

Portraits by Dawid

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## Portraits by Dawid

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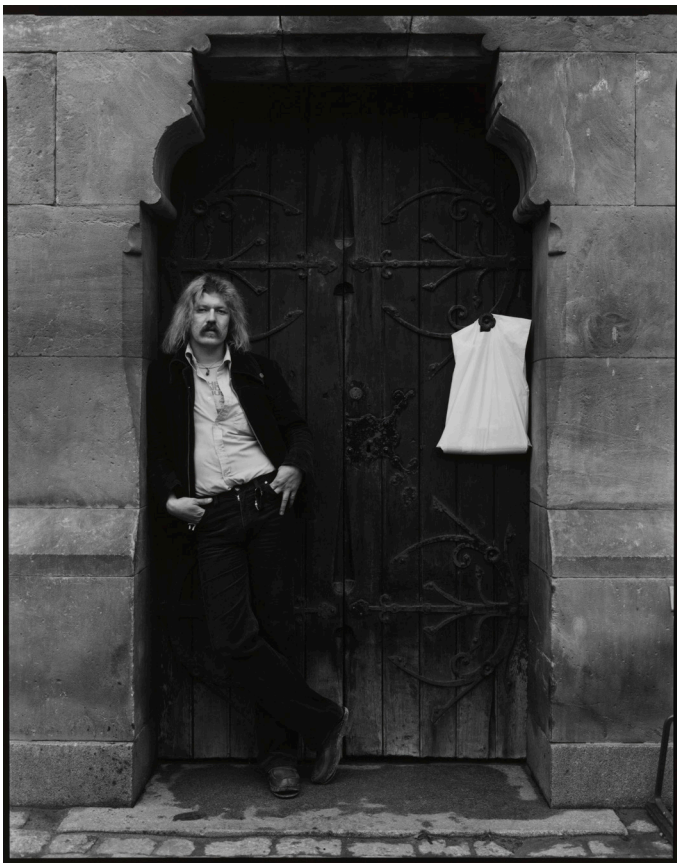


Fig. 1 Dawid (Björn Dawidsson) (b. 1949), *Kenta I*, Kenneth Gustafsson (1948–2003), *Singer, Musician*, 1979. Gelatin silver print on paper, 34 x 23.8 cm. Purchase: the gift fund of Gripsholmsföreningen av år 1937 (the Axel Hirsch Fund). Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 5145.

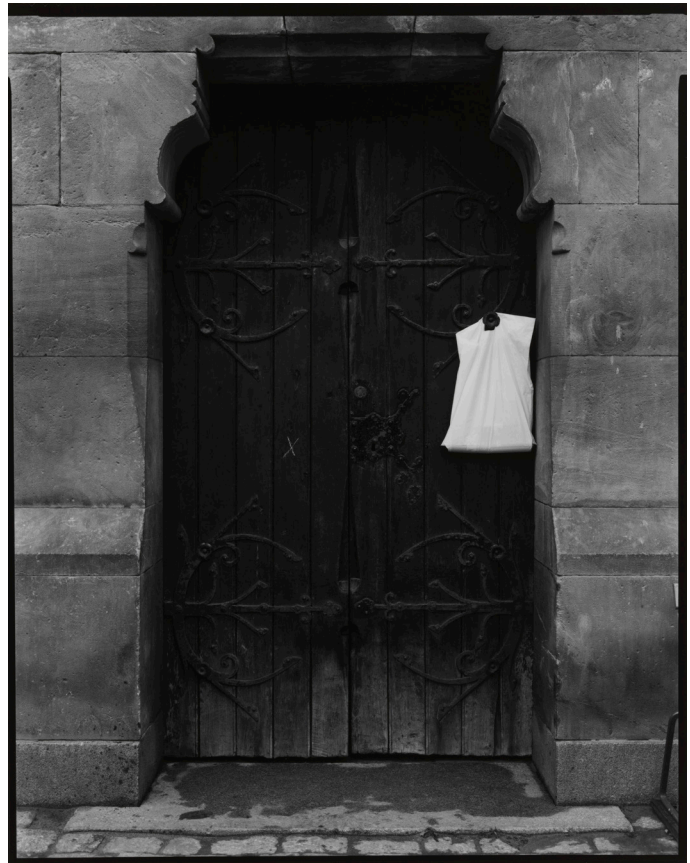


Fig. 2 Dawid (Björn Dawidsson) (b. 1949), *Kenta II*, Kenneth Gustafsson (1948–2003), *Singer, Musician*, 1979. Gelatin silver print on paper, 34 x 23.8 cm. Purchase: the gift fund of Gripsholmsföreningen av år 1937 (the Axel Hirsch Fund). Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 5146.

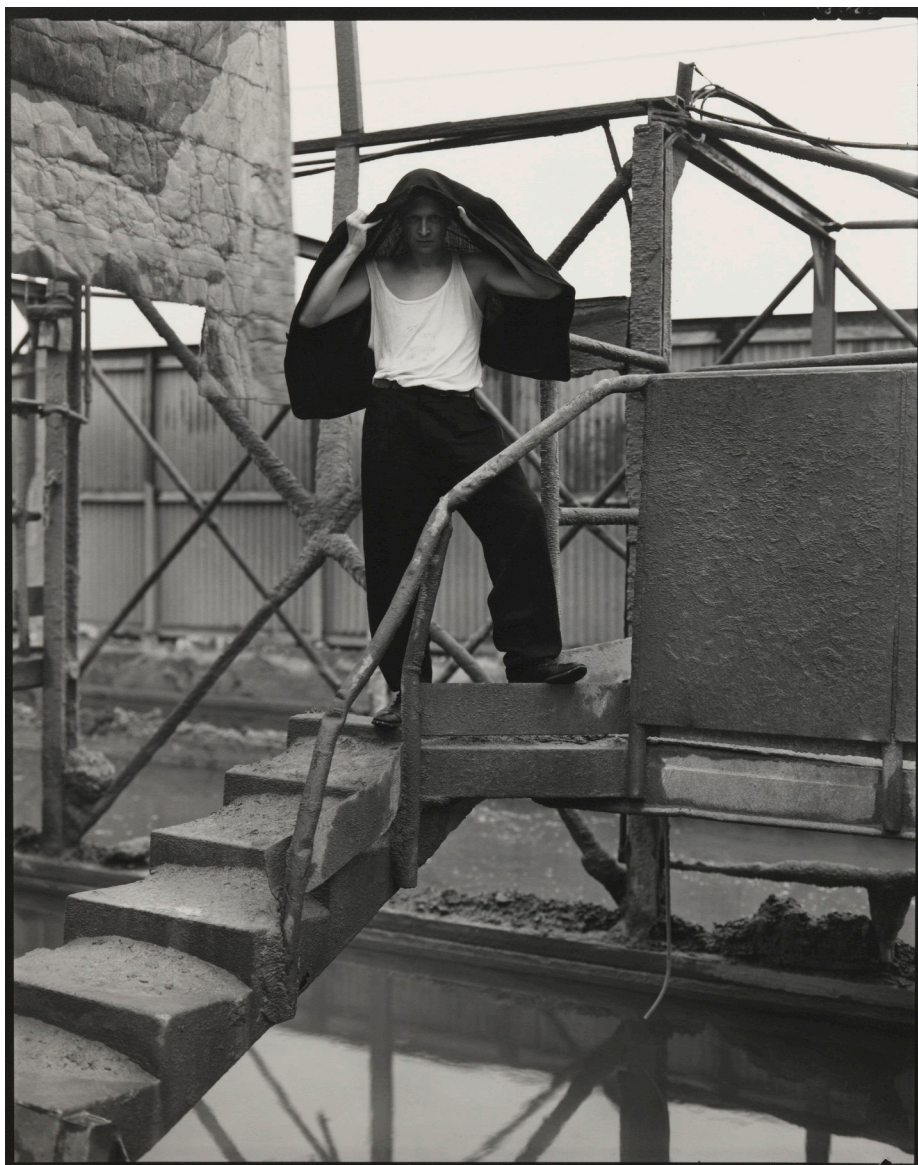


Fig. 3 Dawid (Björn Dawidsson) (b. 1949), *Stig Larsson (born 1955), Author, Film Director*, 1987. Gelatin silver print on paper, 30.5 x 25.4 cm. Purchase: the gift fund of Gripsholmsföreningen av år 1937 (the Axel Hirsch Fund). Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 5147.

**Dawid** (Björn Dawidsson, born in 1949) is regarded as one of Sweden's leading photographers and has reached far beyond the country's borders with his abstract, avant-garde photography. He made his debut in 1973, but his real breakthrough came a decade later with the exhibition *Rust* at the Swedish Museum of Photography (now an integral part of the Moderna Museet). He showed – then as later – how the seeming banality of a bent, rusty nail could be transformed into something unique and artistically expressive. Since then, Dawid's work has stretched conventional concepts and the boundaries of what can be deemed to constitute photographic art.

Dawid was not previously famous for his portraits. When the Swedish National Portrait Gallery arranged an exhibition of them in 2017 – *Men* – a number of important acquisitions of such works were made. Each of them represents a different period in Dawid's career and reflects a hitherto unknown aspect of his art.

The first of these images was a portrait of the singer Kenneth Gustafsson, known as Kenta, in the form of a diptych created in 1979 (Figs. 1–2). Like the few other portraits by Dawid that caught the public eye in the past, this one was the result of a commission. The image of the rebellious artiste was intended for the cover of his LP *Kenta* (1980), hence its character of a front and a back. The setting was a closed gate in the solid walls surrounding St John's Church in Stockholm. Here the bohemian Kenta liked to hang out, with a few cans of beer for company. These are the secret contents of the carrier bag, nonchalantly hung on the massive gate. A well-known performer with a drink problem is pictured in an architectural frame, accompanied by one of his attributes. A portrait of a similar character is that of the writer Stig Larsson, taken in 1987 (Fig. 3). It is a kind of fabricated reportage image and, like the picture of Kenta, it feels almost out of place in Dawid's work, which normally has a minimum of narrative content.



Fig. 4 Dawid (Björn Dawidsson) (b. 1949), *Gerry Johansson (born 1945), Photographer*; signed 1984. Photography on paper, 54.2 x 59.9 cm. Purchase: the Fritz Ottergren Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 5139.

The same quality, but with an entirely different purpose, is found in two images of Dawid's fellow photographers Gerry Johansson (1984) and Bruno Ehrs (1986). In both cases, the setting has a very special function, directly evoking the way the two men worked. The monumental landscape with its small human figure carrying a

large box camera shows Johansson at the time he was following in the footsteps of the legendary Carl Gustaf Rosenberg in the southern Swedish province of Halland, seeking to document exactly the same places as his predecessor. In this way, Dawid's portrait of his friend congenially captures the aesthetic that had become

Gerry Johansson's own and is thus a paraphrase of his colleague/subject's enthusiasm for wide-angle photography (Fig. 4). A similar reference to a fellow photographer's way of working is to be found in his portrait of Bruno Ehrs (Fig. 5). When this picture was taken, Ehrs was living in an old building on Drottninggatan



Fig. 5 Dawid (Björn Dawidsson) (b. 1949), *Bruno Ehrs (born 1953), Photographer*; signed 1986. Photography on paper, 54.4 x 42.2 cm. Purchase: the gift fund of Gripsholmsföreningen av år 1937 (the Axel Hirsch Fund). Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 5140.

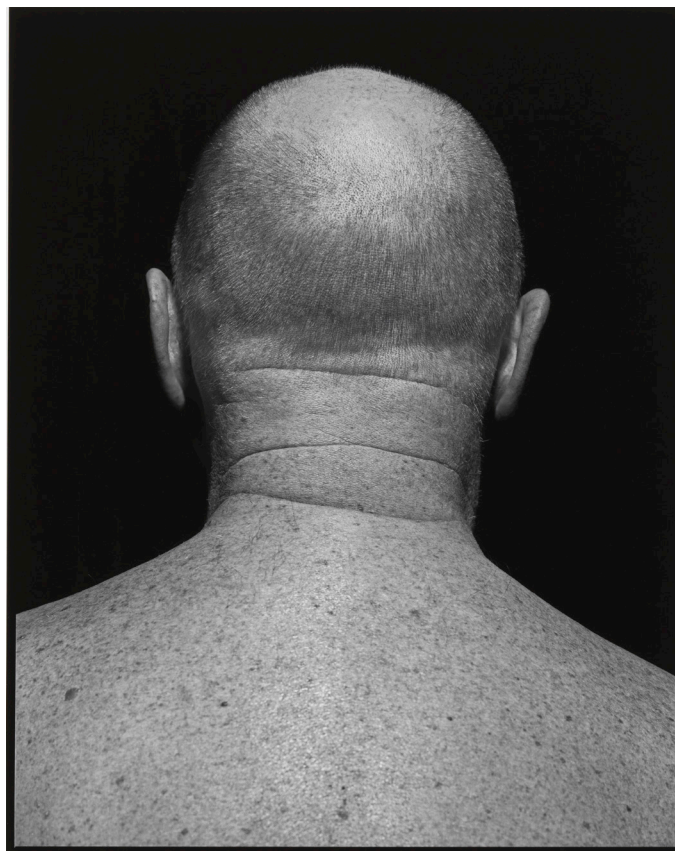


Fig. 6 Dawid (Björn Dawidsson) (b. 1949), *Christer Strömholm (1918–2002), Photographer; Professor*; signed 1982. Photography on paper, 54.5 x 42.1 cm. Purchase: the Fritz Ottergren Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 5138.

in Stockholm. Dawid placed his subject in a recess on the staircase, sculpture-like, with almost classically rendered folds of clothing. A few years earlier, Ehrs had created similar portraits of people in their natural settings. It was this that Dawid captured in his image when he had Bruno Ehrs pose in a slightly theatrical manner that was so clearly at odds with Dawid's own aesthetic.

Among Dawid's many portraits of friends, his images of his former teacher Christer Strömholm hold a special place. Unlike many other photographers, Strömholm appears to have felt no reluctance to sit for photographs himself.

Perhaps this was because there was something of the exhibitionist, the willing poser, about him. These portraits are literally skin-close, and yet sympathetic. In one of them (1982), we see the old photographic legend from behind (Fig. 6). Dawid spares no details: wrinkles, creases and pigmentation changes are all recorded in intimate detail. One wonders what it is that enables the viewer actually to recognise the sitter, even though his face is not visible.

The legendary photographer Nadar stressed the importance of the portraitist knowing his subject.<sup>1</sup> That is not a view that Dawid shares. All the same, we notice that his portraits of friends are different.

One quality that sometimes distinguishes them from others is their humour, something we find, for example, in Dawid's image of fellow photographer Thomas Wågström (Fig. 7). The latter is cast in the role of Lenin, an allusion to his outward resemblance to the Russian revolutionary.<sup>2</sup> Viewed at an angle from below, Wågström-Lenin takes on an extra touch of the heroic, in the manner common in the early Soviet Russian aesthetics of artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko.

What is interesting and unexpected about Dawid's portraits is that, here, he has chosen two diametrically opposed artistic strategies. One is based on a long career of

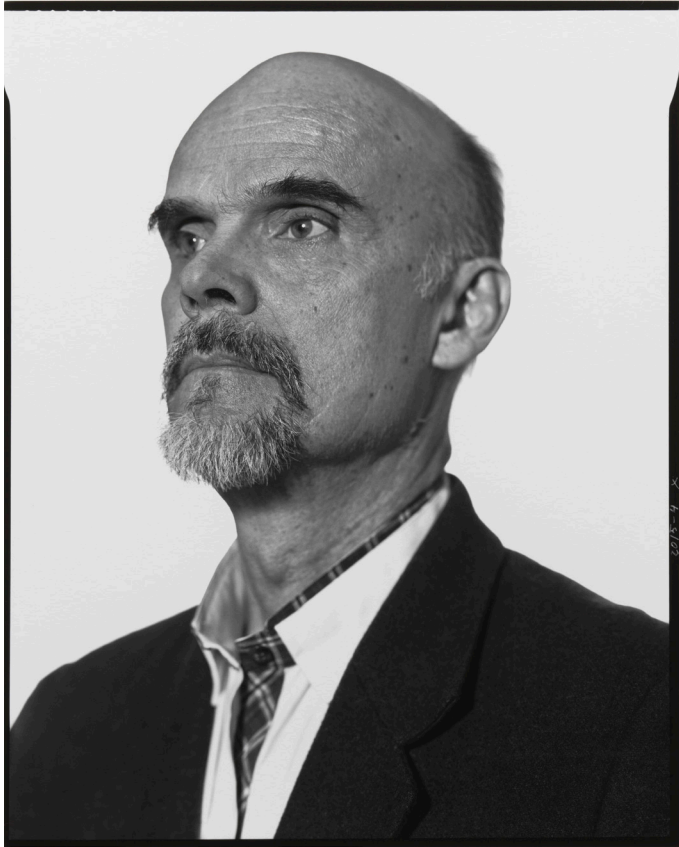


Fig. 7 Dawid (Björn Dawidsson) (b. 1949), *Thomas Wågström (born 1955), Photographer*, signed 2015. Photography on paper, 54.7 x 42 cm. Purchase: the Fritz Ottergren Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 5142.

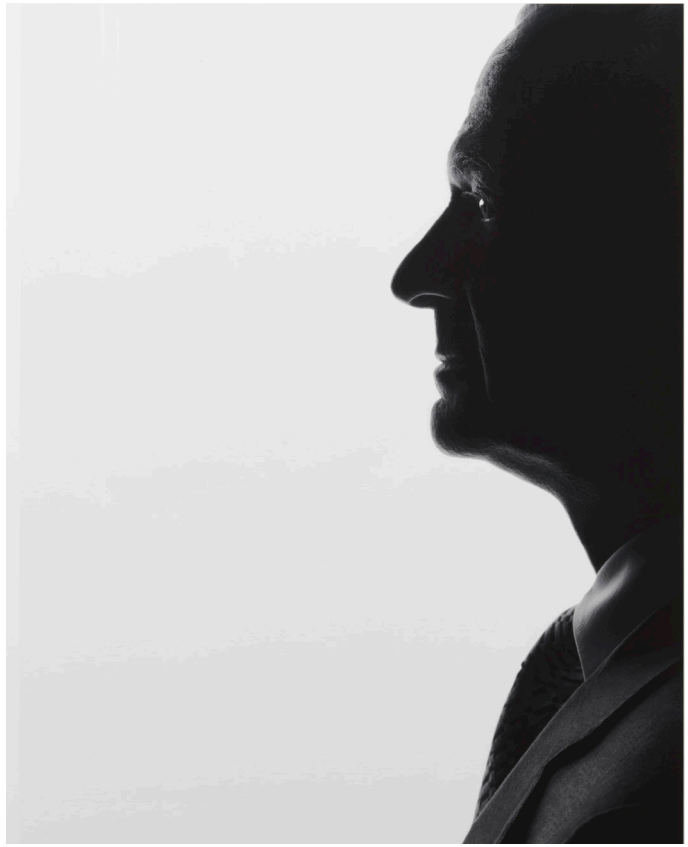


Fig. 8 Dawid (Björn Dawidsson) (b. 1949), *Carl XVI Gustaf (b. 1946), King of Sweden*, 2005. Photography, digital print, 74 x 60 cm. Gift of the Friends of the Nationalmuseum. Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 5112

photographic creativity in which, like an abstract painter, he reformulates reality and offers an alternative. He adds something of his own, beyond what is mechanically recorded by the camera. The choice of angle, the framing, the light – these can all be manipulated, and ultimately it is not the camera's eye but the eye of the photographer that does that. Dawid changes our way of looking at the world, and the normal parameters take on new meaning. Surface becomes depth and depth is transformed into surface. Aware of this, however, we soon ask ourselves the question when these images become and cease to be portraits. According to Dawid, the moment

he completely deobjectifies his sitter, the image ceases to be a portrait and is instead transformed into an abstract sign. What sets Dawid apart, though, is that he pushes the expression of this category of portrait by balancing between its figurative and its purely abstract qualities. This is true, not least, of his silhouettes, with his portrait of the Swedish king providing an innovative example (Fig. 8). It was taken in 2005, in advance of Carl XVI Gustaf's 60th birthday, and served as the design for a new postage stamp issued the following year.

The other route Dawid has tried in his portraits is the very opposite. Here, he places emotional content, and not

primarily form, centre stage. He explores the male psyche by testing different attitudes, emotional expressions and rhetorical gestures. We see him at his most radical in a series of self-portraits in which he plays different roles. The art critic and poet Marie Lundquist has briefly analysed the most famous self-portrait in the series, which is also one of the images acquired by the Nationalmuseum (Fig. 9).<sup>3</sup> In particular, she points to the many different possible interpretations that can be made of it. The figure could be understood as a kind of “escapologist” of photography, struggling with its black (conventional) frames. Given what we know about Dawid's



Fig. 9 Dawid (Björn Dawidsson) (b. 1949), “self”, *Self-Portrait*, signed 1998. Photography on paper, 54.1 x 42 cm. Purchase: The gift fund of Gripsholmsföreningen av år 1937 (the Axel Hirsch Fund). Nationalmuseum, NMGrh 5136.

role in Swedish photography, this symbolic reading is tempting – the man who bursts boundaries and frees photography from its self-imposed limitations.<sup>4</sup> His nakedness reinforces the picture of Dawid as a sensitive and vulnerable image maker. Interestingly, he has a famous forerunner in art, Albrecht Dürer, who in much the same way drew several representations of himself naked.<sup>5</sup> Shifting the interpretation a step further, we could equally well see this as a Christ figure, hanging on an invisible cross, which the composition readily suggests to most viewers. In Western culture this is associated with suffering, but is that the meaning Dawid intended?

**Notes:**

1. Félix Tournachon, known as Nadar, *Quand j'étais photographe*, Paris (1900) 1994, p. 289.

2. Dawid had been inspired by his friend, the graphic designer Greger Ulf Nilson, who had jokingly compared Thomas Wågström's outward appearance to Lenin. Oral communication from Dawid.

3. Marie Lundquist, “Pekbok för vuxna”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 22 April 2001.

4. Per Lindström suggests the same interpretation as Marie Lundquist in his review of Dawid's book *Beautiful Frames* (see “Tysta bilder”, *Sydsvenskan*, 7 April 2001).

5. Several different nude self-portraits of Albrecht Dürer exist. The Klassik Stiftung Weimar has one (from c. 1509), which in its expression has much in common with Dawid's own variations on the theme. Another by Dürer, in which he represents himself as Christ the Man of Sorrows (1522), is in the Kunsthalle Bremen.