in a way these people are still present — we did find them in the student registers. Presence and absence becomes a material that I'm trying to use, knead and present in another format. They turn into two pages of the same motion, power and energy.

**In conclusion,** these entries to the past are very personal but they can also be experienced collectively. It's not revolutionary, but to be aware of ones body in relation to power and this place where I am, I can offer an alternative. For example, an opera aria or a simple construction in a studio.

#### Maria Lind With Careful Hands: Thoughts on Salad Hilowle at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts

It is with careful hands that the artist holds up his casting of the Moors Pharmacies own moor, sculpted in wood. He sitting half naked with a petal, armour and a quiver on a door piece, dangling his legs as if he was ready to jump down. A cliché image of what comes from a far, the unknown and bodily, at the same time tempting. It's January 2021 and I'm visiting Salad Hilowles studio at the Academy of Art in Stockholm, where he, thanks to the Bernadottescholarship, can work for a year. He tells the story of the Stockholm pharmacy, that sold medicine from all over the world from the end of the 17th century, the interior of which partly survived in the Pharmacy Society's Pharmacy Historical Museum. From there, he borrowed the wooden sculpture.

Another cliché image shows up in the new film that Salad Hilowle shows me on the computer. Its the sculpture of a muscular moor that pulls up net by one bridgehead at the royal Ulriksdals castle park, only wearing a blue and white striped loincloth. On the other side of the bridge, there's a twin but with red and white cloth around the hips, his skin is also painted black, red lips and snow-white eyeball. The bronze sculpture was originally made for Haga castle park in 1845, according to the new established stereotype of dark skin men — moors — which for centuries were brought to Europe and its courts as slaves. One or two women also belonged to the group, for example Daphne who ended up in Vetlanda in the end of the 18th century. They were symbols of status, for worldwide contacts, toys that could talk, and work.

**On the day of my visit** at the studio, on the wall hangs a tapestry depicting the same Ulriksdals moor. Once upon a time, tapestries were, like most textiles, valuables that ended high up in the estate inventory. It was another sort of luxury goods that only the wealthy could surround themselves with. The artist had made this particular tapestry and exhibited it at the Royal Institute of Art closing exhibition a half year prior. It was placed at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts entrance hall surrounded by plaster castings of famous antique sculptures such as Nike, Diana, Apollo and the moustache adorned, the Dying Gaul. They are all idealized white, even though the originals were painted in bright colours.

Next to the tapestry on the wall of the studio hangs something that attracts my attention, a long width of cotton fabric, on which, a mans face has been printed. The man looks determined on the sketch drawing. He has a name, unlike the men from the sculptures in the Ulriksdal park, Pierre Louis Alexandre. He was a model at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts during the 1870s. He was one of multiple racialized men that are documented at the school registers of models and students. This group also includes students Jean Louis, Simon Orosman and Philip Andersen. They were all enrolled in the 1780s.

Another moor, who's life was well documented is Coschi, famously known as Adolph Ludvig Gustaf Fredrik Albert Badin. Coschi was his name when he arrived as a ten year old orphan to Sweden from the West-Indies via Denmark, donated to the queen Lovisa Ulrika, by an estate owner in Skåne. The name Badin means joker and refers to his roll at the court where he would grow up as a waiter to the queen and a playmate to the crown prince, later Gustaf III, and his siblings. Influenced by the philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, the queen used him as an experiment in upbringing where Coschi was taught the foundations of christianity, reading and writing, but was otherwise free to make his own choices and shape his opinions. In the new film, it is Salad Hilowle himself who utters Coschi's words, which are preserved in a diary. Freely interpreted by the barefoot artist in an empty art academy, Gustaf III:s creation, whose recent education the artist has just completed, they sound like this: "They said I always had wild eyebrows. I was called the nature child, as long as I did it my way. Leaves, flowers and branches. I was lying in the dark. Saw it stand out against the moonlit cave. And everything seemed very clear. Here is a place to tell the survivors.



















The constantly postponed construction. I found them in the cavities. Next, we will return. At night I study a spring reading about moors that were in other places. In high letters it said: moor, moor! ". In the next sequence of the film we meet the castle ruin in the Haga park and the Ulriksdal moor wrapped up in fog. Still but alarming music accompanies the fateful scenes that lead further into the Academy of Art with the plaster casts where the artist previously exhibited his tapestry.

The mood is saturated in the film, the atmosphere tells of restrained emotions. As quiet as it is around the artist where he stands at the Academy of Art, it is in the halls of the County Museum in Gävle in the following scene, even though it is full of visitors. Wordlessly, women and men of different ages study the art collection with national romantic landscapes and historical portraits where all people are white. The visitors themselves are black. The artist, seen through a broken mirror, is cut in, a lone trembling oak leaf hangs among bare branches as well. A simple construction in the studio. Then, a female voice start singing, an opera aria: "Here I am. Pre-Asynja. The future welcomes me. And I arrive, I arrive." Thereafter, we meet the artist, now turned away with a naked upper body and surrounded by hung fabrics with Somali patterns.

Then we get to see the silent museum visitors again, now from the front where they sit on museum stools with their eyes fixed on a wall where busts of Gustav III and his wife Sofia Magdalena flank something resembling an altarpiece. The painting has given the new movie its name, *Vanus Labor* or Labor of Vanity. It was painted around the 1700s, by someone around the circle of David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl and depicts seven naked children. Two of them are portraits of coming sovereigns, Karl XII and his sister Ulrika Eleonora the younger. Six of the children are white and it looks like they are trying to wash the seventh, the black child placed in the middle. Do they want the black child to become like them? In that case, they are trying in vain — the color is there to stay. Or are their gestures a way of expressing care and honour?

The filmed close-ups that are cut together at the beginning are supplemented here by smooth rides and smoother transitions between the images. The camera circles the opera singer, who is enclosed in a blue light, wearing a tunic and with a very long braid of hair. She stands on a podium, similar to an antique sculpture in an empty studio as close as the quartet responsible for the music. "You wonder when I came here. I have always been here. The sun, the morning, the mother of the evening. We are space with a humans feature. Your eyes inspect with a cracked prism. Schism. Schism. Comfortable with tangible concepts. They built a boat for the ocean. You wonder who I am? O, I make my song. I thank our star. On winter white kick. One beautiful day, you probably understand." That's how the sounding aria goes.

There, in the studio, I think that Salad Hilowle appears to be more and more as a storyteller. It's the images that take the observer in the hand and tells the story forward, highly concrete. As cautiously as he held the casting of the Pharmacy Moors sculpture, in the works of art to be shown at the forthcoming exhibition at the Academy of Arts, he poetically weaves together traces of the early African diaspora in Sweden, its pictorial image, with his own experience of growing up in Mogadishu and Gävle. The absence of visual identification objects. Literal experiences, as physical as the films song, but filled with cracks. Textiles embodies the bodily, which comes closest to the skin. His weave also include old norse goddesses, Swedish sovereignties, child slaves, objectified male bodies and royal art institutions. Here are the loved ones, the childhood friend from the south of Norrland and a prestigious scholarship. Similarly to his older artist colleague Matts Leiderstam, he points at blind spots in art history, and just like Axel Karlsson Rixon, formerly Annica Karlsson Rixon, he deals with the national romanticism's one-sided presentation of what is considered Swedish. And suggests something else.

### Fredrik Svensk Unpaid Labour

After being awarded the "Bernadotte scholarship" for his work, to make people with african descent visible in Swedish art history, Salad Hilowle initiates the fall of 2020 his one year residence at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts.

A couple of months before the announcement, something happens with another royal art history in Hilowles childhood city. The 7th of April 2020, the County Museum of Gävleborg posts a 59 seconds long film on their youtube channel. The headline says: "An Artwork From the County Museum in Gävleborg – Labor of Vanity". The film shows a photography of the painting Vanus Labor by David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl, painted right before the 18th century.

At first, I google the artwork and find that a heir to Ragnar Josephson (disputed in Uppsala in 1918, professor in history of arts, member of the Academy, the Royal Dramatic Theatre Director, and founder of museum of artistic process and public art, as well as author of Ehrenstrahls teaches in painting) has since June 8th 2017, tried to sell a version of the painting through Stockholms auction house. Starting bid 30 000-40 000 SEK.

Unlike all other films of individual artwork from the museum collection, Vanus Labor lacks a narrator. "Some white children are trying to wash off the dark color on the black child" I read in the Swedish subtitle, meanwhile the silent film zooms in on the details of the painting that will strengthen the statement. The painting is described as an allegory, who's sense moral is marked by its title, Vanus Labor: "Don't do what's meaningless". The painting was ordered by Queen Ulrika Eleonora, who wanted an image of "a black baby" that has just been born in Stockholm.

The museum's story of what the painting depicts thus allows the title of the work and a specific interpretation of the motif and shape of the painting coincide. Ehrenstrahls use of the allegory genre is therefore assumed not capable to include other stories about the relationship between the children. By making the title and genre superior than the motif, the artists own ability to build an alternative story is marginalised in the same genre convention. If a historic event is insoluble in the language and the way it's communicated, the preoccupation of the allegory undermines what we would call the documentary aspect. That is, the fact that the image is also a portray of an Afroswede born in Stockholm. With a name and a voice that the presentation leaves uncommented.

The painting, Vanus Labor, is a part of what is called the Swedish cultural heritage, created in the midst of the transatlantic slave trade but before the modern conception of the history of art, progress, nationalism and scientific racism. In thesis number seven of his philosophical history theses, Walter Benjamin writes about how every viewer of what we call cultural heritage will be affected by a shiver.<sup>1</sup> This shiver isn't just sprung out of the artistic qualities in a painting like Vanus Labor, but also out of a "nameless bondage" which belongs to the contemporary period of the painter and queen. But rather than revealing that Vanus Labor is "a documented savagery", we must ask ourselves what we can do with it today.

The museums information film on youtube -a regional mediation through a global tech company of a painting owned by the Swedish people - establishes a temporal and spatial distance to the meaning of the painting. At the same time, it puts questions about its ontological status in the viewer's lips: "It is not entirely easy to understand it today. Is it racist? Is it funny?"

**The dilemma with what** appears to be the neutral presumption of that the painting isn't in its entirely easy to comprehend, speaks to a contemporary civilized observer that understands the complexity to understand a historical painting without immediately demanding answers and a less civilized observer who is unable to do so.<sup>2</sup>

The statement that the painting would be hard to understand implies that there was once an observer who understood it. Which in turn means that the contemporary observer would be equal all other observers infront of the painting on a sensuous level. Furthermore, as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay noted, there could be an expert observer. Someone who, based on personal experience or scientific method, can claim a certain knowledge of the painting.<sup>3</sup>

It may not be possible to use the ruler's tool to end the ruler's house.<sup>4</sup> And it becomes particularly problematic when critical technicians and methods used today are integrated in maintaining a dominant power relationship. But if, what I call art-critical organisational principal of whiteness<sup>5</sup> has been and is part of the normalization of a civilized consciousness, inseparable from both the racial welfare state and the racial capitalism that is making the planet uninhabitable for the human, well then art must also be part of the creation of what Sylvia Wynter called a human, after man.<sup>6</sup> This is crucial, not the least because the art and it's scientifically disciplines in humanities is founded on the thinking aesthetics as something fundamentally humane.

The art exhibition as a critical form is traditionally issued from a contemplative and reflective observer. How can this be lead back to reproducing something other than the civilized individuality that has made the modern aesthetic regime racially implicit?<sup>7</sup>

I believe that the museums presentation of the painting Vanus Labor confirms a perspective of the art and the notion of time and space that has dominated the reasons and consciousness of colonial modernity. But now, through youtube, as part of the new liberal transformation of the welfare state.

When Salad Hilowle integrates the painting Vanus Labor in the the video artwork Vanus Labor in the exhibition at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, he doesn't do so by displaying the painting in a new royal art context leaving it uncommented. He doesn't either give the painting a new "interpretation". Rather, the painting is integrated into a composition that both implies and cancels both presentation and interpretation. It's done by reflecting, shattering and mixing the time and space around a series of Afro-Swedish lives that moves and reconstructs our times dominating power and desire relationship. But maybe this can only be done by exposing internal contradictions in today's political economy?

One contradiction in today's political economy might be articulated most clearly when an artist executes a work within a format and a convention which to a greater degree imitates wage labor performed for an employer. While the employee receives a salary for their time, the artists work is unpaid. Or in best case, part of a scholarship. In addition, if the result of the unpaid time that the artist spends is a product that must solve a social problem or provide new knowledge about a certain problem, the contradiction is further narrowed.

Today's development of a generalization of the gig economy is still understood on the basis of the organizational model of wage labor. Nevertheless, the relation of contemporary art to a historical situation just before the modern art system and wage labor was formed, has become increasingly interesting.

**During the era of** great power, David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl did not only work for the Swedish royal court, but was, as a nobleman, part of its sovereign power. Klöcker's *Vanus Labor* was thus created before artistic work came to be in an exceptional relation to the dominance of paid work.

Salad Hilowles unpaid work Vanus Labor covers that whole sequence, from the emergence of the universal human that doesn't uphold as christian in relation to the pagan but as a human in relation to the less human. A shift that has been guiding for both the modern nationalism, the conflict between work and capital, busy with the family, the home and the own identity. But also, for the modern racism hopelessly integrated in the history of art and the categories of aesthetics, ideal and progressive possibilities.

Perhaps, there is a possibility to develop an art that integrates the art critics and the curators experience in a speculative an experimental narrative? Perhaps, it might be a way to liberate imagination and contemplation from the self reflective reason that today characterizes by an entitlement thinking that demands that self interest becomes the foundation for the politics.<sup>8</sup> An artistic variant of what Saidiya Hartman called "critical fable-making" would at least be another perspective of the arts possibilities than the one that dominates today.<sup>9</sup> That is, what reduces art to an investing object that can provide return, legitimacy and social or existential support to the own life. Or that which reduces art to an ideological instrument and an exceptional form of labor in our times political economy. I believe so.

1. Walter Benjamin, Über den Begriff der Geschichte, 1940, posthumously published by the Frankfurter Institut für Sozialforschung 1942. The manuscript is included in Schriften I, 1955.

2. I call this distinction of the beholder "the art-critical organizational principle of whiteness," because it describes whiteness as a relation of power and desire rather than as color. Fredrik Svensk, Vithetens konstkritiska organisationsprinsip, del 1, Paletten #321-322, 2020 S 113-117

3. Ariella Aisha Azoulay, Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism, Verso 2020 "The role of institutions such as archives and museums in the 'preservation' of the past is the effect of a vast enterprise of destruction conducted at the expense of and as a substitute for destroyed worlds."

4. Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider - Essays and Speeches, New York: Crossing Press Feminist Series, 2007, 112

5. Fredrik Svensk, Vithetens konstkritiska organisationsprinsip, del 1, Paletten #321-322, 2020 s 113-117

6. Sylvia Wynter, Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument, The New Centennial Review, 3: 3, 2003.

7. David Lloyd, Under Representation - The Racial Regime of Aesthetics, Fordham University

8. Jmf. Christopher Menke, Kritik der Rechte, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2015 & Denise Ferreira da Silva, Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(Ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World, The Black Scholar, vol. 44, no. 2, 2014, s 81-97. (På svenka i Paletten #314, 2019.

9. Se Saidiya Hartman, On working with archives: An interview with writer Saidiya Hartman (https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives/)

#### **Ulrika Flink** The Voice of Silence

**Salad Hilowles camera** moves slowly over a beautiful stone floor, as we enter an exhibition hall behind the thick brick impersonated wall. There's nothing special with the room, a museum hall that's exhibiting a historic art collection against olive green, white and soft blue walls. Paintings depicting landscape and portraits enclosed in gold frames. Two women observe a sculpture in the foreground, a young man looks at the art as he slowly moves between the artwork. The atmosphere in the hall thickens as the room is filled with a subtle trembling noise, creating unease, as if something unpredictable is about to happen or has happened. Black individuals that turn into black bodies, hypervisibility in the room of whiteness, filled with contradictions, mythical constructions and violence.

The paintings white gaze meets the black gaze. We all know that the white gaze have the ability to marginalise and make invisible, make subject to object. However, this process seems distant, instead the artwork and the rooms seem to go through a revealing transformation.

"Look, a moor!" someone calls after the narrator Gustav Badin: "My blackness could never be understood". Frantz Fanon wrote about the black body and how it would change, deform and be made to an ontological problem in relation to the white gaze. What's reflected back is built on ideology and myths, a racist hierarchy that puts the black body in touch with nature, not with intellect, concludes its invariability but above all its subordinated rank.

**The camera moves** in to yet another museum hall, sweeps over an audience of women and men sitting on museum stools. We see individual faces, encouraging glances, which without turning away is directed straight towards a wall with paintings. These paintings probably belonged in castles, wealthy and powerful homes. The focus ends up on Vanus Labor or Labor of Vanity from the end of the 17th century. We see six white children around a black child that they seem to be washing. The painting is an allegory, meaning it's suppose to express learning, I'm extremely uncertain what this learning is. At the county museum in Gävle where the painting resides, the conclusion is drawn that the white children are trying to wash of the black child's skin color, since that is doomed to fail it is constituted, vain labor. The act in itself, to wash someone or yourself is interpreted as a ritual in cleanliness, meaning to wash your body before prayer to a God. This painting arises in a colonial world order where the view of white europeans are superior by nature, also imprinted in Sweden. With this background, with the eyes of colonialism, the black child would never have access to a God, the natural place in the cosmology of the divine would make a cleansing ritual vanus labor.

The sitting audiences gazes meet the paintings and the history in silence, a silence that takes shape in existential resilience that speaks of the power of whiteness, does it disturb, does it interrupt just by making it visible. It is this exposure that makes up the greatness of Salad Hilowles cinematographic work Vanus Labor. We are reminded that museums never have been neutral or objective, all rooms carry a history, a context that confirms and consolidate a perspective, a story. Angela Davis wrote "Any critical engagement with racism requires us to understand the tyranny of the universal.

For most of our history, the very category 'human' has not embraced Black people and people of color /.../". I'm thinking of this when the museum halls are filled with a beautiful soprano singing:

You wonder when I came here I have always been here the sun, morning, evenings Mother We are space with a humans feature

























## Mårten Snickare An Artists Meeting in 17th Century Sweden

**He seems at home** in a palace. Relaxed, leaning against the marble baluster and wearing a casual elegant costume, not unlike the clothes that contemporary artists likely depicted themselves in — compare Mikael Dahls and David Klöcker Ehrenstrahls selfportrait, both from 1691. The man is surrounded by monkeys and birds, colourful, vivacious, in motion.

Movements and cross-boundary characterises the 17th century. In the arts, where people, Gods and angels wallow among the clouds and the boundaries become uncertain between the image space and the observers space. And in the world where european colonisers, trade men and explorers cross new oceans and conquer new territories. In the opposite direction objects, animals and people travel from all continents to Europe. Some voluntarily, others with force: slavery is the darkest chapter in the history of the 17th centuries movements and migration.

The man in the painting has most likely travelled far. His looks give away of roots in sub-sahara Africa. Even the painters creator, David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl a migrant: born in Hamburg, educated in Holland and Italy, active as the royal court painter to Hedvig Eleonora, swedish Queen and a big patron of the arts in her time (she also migrated, from Germany to Sweden). The animals have their origin from even further places: the ape skull that's climbing on the metal rod belongs in South America, that also includes the red-fan parrot in the smaller ring and the parakeet on the mans





David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl — Boy with Parrots and Monkeys, oil on canvas, 1670

right hand; the yellow-crested cockatoo in the larger ring usually lives in Australia and the berber macaque on the mans left shoulder in the mountains of North Africa.

Together, the animals and humans (the depicted man, the artist and the purchaser) draw the contours of the world as it was known in the 17th-century Sweden, a world imprinted by colonial expansion and amazement of the unknown. The man and the animals may well have been there, before the eyes of the queen and the court painter. Colonial companies and global trade routes carried people and animals from near and far too Stockholm. At the same time, the painting can be understood as an allegory of Europe's supposed special status and Europeans' self-imposed right and obligation to unite the world and organise it along a scale from culture to nature, civilization to barbarism. Materialistic as well as ideological the painting depicts a colonial world order, a world where the animals and humans can be reduced to collectibles or used for slavery. There is an irrefutable connection between the Swedish participation in the transatlantic slave trade and the image of the black man in the Swedish royal court.

But at the same time, the painting evokes an imagery of a world where the boundaries have yet not been set and the hierarchy has not been fixed. There is a lot of movement in the painting, bodily, geographically and culturally. The main character does not appear as a static collectible captured by the colonial gaze, but instead as an individual with dignity and self-esteem.

In the visual culture of the European 17th century, one finds many stereotypical representations of blacks, or "moors" as they said. But also compassionate portraits of black individuals. This painting belongs in the category last mentioned. The mans facial features is carefully studied and individualized and he seems aware of us who observe him at the same time as he convincingly takes space in the world of painting. Maybe we will never be able to identify him, but we do know that people of African descent lived in Stockholm, in Hedvig Eleonoras time. For example, at one occasion the queen commissioned her court painter to depict a newborn black baby, "ein kleines Mohrenkind". And in the royal accounts, in a register of artists hired by the queens court, there is a "moor named Carl Ulrich" together with others such as David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl.

Let us return to the painting one more time. The mans clothing, his effortlessly posture and his awake, curiously scrutinizing gaze – all this is reminiscent of how artists at the time gladly were portrayed or how they portrayed themselves. It is not a particular far-stretched guess that the man in the painting is Carl Ulrich, the black artist that is mentioned in the registers. In that case, the painting testifies of a meeting between two artists. One with roots in Germany, has since long a central place in the Swedish art history. The other with roots in Africa can now enter from the dusk with his own name, and thereby enrich the image of a Swedish 17th century where a black man was not only the object of others evaluating gazes, but could himself direct his artistic gaze towards the world.

# Colophon

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