

MUSÉE PHOTO

NO. 23 CHOICES



Arne Svenson: *The Future Passed*

Musee Magazine
No. 23 Choices
April 2020

Aline Szapocznikow Arne Svenson Douglas Gordon Efram Zelony-Mindell Elko Yamazawa John Chamberlain Mark Lubell Robert Rauschenberg
Martha Rosler Matt Tyrnauer Nathaniel Mary Quinn Paul Mpagi Sepuya Thaddeus Ropac Vik Muniz Adrian Sonderegger + Jojakim Cortis
Andy Warhol Troy Brauntuch Anastasia Samoylova Clement Valla Jacoby Satterwhite Jessica Eaton Paolo Giolo Tabitha Soren Walead Beshty

ARNE SVENSON



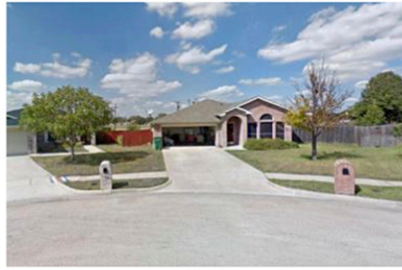
Portrait by Nina Subin. All images courtesy of the Artist. Following spread: Arne Svenson, *Seven months prior to death by firearm: boy, 15*, 2019.

ISABELLA KAZANECKI: *To start, how did you get into photography and what keeps you going?* **ARNE SVENSON:** I came to photography somewhat late. My background is in special education, and though I did take painting classes while I was working on my degree, I was not satisfied with the results. There was something missing, which I realized pretty early on was the framework of reality. I'm more of a renovator than a builder. I'm drawn to pre-existing conditions, tangible imagery that I can frame and bend to manifest my visions. After university, I worked for a while with developmentally disabled infants, which was great, but I felt creatively muzzled. So after a few years, I made the difficult decision to leave my job in California, move to NYC, and teach myself photography which, given my sensibilities, I figured was the most appropriate medium for me to pursue. I'm completely self-taught which, though arduous during the [on-going] learning process, has allowed me the freedom to create work somewhat free of derivation. What keeps me going is a good question – I ask myself that when I am laying in bed at 3AM trying to figure out why the image I worked on all day doesn't work. When the pieces fall into place its extraordinarily satisfying, at least until the next click of the camera. **ISABELLA:** *I'm interested in your current project, *The Future Passed*. Tell me about that.* **ARNE:** Horrified by the increasing incidents of children being killed by guns, I felt compelled to do a project/book addressing the issue. Much attention is given to the victims of mass/school shootings, and rightly so. However, an average of four children a day are killed by a gun. As a 17 year old in California is dying from being caught in a barrage of gang-related gunfire, a 2-year-old girl in Missouri is being shot by her father in a murder suicide and, simultaneously, an 11-year-old boy in Florida has found a loaded gun in the closet and is fatally shooting himself in the face. How does an artist portray the anguish and anger these incidents illicit? I made countless attempts at creating work that would grab the viewer and shake them into action, but everything I did just added to the screams of the times. My work was just another voice yelling into an echo hole of response. So I decided to whisper. Instead of portraying the victims, and their tragic stories, I chose to show only where the killings happened. But not "scene of the crime/incident" shots – instead my photographs are taken of the houses, parks, and streets prior to the child being shot. In *The Future Passed* there are no people, no cars, no scenes of life, just the house, apartment building or park where the child was killed. At first glance the photos look like real estate ads or surveyor photos—banal and harmless, a cross-section of where/how Americans live. But, when the viewer realizes that they depict a place where, in the near future, a child will be shot and killed, the houses, apartment buildings and parks quickly fall into the category of, in the words of Hannah Arendt, "terrifyingly normal." As in my other work, by presenting only *the place*, I am giving the viewer the opening sentence. It is the first paragraph of a narrative that they must complete on their own. But the inescapable fact in this narrative is that at least one child will be killed in each place we are viewing. It is a lot to expect of the viewer, and I am counting on their empathy. My hope is that by viewing where a preventable death will happen, the viewer will be galvanized to circumvent similar occurrences in the place next door. **ISABELLA:** *I believe you work with consistent themes. What would you say those are or would you disagree entirely?* **ARNE:** My series are divergent but connected; I'm forever trying to make the unimportant important and the





Arne Svenson, Eleven months prior to death by firearm: boy, 17., 2019



Arne Svenson, Four years, seven months prior to death(s) by firearm: boy, 8; girl, 6; boy, 4., 2019.



Arne Svenson, Two years, eight months prior to death by firearm: boy, 18., 2019.



Arne Svenson, One year prior to death by firearm: boy, 15., 2019



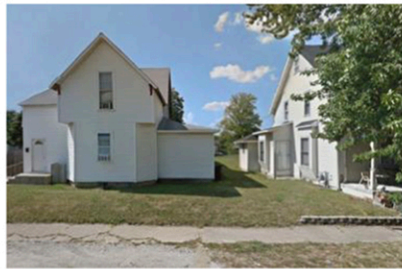
Arne Svenson, One month prior to death by firearm: boy, 15., 2019.



Arne Svenson, Seven years, three months prior to death by firearm: girl, 15., 2019.



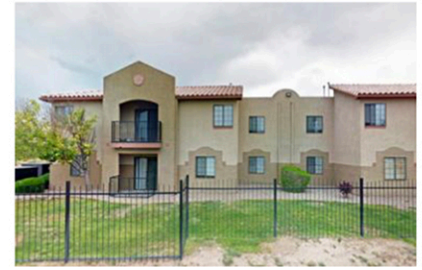
Arne Svenson, Six months prior to death by firearm: boy, 17., 2019.



Arne Svenson, Four years, three months prior to death by firearm: girl, 4., 2019.



Arne Svenson, Sixteen months prior to death by firearm: boy, 15., 2019.



Arne Svenson, Three years, three months prior to death by firearm: boy, 17., 2019.



Arne Svenson, Eight months prior to death(s) by firearm: girl, 4; boy, 2., 2019.



Arne Svenson, Three months prior to death by firearm: boy, 9., 2019.



Arne Svenson, One month prior to death(s) by firearm: boy, 6; girl, 4; boy, 3., 2019.



Arne Svenson, Two months prior to death by firearm: boy, 13., 2019.



Arne Svenson, Six months prior to death by firearm: girl, 2., 2019.



Arne Svenson, One year prior to death by firearm: boy, 6., 2019.

unseen seen. I see myself and my practice as a cross between a reporter and a lifeguard, either looking for the “decisive moment”, as in the *Neighbors* and *Workers* projects, or for a subject that is in need of resuscitation, like the forensic facial reconstruction(s) photos from the *Unspeakable Likeness* series. I also have a deep interest in the implied narrative, in providing the viewer with indicators and hints of the stories buried in the imagery. **ISABELLA:** *Your projects, Neighbors and Workers have been compared to work by Edward Hopper. Why do you think that is so?* **ARNE:** I think people have compared my work to Hopper because we both portray tableaux of solitude and aloneness in claustrophobic situations. Also, there is a voyeuristic aspect to both his work and mine. If you look closely, you will see a window in almost every painting by Hopper, and, in a number of series, my photographs have either been taken out a window and/or through one. The presence of a window in my work has, symbolically and literally, provided me with protection – a way to interact without having to experience the art of interaction. There are also similarities in that both Hopper’s work and mine act as narrative stimulators. We present the first visual sentence, the “once upon a time,” of a narrative and it is up to the viewer to complete the story. And I think we both have tried to capture what it is to be alone...what we look like when there are no witnesses present. Aesthetically, we both use raking light and a “nighttime palette,” colors that even in the day appear to be lit by the moon or some source of artificial light. **ISABELLA:** *I’ve recognized a widespread interest in the appropriation of pre-existing visual data, specifically from Google Maps, by artists. Was it a practical or an artistic choice to utilize this technology rather than photographing all the houses yourself? How do you make the visuals your own?* **ARNE:** I used pre-existing data, e.g. Google Street View, as *The Future Passed* source material for numerous reasons. The most salient being that I needed images of where children died prior to them dying. The only way to do this was to take a screenshot of places that had been photographed prior to the incident (Street Views are dated). I was also intrigued by the 8-feet-in-the-air POV of the Street View camera and its unerring objectivity. These factors, plus the knowledge of what will occur in these places gives the photographs a visceral sense of “wrongness,” of being suspect and suspicious under their cloak of banal complacency. When I would find an image, say of a house where a child was shot, I would take a screenshot and then adjust it to my suit my aesthetics and the project concept. The photographs I used in *The Future Passed* look like I took them. They have the composition, color and “flatness” that I look for when I’m actually taking a photograph in the real world. If the series had called for me to travel around the country photographing scenes where incidents of shooting deaths occurred I would have done so. But using the internet, I could time travel to a place before death and never leave the confines of my studio. **ISABELLA:** *In your series, Unspeakable Likeness and Prisoners, you exhibit an interest in criminal justice. Prisoners is even being included in a group show up right now at ApexArt, The Criminal Type about criminology and mugshots. Would you say this project was related to or informed The Future Passed?* **ARNE:** Much of my work does have to do with the criminal justice system, but I think *The Future Passed* was more informed by my former professional life. As I stated before, I was trained to be and became a special education teacher. I worked specifically with developmentally disabled children between the ages of zero to three. Working in the trenches, so to speak, with these kids made me hyper-empathetic to their

Arne Svenson, Opposite: Seven months prior to death by firearm: boy, 17., 2019; Following spread: Three months prior to death by firearm: girl, 6., 2019.

situations and keenly aware of their vulnerabilities, their helplessness. When I read about children being killed by guns, whether it be murder, suicide or accident, I see the faces of the children I worked with. Let me add that the research that goes into creating *The Future Passed* is extremely difficult and haunts my days. Hour after hour I’m reading about parents shooting children, children shooting children and children shooting themselves. Although I’m only showing the place where the child died, I feel it incumbent to know the full story of each case I illustrate. But, I try to maintain my focus on where the incidents happened—to follow the trail of these deaths en masse is paralyzing, and I must compartmentalize in order to finish the project and book. **ISABELLA:** *Many of your pictures are highly aestheticized, sometimes even to the extent that they are mistaken as paintings. But then in a project like Botanicals or Faggots, for example, you lean towards a more encyclopedic style. You’ve mentioned the photos in The Future Passed resemble those in a real estate catalogue. Can you speak to the function of these stylistic choices?* **ARNE:** Naturally my aesthetic is applied to all I produce. Nevertheless, my work does look very divergent. This is because I let the subject determine the process and final outcome. In many cases I take a taxonomic approach, as in the *Faggots*, *Botanicals*, *Unspeakable Likeness* and *The Future Passed* projects. At other times, as in the *Neighbors* and *Workers* series, I am taking individual shots that relate to the others in the series but in a non-encyclopedic way. They are non-categorical and don’t rely on the other images in the series for their narrative. You mention the painterly aspect of the *Neighbors* and *Workers* images. This, I admit, was something I didn’t plan but that revealed itself as the series progressed. But I trust my photographer’s eye and it usually leads me somewhere I need to go, usually to a place I didn’t even know was a destination.



