



The Primordial Man

JAN H. ANDERSEN



The work of commercial artist Jan H. Andersen, who is well known for his stock images of boys and men, is discussed in this biographical essay that reveals much more than his work as an artist. He describes his journey from doing social work with children to being a leading observer of the inner lives of boys as revealed in the portraits he creates. The emotional life of boys is not a mystery to them, as their participation in the staging of pictures reveals. The author suggests that we are on the verge of a “small revolution” in the way we will see boys that will be carried out by boys themselves. The importance of social media for boys as an outlet for previously hidden feelings is emphasized.

Keywords: boyhood, gender, emotions, masculinity, cultural expectations, fear, archetypes, emotional life of boys

Editor's Introduction

New Male Studies includes among its offerings the contributions of individuals who work outside of academe and do not cleave to the by now standard format for presenting research. In fact, we consider their reflections to be essential to realizing the mission of the *new* study of boys and men, one that avoids the ideological commitments of many who write and teach in our colleges and universities. Each issue to date of *New Male Studies* has included one such contribution. The following essay by Jan H. Andersen is one of two in this issue. Because of its remarkable perspective and insights, a somewhat more extended introduction is warranted.

One of the spectres that from the beginning has haunted the study of young males' experience and lives is that of the presumed motives for such an interest. Apart from the fact that in recent years the presence of men other than the father and male members of the immediate family in the lives of boys has diminished, moral panic surrounding the issue of pedophilia has reached an unaccountable pitch. Until two world wars drew men away from the schools where they had traditionally taught boys (and girls) as schoolmasters, a boy would likely have had a male teacher throughout his then limited academic career (if he was lucky enough to be able to attend school) from primary through grammar school and on to the end of secondary education (again, if he was fortunate enough to have this option). More recently, traditional settings in which older males mentored boys and young men were part of most boys' experience. These included scouting and sports. Now only sports remains as a social space in which boys have a socially sanctioned opportunity to come into contact with older men. Often, however, sports serve the interests of the coaches more than the needs of boys. Elementary schools rarely have male teachers on their staff. Secondary schools employ men, but the teaching profession (like, say, nursing) is still considered to be more appropriate for women. There are signs that this is changing, but the experience of most boys will see them taught primarily by women until they reach the secondary level. As a child in elementary school in the States during the 1950s, I was taught only by women. Only the circulating penmanship inspector and a science teacher were men. They visited the school twice a year. My first full-time male teachers were in junior high school.

This bit of history is important, since the net result of systematic changes since 1940 and then again during the period since feminism began to dominate academe after 1970 in schools and elsewhere has been a gradual but steady disappearance of men from boys' lives. Add to this the trend in divorce and resulting one-parent home arrangements featuring a single mother and the story of Jan H. Andersen's journey to increasing involvement in the lives of boys, first as a social worker and later as an artist, becomes compelling. It is a story of a remarkable man who ignored convention and tradition and was drawn instinctively on the basis of an awareness of the importance of his own boyhood to illuminating the hidden lives of boys in our time.

The fear that grips people when men express an interest in children was something unknown until the past few decades. The reasons for this are not clear and will turn out to be complex. In the meantime, however, it is crucial that everyone interested in boyhood and the well-being of boys and

young men talk openly about the issues surrounding pedophilia and their relation to the broader topic of male studies in general. Fear of the word itself is palpable in academe, and in the popular media the mention of interest in children generates a default response: this must be about a vicious male who has sexual designs on small children. The obvious response is not even made given the taboo against even mentioning the topic, but it is this: While there are a few men and women who take advantage of their size and power (physical and political) to force children into frightening and physically painful acts that the adult constutes as sexual but which for the child are simply violent, overpowering assaults on his body, the relationship between nearly all men and young males is based, as it has always been, on the man's heartfelt care for the reincarnations of his own boyhood with whom he associates. Men in every culture (historical, Western and currently West-exotic) have played the role of example, guide and source of information based on experience of what it is like to be a male of the human species. Modeled on the father but extended in significance and meaning beyond the dynamics of the family of birth and upbringing, men have always found in boys an opportunity to pass along their wisdom and skills, as friends, as grandfathers, as coaches, scoutmasters, teachers, and mentors in general. In turn, boys have always looked to men other than their father for a range of examples of lives embodied by the male with his unique anatomy and way of navigating space. That in our time these relationships have been demonized and are fraught with suspicion (for both the men and the boys) has created an empty place of experience for all males. And as fewer fathers remain on the scene in the disappearing nuclear family, the losses for both young and older males have been substantial. These losses will very likely come to be seen in the background of the acts of violence by adolescent males that we are all too familiar with especially in the States.

It is no secret that there is an aesthetic dimension as well in the relationships between boys and men. Here the distinction between aesthetic fascination and sexual (for the older male) desire must be made. Older males see in boys and young men examples of the rare moment when they were in their prime of physical strength and most enthralled by their energy and imagination, and able to perform feats of athletic prowess that they are no longer able to execute. There is an aesthetic beauty in the young male that has been recognized since the ancient Greeks and was reaffirmed in the Renaissance. Conversely, young boys are impressed by the size and capabilities of older males, whom they emulate often and especially when their own father is not available to them. Stature, strength and skill as well as physical features that are found only in males (body and facial hair, large hands and feet, well-developed muscles in some men) are aesthetically attractive to young males just as much the older man's wisdom, skill, intelligence and power. Why pretend these interests are missing when every male can attest to having experienced aesthetic interest in other males as well as in age mates during adolescence when physical development is a central theme.

Jan H. Andersen understands this mutual interest and describes the response of boys to his presence when he served as an elementary school teacher. He did not disavow a fascination with the face and physique and manner of comportment of the young males he served and has since moving on from that work spent the bulk of his life recording representations of the physical features unique to boys that reveal so much about their inner lives. He is not ashamed to admit this fascination while so many men pretend to deny it. This is an honest man who not only celebrates a certain kind of beauty that has been written and spoken about since antiquity and in every culture. His honesty is especially compelling at a time when the climate of opinion is dominated by the suspicion of

unacknowledged motives when a responsible man speaks of his interest in the well-being of boys.

It would be enough if Andersen had captured moments of aesthetic beauty, but he has also explored the very world in which boys and men have been alienated from each other and what the consequences of that are turning out to be for boys. His photographic essays explore the dark side of boys unable to speak their experience, especially the full range of their emotions and not only anger. Some images are so stark and frightening that one cannot linger over them. But we must. We must acknowledge the sadness as well as the rage of so many boys as well as the ludic, wild *thymos* they sport in their games and flights of eccentric exploration. There is no substituting for examining and living with his images, but it is important to read what Andersen says about the need for our culture to listen to boys as well as look at how they appear and what they do. He believes that there is perhaps a saving grace in the boy, whom he designates as the "primordial man," which I understand to mean not only the source of the man to come but in a certain sense also of the kind of human being that is still evolving. So there is beauty, something ominous that we must attend to, but also a powerful sense of promise in Andersen's images as well as in his very personal observations about the fascinating creatures he portrays in his photographs. We thank him for sharing both with our readers.

What can a visual artist bring to an academic journal on male studies? I can't even tell if I'm a man with an artist inside or an artist with a man inside. I don't even like being called an artist — I prefer to be a photographer — a man in control of the camera, in control of the elements. Being a photographer I'm not limited by facts and figures like doctors and professors. I'm only limited by what my mind can grasp, what my eyes can see and my camera can capture. Maybe I'm actually just the comic strip of this issue. But now that the space has been allocated and I have already wasted some of your time, let me try to explain what brought me here.

I do a kind of photography for which I have never found a suitable name. I dare not call it male photography because this will either be interpreted as classical erotica and nude art — photos of naked women in tasteful manner or not — or the opposite, the homoeroticism of photographers like Robert Mapplethorpe. Neither of them are even close to what I try to achieve. Even less dare I call it by its true name: boy photography. Doing so will most likely brand me as unwanted socially among people who don't know me very well, as it could be interpreted even worse than the first name. And far more wrong.

I am a photographer, living in Denmark, 38 years old and the proud and happy parent of a teenage boy. As a photographer, I work primarily with stock photos, secondarily with portraits. Stock photos are photos that are made with the intention to be used as illustrations in all possible contexts. When you see a photo in a magazine, a brochure, a newspaper or on a website, it is very often a photo that was not made specifically for the publication, but purchased as a relatively inexpensive illustra-

tion from a stock photo agency. There are lots of photographers who make stock photos. We almost all have our different specialties — either in photographic expression or favorite motifs. My specialty is children and young people — in all situations and moments of life. Obviously I make many stock photos depicting ordinary, boring everyday events. Trivial photographs showing everything from brushing teeth, eating breakfast, going to school, doing homework and sleeping.

Last year I delivered a six-digit number of images to all kinds of publications, and my client list ranges from small newspapers and independent directors to large companies and international humanitarian organizations. This is not so much because of the many images of trivial daily events. This is to a larger extent due to my real passion: to portray the darker sides of children's and young people's lives. Their feelings, their inner struggles, their fantasy, terror, joy and fascination of big and small things in life. And especially the border areas where we find the social and mental disorders, and the damages caused by bullying, neglect and abuse, and when it leads to insanity, destruction, suicide and death.

It is often mentioned that my style and my stories have resemblances with the works of Norman Rockwell. I must honestly — ashamed — admit that I initially had no idea who he was. Later, after studying his work, I must also admit that there are many similarities, without however in any way claiming that I possess his creativity and great skills. When I humorously describe myself, I call myself Norman Rockwell's evil twin, because my work is often far more dark and dramatic than his.

When I some time ago was asked to write an article about my photographic work for this journal, I was of course very honored. I also immediately began to write. At first I wrote about art, masculinity in art and masculinity in a matriarchal society, but I realized that this was not the truth. At least not the whole truth. It was not the whole truth about who I really am and why I do what I do. I had to start over — not just once, but twice, until the text actually told the whole truth about why I do what I do and why boys take up the majority of my photographic production.

Most photographers can start the story of their photographic career with the first camera they got when they were 12 years old. I am no exception to that, but that's really not very interesting. To tell the truth about me as a photographer, why I ended up in this niche doing what I do, I also have to tell you how I became who I am. I'll stick to the short version, so I won't bore you to death along the way.

As a child I was an ordinary boy from an ordinary middle class family. I grew up with two older brothers and both my parents worked for the government. I was dutiful, I never flunked school, I was never late, I did my homework every day and I never made any trouble. I earned my pocket money by delivering newspapers, I used them wisely, I did not smoke, I did not drink and I only had friends whom my parents also accepted. This was expected of me, and I delivered. I was hardly the best looking boy in the class nor a great seducer of girls. Even less was I the best on the football field. I was, however, one of the smart kids. I spent my time at the library and not on the football field, if I didn't spend my time in the rather big laboratory that I'd made in the basement.

Eventually even geeky boys forget about being boys and grow into men. It was clear very early that I should continue to university in pursuit of an academic career in chemistry and computer sci-

ence. Everything turned out as expected until one day I wanted to attend another university. Because of the break in my studies, and a government policy that young people under 25 should not be unemployed and not studying, I was sent to work temporarily in a kindergarten. I had the opportunity to say no, but I've never been afraid of challenges, although the idea of having to work with children actually scared me.

It scared me because it was completely unknown territory. I had never dealt with small children. As the youngest child in my own family I had not had any experiences of caring for younger siblings, and I had never had occasion to see children as anything other than disgusting and annoying. Not unlike how many other boys feel about small children. It was not cool to work with children — this was something women do. Men are supposed to invent, explore and conquer the world.

I was 19 years old when I had my first day in the kindergarten — for the second time of my life. It's actually half my life ago, and yet I remember that day as one of the most important days of my life. Not so much what happened in the kindergarten that day, but how I felt when I got home. I was unspeakably tired, but when I went to take a nap, it was with a sense of joy, a sense of importance that I had never experienced in my life. I had a day in the kindergarten where I was not only a rarity as a man, but also by far the youngest of the adults, and I immediately became a big hit among the kids, and the one who could both push the swings, fight for fun, play a little ball and sit on the couch and read stories, while a handful of children were fighting about who could be most popular with me. Already at that moment I knew something that would take months before I told others. I knew I was sold. I had found a part that was missing in my life. I knew that children were going to take up a large part of my future.

To tell the world as a man that you actually like to work with children is not easy. It is not very masculine. In a world where it is easy to be suspected of being a pedophile, it's even harder to tell. However, there are fortunately still many men who choose this path, despite the obvious risks.

Thus my life took an unexpected turn. I continued to work in the kindergarten for over a year, I became a passionate scout leader, which gave me the opportunity to work with older kids too, and I began to participate in various types of social work for children. I continued along the path and got a degree in child care and was especially interested in psychology, and psychological and social problems have been my primary interest and focus since then.

As a man in an environment dominated by women you meet a certain indulgence. It is not expected that we live up to their standards of what the rules should be and how children should be treated. We can use this to the children's benefit, however, and it gives us an opportunity in many cases to raise the bar slightly when it comes to noise and the amount of chaos that will be accepted and how wild the games can be. For "boys will be boys" and it is generally accepted with a shrug by female colleagues. It also allows men employed in institutions to give the necessary space for the children — especially boys — who naturally are much more physically oriented in their activities and where both the activity and noise levels are often much higher.

Men — boys — are generally not very patient. I discovered that I'm naturally gifted with a very great patience and great perseverance when it comes to working with children. I soon found

out that these skills gave me a great advantage when working with children with issues such as ADHD. I also discovered that these children, especially boys with deeper problems and difficulties, were the ones I had a special weakness for. I could read them. I could see the small changes in their face when trouble was coming. I understood them into their deepest feelings. I could talk to them without being judgmental, could be silent when necessary, tirelessly and persistently waiting, and could be a safe zone when they would open up to what was inside them. Over the years it became evident to me that this was going to be the true goal of my life, and it has since given me the opportunity to work with boys with all kinds of problems from trivial speaking problems, inferiority complexes, eating disorders and ADHD to much harder problems such as schizophrenia, autism and suicidal thoughts.

During the process I photographed. Only for fun, but experienced often to get high praise from the children's parents for my ability to catch small and big moments in everyday life, which of course was an encouragement. This was not what launched my more professional work in photography though. That part was initiated when I was working on a website for a social project I was involved with. On this website I needed stock photos of children who looked abandoned, lonely and sad, but I discovered that the range of such images was small and the quality poor. It has never been difficult for me to spot opportunities, and it was soon a goal for me to fill this gap in the photo agencies' archives. I actually soon considered it my duty to fill this gap. This was the start of my work as a producer of stock photos and it quickly turned into a larger production since the first models had signed up.

I am a man — a boy. I am fascinated by the things that boys have always been fascinated by. I like war movies, action heroes, weapons, zombies, aliens and Batman. I can laugh at boyish jokes, read comics and I like to play with fire. I compared penises with the other boys when I was a kid, built hidden places for our secret club, fantasized about strange events and expeditions in the nearby woods and ran around in a Superman costume. Just like most other boys. I've also been through all puberty problems and looked at muscles — or what was supposed to be muscles — in the mirror, wondering if other people thought that I smelled bad, discovered too late that I had something that looked like a mustache, and in silence worried about proportions of every limb. Like most other boys. I've also been afraid without daring to tell anyone, I've missed my parents at a summer camp without daring to cry and was afraid they would die without having someone to share this absurd fear with. I have also had secrets, like writing stories and novels, without daring to tell anyone, because it is not very masculine, when you're only 14 years old and a boy, to admit that you have something going on inside. There are not many guys who will reveal that they actually like to be creative in different ways. Women will never be able to fully understand these things. They will never completely understand why boys' tacit interaction can be just as close and important as their own less tacit interaction. They will never understand that boys fighting for fun, socializing around violent computer games and apparent superficiality about things important to girls is compensation for something that is actually as intimate as the girls' intimate relationships. Intimacy in a manner that is legitimate for boys so they can still see themselves as masculine in a world that expects them to be masculine.

Women will never truly understand why we don't care about washing hands, why we have the urge to climb the tallest trees and why we constantly confront death. To master it — and some-

times fail to do so. They will never fully understand why pure strength means so much to us and why we are afraid that there will be cracks in our carefully constructed facade. Just as we men will never fully understand the challenges and experiences that women go through on their journey from girl to woman. We can relate to them, we can acknowledge their existence and accept them, but we will never know how they feel and look from the inside.

I make photos of both girls and boys of all sizes and ages for my stock photo archive. My own experience as a boy and my professional work with boys, is undoubtedly why the boys' world — their daily lives, imagination, feelings and problems — take up the vast majority of my photographic production. I know how they feel, I know how they look when they feel and I know how they try to hide the fact that they feel. It has somehow grown beyond pure commercial interest. It has become a mission in search of myself, looking for what being a male is all about.

One of my favorite quotes is the famous one from Plato: "Of all the animals, the boy is the most unmanageable." That is true in so many ways, even though it's an understatement. I think they are not only the most unmanageable of all the animals, but also by far the most complex one.

One of the exciting features of boys is their undeniable over-representation in almost all disorders related to the mind. How and why may remain a mystery to science, just making the minds and emotions of boys and men so much more interesting for me to deal with, as it has been for many artists over the years. With an interest in the psyche of men and boys, and several projects trying to illustrate various mental and social disorders, boys' brains are indeed a pure treasure trove of mysteries. From lively and colorful fantasy and imagination, untamed genius, ingenuity and excessive omnipotence. From instinctive forces and denial of death to short circuits and the darkest madness. An uninterrupted source of inspiration for artists and philosophers, and often a part of their own inevitable fate.

To know how boys look when they feel has certainly become my most important skill over time. Both when it comes to my actual work with children, but especially when browsing and selecting photos among hundreds of thousands of candidates over the years.

Most of my photos are based on facial expressions. Obviously exaggerated, silly expressions, but my real fascination with facial expressions is the subtle expressions. The small details in the eyes, mouth and eyebrows that can - with more impact than any other tool — determine the message of a photo. Tiny nuances that determine whether a photo works or not. My models are selected not only for their looks. Our aesthetic ideals are different for children than for adults. The younger children are involved, the larger a portion of them are candidates to serve as models, as freckles, prominent ears and other wrong proportions are seen more as charming traits than as an aesthetic error. I have, however, mostly selected my models specifically for their ability to produce the expressions I'm looking for. The intense, deep expressions that make a big impact on the viewer, where the meaning and the feeling from looking at it is unambiguous and simultaneously true and from the heart. Most of my models I work with for years. I act as their instructor and have known many of them since they were quite young. Thus I know both their different skills in expression, but over time I also get an insight into their own psyche and the conceptual world they understand, can familiarize themselves with and can express through their facial expressions and gestures. This is a great help when

I need to select images. Any scene can be photographed dozens of times. My task is subsequently among other things to find exactly the right image. The photo that tells the story best. Here my own experience as a boy is priceless. When I feel the same inside as the boy you see I have found the right photo. And I'm rarely in doubt.

I don't just work with children. I also work a lot with their parents. My work involves much communication with parents, so there is never any doubt about what I'm doing and why. Everything must be based on trust and full insight into what is going on. This means of course that they browse through all the photos I take. I have seen countless times that parents — especially mothers — are deeply amazed and fascinated by what expressions I can produce with their boys and what feelings I can get them to show. Expressions they have never seen before. I ask them if they've looked thoroughly.

For it is that which is true. The emotions and expressions should not be invented with the boys. Although they may never show them openly at home or to friends, they know them very well. All boys can play-act and make expressions and mimics. The only requirement is that they are given a safe zone where it is safe to do and an opportunity where it is allowed, and a little expert guidance in making it to perfection. This I can never achieve fully the first hour or the first time I make photos of them. It's hard to stand in the spotlight in front of a camera and have to express deep feelings. It is easier to start with silly expressions — to be clown is a secure base for a boy. It gets better the second time and third time. As they slowly get used to being able to stand in front of a camera and express emotions and live through situations that might be embarrassing to show to friends and family. It is my experience that when they first see themselves on a book cover, a CD album or in an article, then it all of a sudden is much more legitimate, something they can share with others, boast about — which ultimately makes them more confident and genuine in front of the camera.

Sometimes I devote hours to practice expressions. Then I set up a mirror where they can see themselves while we try to orchestrate different emotions. My experience is that though the boys might know all emotions by themselves, they have a much harder time detecting the signals and symbolism in small variations of their facial expressions. It is probably part of the reason that boys tend to be violent towards each other and easily get in trouble — that they find it difficult to read the danger signals in each other's facial expressions because they have not learned how different emotions look at themselves. Ask a boy to look angry or be sad, and he will first give you an exaggerated or silly expression that is far from reality and closer to comedy. It also happens in front of the mirror before we slowly practice how it actually looks in real life. Then we give some of the expressions names, so it's easier later to describe what expression I want them to do. It takes practice to make expressions that look genuine, that show a true emotion with impact. Some have natural talent. Most others can learn it.

But why is it so hard for boys to show the feelings they obviously have? Because they have grown up in a world where the masculine ideal is that you don't. You don't expose yourself to your peers, tell your deepest secrets or show that you are afraid or sad. You show only the feelings associated with masculinity — anger, rage, superiority and dominance. This has been the cultural ideal since the first humans. Thus for many boys these are the only emotions they know how to express and thus are the only ones being expressed, even when completely different feelings are there. Many

boys grow up in a world dominated by women. Single mothers and female teachers, and maybe some men who have been emotionally destroyed by the same cultural expectations as they are themselves being consumed by. They don't necessarily meet men who can show them that it's okay for men to show emotion. Who can tell them that men share many characteristics with women, but that they also have many features that their female-dominated world prefer to suppress.

Boys lack male role models who can show them alternatives to culturally accepted masculinity. We must not deny the culturally accepted masculine feelings, we should not try to suppress who we are, and make anger and domination and other classic masculine feelings forbidden feelings. If we do so we will betray ourselves, betray our own biology and try to overrule the forces that actually brought humanity to the stage where it is today. We will not succeed in such betrayals. We should not try to turn boys into women, but be good role models to show that it is also not just okay and acceptable, but actually expected, that we show other sides as well.

Even though boys will continue to grow up in a world of ideals rooted in culture and will continue to grow up among other boys, where they are brutally forced to suppress parts of their personality, I also see hope for major changes ahead. In fact, I believe that we are on the edge of a small revolution that will change the opinion and ideals of what defines the sexes. Paradoxically, not initiated by adults or by a belief that there is a need for a radical shift. No, initiated by the children themselves. The technological revolution, which obviously is the natural habitat for boys, has over the past decade given children and young people a voice they never had before. Where children's culture for centuries has been interpreted and reproduced through adult eyes — in the media, in literature, film and visual arts — the new generations suddenly have access to tools that enable them to tell their own story themselves. And they master these tools so well that they actually have long taken over the real domination of the Internet and the social media. Think of Internet memes, phenomena like rage comics, strange acronyms, viral videos and the like spreading across the Internet like a firestorm. They are created by young people, and affects adults' use of the Internet and social media much more than we actually want to admit. Social media have become the young people's media.

Through my contacts in different social media, I have had the opportunity over the years to study young people's use of the media, how they communicate, what they communicate and how they interact with each other. And this is where I see the great changes that give me hope that especially boys are discovering that boys are allowed to have in them much more than was previously accepted. I don't just see lots of boys who tell trivial oneliners about what they do, share photos from their everyday lives and write smart remarks to each other. I also see guys who slowly — in one small part at a time — show what they are really passionate about, how they feel, that they are sad about losing a girlfriend, daring to show that they have written a poem, have been creative with a pencil and reveal that they don't just listen to hard techno music. And they take the risk, one small piece at a time, to put videos on Youtube, where they play and sing to the world, inspired by the many others who have done this successfully. Undoubtedly social media is also about pretending, but even though not everything comes from the heart, try to observe what happens the next time you're on Facebook and see a kid — a boy — upload a new profile photo. I can't recall that I or others in my childhood got so many kind comments and heart icons from my friends at any time. Facebook is not the entire world and other conditions still dominate outside the safe environment of a screen

and a keyboard. Yet it will make an impression on these young people, it will make a difference over time — and I am quite sure that it is a difference that will be reflected in future generations' views of themselves and each other.

I did not grow up in a time where I got such opportunities to tell the secrets. Even at the age of 38 years, I still do not want to show or tell others that I'm actually crying at the end of *Titanic*. Because it is not masculine. It's not acceptable. We rather like to end the film by criticizing Leonardo DiCaprio. Just as boys often do with Justin Bieber when they hear his music. It's not cool and macho to admit that you can actually see that he looks good or that you would like to be able to sing like that. Because if you do, you just give the other boys an opportunity to call you gay. And that is in fact the greatest threat to one's masculinity. The fear that others may find a reason to call you gay. The fear that your father will suspect you of being gay. There is hardly anything a boy fears more than that. It has been the ultimate threat to our masculinity, and it remains that. Thus we learn quickly in our childhood, to have a facade. A poker face, that reveals nothing about what is going on inside. This probably explains why most poker players are men. We have practiced the expressionless poker face without any revelations our entire life.

This has been part of my goal with my photos. At first my photos are probably considered harsh, brutal and often morbid, but I try to get them to tell you more than just that. To show the full spectrum of emotions in boys and men. Show that there is much more in play than just the classic masculine ideals. That men and boys can be afraid, loving, sad, vulnerable and anxious and that behind a nearly expressionless and aloof face invisible struggles are taking place and deep thoughts are being thought, that only other men and boys understand, but never tell about. I try to show that emotions exist even inside the warrior, the bully and the school killer, a nearly invisible brushstroke across the face that reveals a frightened, crying and sensitive boy who just can't manage to tell it otherwise.

Even today, enlightened and confident about what I do, it's hard for me to describe what I do as art. Although I do not reject it, it touches something inside me if I use that term. Something I don't like. Art is feminine. Even though every artistic discipline has been dominated by males since the dawn of mankind, art is still not considered to be among the culturally accepted masculine ideals. Stereotypes admittedly, but since it expresses a connection with your emotions, it associates you with the classic characteristics of what women do. It is much easier as a man to say that I "make pictures." This constitutes a mastery of a technical discipline, being the commander of light, freezing the world for a moment. We feel much better with this. Controlling the elements is masculine.

I am often in doubt about as to whether my pictures are more a search for my own identity than just a deliberate exploration of life. About whether the artistic aspect, the technical aspect and the commercial aspect is just an excuse for actually searching for my own nature. I can't deny that it is. I would even go so far as to say that it is actually most likely. Not just a search for my own identity, but an opportunity, wrapped up as small technical achievements with a camera that I use to reveal thin slices of myself. Slowly telling the world who I am. Telling that I actually have emotions without ever revealing them directly.

There may be moments where I'm not sure if I really have something to tell others — if there

is anything in my photos they can possibly use. And then it happens that I fall into conversation with old friends I meet in town or at a party, people I might only have had brief contact with through social media. And during the smalltalk, where we remember old days, they start talking about some of my photos they have seen, and let me know that there were indeed some that made an impression on them. Not just the fun, quirky or technically beautiful images, but also that they have been fascinated and touched by some of the stories — by the emotions. There are also days each week where I receive emails — mostly from men — who want to tell me that they see a part of their own childhood in my photos. It is most often childhoods full of insecurity, violence and broken families. The emails that have made the biggest impression on me are the ones where they tell how it has given them courage to start sharing their stories and their feelings with others. These are the moments when I am again convinced that my photos are not just navel-gazing introspection of my own twisted soul.

In recent years, showcasing my photos has given me a lot of positive feedback from people. Of course, much is negative. I find it interesting that the most “violent” attacks on me always come from men. It can, of course, be caused by women being more likely to simply ignore images they do not like with a shrug, while men are quicker to get off and use big words. Nevertheless I consider the frequency and intensity of this as a sign that I might have touched something that they do not want to be touched. When I confront them, it is never possible for them to tell me what my crime exactly was.

It is probably here that my own masculinity, my own boyishness, is most evident in my photos: I’m not afraid to provoke. Not just for the sake of provocation. If that were the case I could just say stupid things regardless of whether they were true or not. No, more like provocation to challenge some people’s somewhat staid opinion of what is right and wrong — because I think that is interesting to explore.



The photo above is a really good example of this. Everywhere this has been exhibited it has led to vigorous comment. The great majority positive and appreciative, but also much that is negative. And it is the negative that interests me most, because I think it's intriguing to explore the kind of mechanisms that cause people to react so strongly to such a photo. For that is exactly what it is: A photo — no more, no less. And it is patently obvious that it is staged and not taken a split second before a troubled kid left this world. This has produced reactions like being told that I am “sick in the head” and “should be thrown in jail” and that I “make a mockery of death.” Often followed by words not suitable for this journal. Pretty serious inferences when all I did was illustrate something that actually happens all too often. In reality.

There could be many reasons to reactions like these. People might be reminded of tragic experiences in the family. Perhaps it is rooted in religion. It might also be that they belong to the type of people who believe that graphic depiction of violence and death drives certain people to carry out such deeds, and therefore their protests are misguided concern. Whatever the reason, I find it very strange when people react negatively. Do they not read newspapers? Or is it simply that they're tired of reading these reports in newspapers? But why do they not address the problem instead of attacking the photographer who depicts it?

I have wondered for years and I can't claim to have uncovered the full explanation. I guess I'm just showing them a dark and probably almost forgotten corner of their own mind. All those who over the years have reacted negatively to any of my pictures have, where possible, received a personal response from me. A reply where I am probably surprisingly friendly and grateful for their time and opinions, and which probably takes the wind out of their sails. Then I ask whether their reaction is due to what the photo depicts, or the fact that I've created the photo. The answer is almost always the former, but then I have not yet received any sensible response when I ask why I should not be able to create an image of something which is part of our reality, like birds in trees or cows in a meadow.

After years of work with depicting the mind of boys and men, it is difficult to admit that you were wrong. That I have been looking in the wrong direction to find what I was really looking for. My photos have changed over the years, as I have had the opportunity to reflect on what it really is that I want to portray. The first years, my work focused on the suffering boy. Boys who are victims of inner demons that are suffered by them from the brutal treatment and cultural expectations of the outside world. Boys who can't show emotions, boys who are trapped by drugs, boys trying to scream, but who do it in a disgusting way. But it's not really the suffering boy who is interesting, although this is the most obvious thing to study. The suffering boy is only a symptom that something is suffering, that something has been locked up and can't appear in its proper form and shape. It is what is hidden behind the suffering that is actually interesting. My focus have shifted toward this, as it has slowly become more clear to me.

Let me describe an episode from a photoshoot this summer, where I one night brought one of the models to the beach to do some photos. The final photos should be of him standing fully dressed kneedeep in the water looking towards the sky. I asked him to go into the water, and his response was promptly: “Can I? Really? How far?” It made me laugh instantly. I think no one will argue that this is the true response of pure boyishness. Not worrying about anything, just living the moment.

You can see it in the boy's face — in the clarity of his eyes — when the opportunity is given. The sudden rush of excitement, the exploration of what can be done and achieved, the expectation of new experiences by entering the unknown, not by logical reasoning, but brought to the surface instantly by pure instinct.

Although we can probably quickly agree on a wide range of features that characterizes boys' behavior, it is still difficult to boil down into a single word we all understand the same way. It's probably wrong to expect that something as complex as a living being and the human mind can be described in a single word. How many pages does it take to describe love? And yet it will hardly be adequate. If even a single emotion defies description, it is of course human hubris to believe that a single word could describe the pure and unspoiled man. It is said that photos say more than a thousand words, and I am also strongly convinced that photographs will be a very useful tool to tell what defies description. To carry on with the worn out metaphors, the process for me is like peeling an onion. The man's — boy's — essence is to be found under many layers. Layers of emotional disabilities caused by cultural expectations, pent-up emotions, anger and hatred and as each layer is peeled off it becomes increasingly harder to see, stay focused and get deeper. In there is the archetypical man. Not the suffering boy, not the culturally defined archetypes, as we have already peeled off and thrown in the bin. No, here we find the archetypes that come to us in dreams, show their face in our inspiration, art, creativity and in the quest to understand who we really are — as men. Here we find the forces that drives boys' passion, curiosity and true belief in themselves as superior human beings. The forces that make them pursue goals that at first look foolish but will later be seen as true genius. The unadulterated spirit that enables them to live the moment. I have only managed to peel off the outer layers for the course of several years and it will take me years to get through the next. However, I am fully convinced that one day I will reach the core. That I will be able to depict the spiritedness, the pure energy of life, that is the true core of boys and men. The archetype above archetypes. You could call it libido, thymos, mortido and orgone. I call it the primordial man.



Jan H. Andersen is Danish photographer who specializes in children and young people's portraits, stock photos and commercial model work. He may be reached at jha@jhandersen.com

NEW MALE STUDIES: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL (NMS) IS AN OPEN ACCESS ONLINE INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION OF ISSUES FACING BOYS AND MEN WORLDWIDE. THIS JOURNAL USES OPEN JOURNAL SYSTEMS 2.3.4.0, WHICH IS OPEN SOURCE JOURNAL MANAGEMENT AND PUBLISHING SOFTWARE DEVELOPED, SUPPORTED, AND FREELY DISTRIBUTED BY THE PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE PROJECT UNDER THE GNU GENERAL PUBLIC LICENSE.

THIS ARTICLE HAS BEEN DOWNLOADED FROM [HTTP://NEWMALESTUDIES.COM](http://newmalestudies.com).