JEHAN ELLIOT KENNEDY SÖDERQUIST

BIO

Jehan Elliott Kennedy Söderquist is a transgender and disabled printmaker, textile artist, and illustrator living and working in Seattle, WA, where he was born to a Swedish-American family. Soderquist's current work revolves around Swedish folklore of his childhood.

Soderquist was the 2020 recipient of the Jack and Sylvia Cluck Endowed Scholarship, as well as the 2017 recipient of the Wendy Jackson Hall Memorial Scholarship. In 2019, he worked with artist Leonard Suryajaya on his solo show *IS IT TIME YET* at Specialist Gallery in Pioneer Square. He was an assistant curator for the Neddy at Cornish, as well as the Artists Up exhibition at the Cornish Playhouse, presented in collaboration with ArtsWA, 4Culture, and the Seattle Office of Arts and Culture. Söderquist will graduate from Cornish College of the Arts in May 2021 with a BFA in studio art.

STATEMENT

My work is defined not by what I put into it, but what (and who) I am as a person. My work is about trauma, disability, gender, and sexuality. But more than that, it is about my lived experiences with those things. Even when I intend otherwise, a part of my work will always be self-portraiture, a way for me to speak outwardly about events for which I never had the voice.

When I first went to therapy in fifth grade, a year after my grandmother's death in my childhood home, my counselor at the time came up with a system for my mom and I to communicate. Because talking about my feelings often seemed far too large and looming, we started writing letters to each other that we left in a little red mailbox on the mantle in the living room. As an adult, I've found something better than that. Now, when I find that I just don't have the words to talk about a feeling or a memory, I draw my letters instead. My work becomes that little red mailbox, signaling that I'm ready to share.

I start by using the Swedish folklore I grew up with as a way of retelling my childhood memories and mythologizing my own trauma. By turning myself and the people in my life into characters, I can view these memories as being external, rather than something that belongs to me, making it easier to process what happened objectively.

One such folktale, and a major inspiration for my own work, is *Princess Tuvstarr*: a metaphor for going out into the world before one is ready and losing your innocence. The young girl leaves her home at Dream Castle with her friend Longleg Leap, who is wise, and older, and knows the dangers of the world. Longleg Leap warns her of the danger, but the young and foolish princess forgets his words and lets go of his horns. She loses her crown, her dress, and finally, as it slips off the chain around her neck and drops into the dark waters below, her golden heart. The princess never leaves the forest. She sits at the water's edge for eternity, trying to find her heart, but what is lost can never be recovered.

I had no option but to relate to stories like *Tuvstarr*. They were a simultaneous escape from the problems going on in my life, and a way for me to process those events. When I sat down on my grandfather's lap and handed him whatever book of Norse myths or folktales I had checked out from the school library that week, I didn't have to think of these issues as being "mine" anymore. By relating traumatic or hurtful experiences to characters, I learned how to externalize my negative feelings, and how to think about the problem objectively.

This is a mechanism I still use today - and the driving factor in my current work. I take a memory from my childhood, an experience, a feeling, and I mythologize it. I turn myself into the *huldra*, the older boy into the *älvkung*, a close friend into the *kyrkogrim*. I give myself an out — a way to think about my experiences without my emotions getting in the way, and then I draw those feelings out.

Instead of sitting with my trauma, the work allows me to redefine my experiences through personal mythology. Instead of sitting alone in the forest, searching for his lost heart, this huldra overcomes his past. This huldra gets to leave.