



Centraal Museum, Utrecht, Netherlands,
Färgfabriken, Stockholm, Sweden

The trick of the half-truth is turning belief into knowledge. With shrewdly ambiguous stories like *Rebecka* (2004) and *The Viewer* (2005), which intertwine art, sexuality and power, Miriam Bäckström has left us infatuated with the truth about half-truths. Her most recent intonation of this theme is *Kira Carpelan* (2007), a documentary film. Two years ago, Bäckström invited Kira Carpelan – a graduate student in her final year at art school who had worked as an editor on some of Bäckström's films – to create her then-forthcoming exhibition at Färgfabriken. Assuming the role of producer, Bäckström assured the project's financing and allowed Carpelan full access to her art, herself and her professional network. The single proviso was that, whatever the outcome, Carpelan's exhibition would be titled 'Kira Carpelan by Miriam Bäckström'. Carpelan accepted the invitation and decided to make a film; for her part, Bäckström began shooting a documentary of Carpelan's film project.

Once set in motion, the universe Bäckström devised for the making of *Kira Carpelan by Miriam Bäckström* created a reality trapped between contradiction and ambiguity; and the routine motive for making exhibitions mastitized. Would Carpelan take control of Bäckström's ambition, exploiting it to realize her own? Or was Bäckström's aim to discharge Shakespeare's line from *The Winter's Tale* (1609) – 'Oh, she's warm! If this be magic, let it be art' – and as her title teased, *create Carpelan*? As a young artist, Carpelan's ambition is tied up with destiny, while Bäckström's is a matter of

history. And, as Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle or Geppetto and Pinocchio can tell you, history and destiny rarely arrive at the truth hand in hand.

Carpelan's film for Färgfabriken, *Untitled* (2007), is a sparse affair about two women – childhood friends – going through the motions of one of their occasional reunions; held this time in a suffocating hotel room. The exceptional Swedish actress Rebecka Hemse plays Lillith, while Bäckström has been cast as Rosa. We are meant to understand that Lillith's feelings of entitlement charge her with a surfeit of brusque opinions, while the docile Rosa serves her as deferential confidant. Lillith is stymied by how unresponsive life has become and she is gearing-up to blame anyone but herself. She taunts as if to bait Rosa: 'Do I think it matters what is real and true? Do I think it makes a difference if you believe or know?' but she is only baiting herself. Rosa could reach out to her old friend, but emotionally she's a million miles away; their friendship won't be resurrected. Carpelan's intermittent blackouts between disjointed vignettes methodically stifle anything approaching a plot. Her film, so minimally constructed, is over before it has begun.

Titled *Kira Carpelan* (2007), Bäckström's documentary premiered at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht (as part of the city's 'Impact' art festival) just as Carpelan's film closed at Färgfabriken in Stockholm. It is the most defiant of Bäckström's films; as a 'documentary' it is pure pretence. If this makes it her most risky film, it is also her strongest. Bäckström's film doesn't document Carpelan's, it doesn't even comment on it. Instead, Bäckström pushes back from the sophisticated ambience of her earlier films to recount the

Miriam Bäckström
Kira Carpelan
2007
Film still

allegorical tale of Kira Carpelan, a young artist who lives in a world where Jennifer Hudson can go from the Dunbar Vocational Career Academy in Chicago to *American Idol* to Academy Award winner faster than you can say: 'Dreams can come true, it can happen to you.' In such a society, Bäckström wonders what currency the documentary form could have? In her allegory, the successful (and therefore powerful) artist is put at Carpelan's disposal; her 'success mentor' (played by the noted curator Anders Kreuger) *loves* networking and helping to map her destiny; celebrated movie stars *want* to be in her films; urbane Konsthall directors *listen* when she talks; and art world denizens take her *seriously*. Conventional allegories use fictional figures and actions to reach toward truths about human existence, but, willfully insubordinate, Bäckström selects half-truths teetering between belief and knowledge.

Snippets of documentary-esque footage taken on Carpelan's set freckle the film, giving faint account of her directorial approach, while the balance of the picture is well-harnessed to Bäckström's own style. Apparent in her style is the relaxed affair Bäckström's actors have with her script; it always sets them up for the inevitable slip from *cinéma vérité* to being actors winging it back into reality, while the camera rolls. Off camera, Bäckström fires a question at Carpelan; the younger artist's eyes dart down toward the script before gazing back into the lens to answer: 'I don't want to be creditable'. This scene (it is one of many like it), couched within Bäckström's mocking documentary, creates the perfect *pious fraud*, the most infamous of half-truths.

Ronald Jones

Miriam Bäckström / Kira Carpelan