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Why Is This Man Going to Jump off the MCA?



By Tori Marlan

CHICAGO READER
CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY | THIS ISSUE IN FOUR SECTIONS
FRIDAY, JUNE 10, 2005 | VOLUME 34, NUMBER 37

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Chicago Blues Festival
Special pullout in Section 3



PLUS

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Trestle, from Skarbakka's series "The Struggle to Right Oneself." On Tuesday he'll jump off the roof of the Museum of Contemporary Art.

To Leap Without Faith

Growing up fundamentalist, photographer Kerry Skarbakka was deprived of free will. But now he's pursuing it in its purest form.

By **Tori Marlan**

On June 14 Kerry Skarbakka plans to jump off the roof of the Museum of Contemporary Art. He's not trying to kill himself—in the name of art the Brooklyn-based photographer has also thrown himself down stairs, leaped off cliffs, porches, and overpasses, and flipped backward off the rungs of a ladder. His life-size color photos of these stunts—sometimes he's supported by climbing gear he later digitally erases, sometimes not—have landed him on the covers of *Aperture* and *Foto +*. In October 2004, *ArtReview* picked him as one of ten outstanding young photographers from around the world who "look certain to shape the medium in years to come."

Though the 34-year-old Skarbakka—who doesn't have health insurance—has suffered a broken rib, a sprained ankle, and a thousand scrapes for his photos, he says, "I'm not scarred up like one would think. My scars are all mental."

Skarbakka is familiar with the feeling of having no control, of flailing about unmoored, of twisting and turning to find the right position. "The photos are a good representation of who he is and the tension he feels internally," says Tracy Kwit, his fiancée.

Skarbakka's parents divorced shortly after he was born in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1970, and he moved to the D.C. area with his mother and older brother, Brett. A few years later his mother remarried.

A defining moment in the family's history occurred when Brett, at 14, went to a church service with a friend and came home claiming that the preacher had miraculously made one of his legs grow, correcting a limp the family had supposedly overlooked. Taken by Brett's story, the family quickly embraced Christian fundamentalism. They moved to a remote farm community in Tennessee, where Skarbakka's stepfather's computer skills were

continued on page 28

Skarbakka



Skarbakka demonstrates some of his tricks

continued from page 1

irrelevant and the family lived off the land in poverty.

And so at age seven, Skarbakka found himself speaking in tongues. He witnessed faith healings at tent revivals and in storefronts and basements. People he knew told of encounters with the devil. Friends of the family claimed they'd seen evil beasts lurking in trees. One woman took refuge in their home after flying dishes and slamming cabinets made hers uninhabitable. A friend at Bible camp once let out a horrifying guttural scream and scratched his girlfriend's face. He was possessed by Satan, the camp staff explained, warning the terrified kids that they could be next.

Skarbakka says his upbringing left him with "no constructive information about how to deal with life." Before making important decisions his mother and stepfather prayed and then flipped a coin. His mother answered his questions and responded to his concerns through song. He was taught not to look inward, he says, but to look to God. He didn't need to know himself; he just had to do what he was told and be a good Christian.

At night Skarbakka would lie awake wondering if he was good enough, burdened by the question of whether he'd be admitted to heaven if he died before morning. Thoughts of hell tormented him. "I was afraid to go to sleep up until I was 17, 18," he says.

Fear and anxiety pervaded his childhood. So did violence and death. The family raised farm animals they slaughtered and ate. "Our clotheslines were strung up with flopping carcasses of beheaded, skinned animals," he says. One day Skarbakka's parents sent him to deal with a deformed rabbit whose teeth protruded so far it couldn't eat. "We had shotguns,"

he says. "I was given a hammer."

Skarbakka's stepfather was a six-foot-four, 280-pound Vietnam vet with shrapnel wounds and a Purple Heart. He was militant about discipline and control. In his view women were to be subservient and a fitting punishment for children who misbehaved or even so much as complained was manual labor—ridding the garden of every rock, for example. He kept many different translations of the Bible around, says Skarbakka, and he read them all. "He was very authoritative and made others crumble under his knowledge and his interpretation."

Skarbakka says his brother and stepfather fought terribly, and that Brett was forced out of the home when Skarbakka was ten.

In the summers Skarbakka spent time in Minnesota and Wisconsin with his biological father, Jim, whose model of parenting couldn't have been more different. While his stepfather's mantra was "No Christian son of mine doesn't do what I say," Skarbakka says his father's was "No son of mine doesn't drink beer." He'd take the teenage Skarbakka into a liquor store and ask, "What's your bottle?"

Skarbakka says his father found other ways to undermine his fundamentalist upbringing—for example, "shaking his fist at me at the age of 13, trying to get me laid."

At home in rural Tennessee, Skarbakka felt isolated. He raised cows (13 in all), pigs, and three donkeys, birthed animals, and went to church or church-related activities four times a week. He did get to see some of the world as a teen missionary, however, traveling to Portugal and Italy to build dorms for church camps. And during summers in Wisconsin, where his father had a charter fishing business, he fell in with goth kids and started listen-

ing to new-wave, industrial, and punk bands, drinking, and having sex. "I let him be on his own," Jim says. "I wasn't strict with him. He didn't have any curfews." And yes, "if he wanted to have a couple of beers, I didn't mind."

With exposure to influences beyond his small Christian community, Skarbakka cultivated a rebellious look, wearing makeup, dyeing his hair orange, getting a number of piercings, and wearing "the biggest, gaudiest jewelry I could find," scrubbing himself clean in the school bathroom at the end of each day. He started smoking pot at 15 and sought out fellow students he says he "could be more candid and less godly around."

But the conflict between acting on his desires and against the teachings of his church led him into deep depressions. When he lost his virginity at the age of 15,

his black mood lasted a month. Suicidal thoughts, he says, "were always in the back of my mind."

Skarbakka says he was known among his peers as an artist. His brother, who was also artistic, had often put pencils in his hands when he was a child and encouraged him to draw. Skarbakka was theatrical too. He liked to dance and sing and make faces. People told him he should be an actor. But his future wasn't something he spent much time pondering. He says his only real ambition was to flee rural Tennessee: "I could never remember wanting to do anything except get out."

Skarbakka's escape came through the military, though he says his mother and stepfather forced him to enlist. For most of his two years in Olympia, Washington, with a girlfriend and kept himself "bumped

up" on crystal meth, which the army didn't test for. He also took LSD and other recreational drugs. In his hallucinations, he was often strung over fire pits in hell, demons poking him with pitchforks. "Time and time again I'd revisit these places until I became desensitized to them," he says.

The drugs kept him from reflecting too much on the mixed messages of his childhood, but he still grappled with anxiety about straying from the flock. "I was heading pretty much off the deep end," he says, "but I always knew that there was something there that would keep me from truly being the junkie. In the back of my mind was, What if you are wrong about your faith? You're walking away from it, but what if you are wrong? And if you're wrong, you pay the ultimate price. I was always wondering if I was doing the wrong thing—what if I die now and the rapture, the apocalypse, is all correct?" Despite his heavy drug use, he says, his upbringing had conditioned him to follow orders and fall in line. "I knew how to play the game," he says. He wanted an honorable discharge when he'd done his time, and he got one.

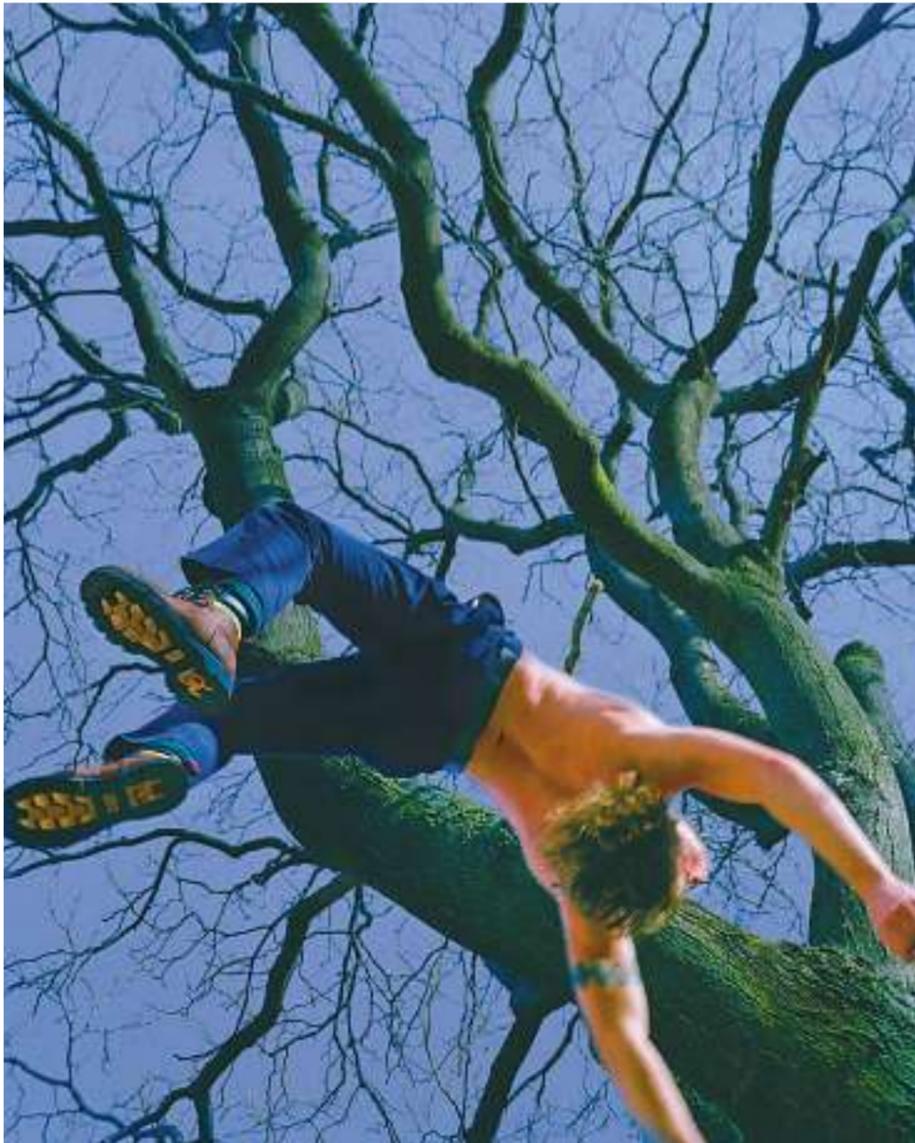
After that, Skarbakka attended the University of Washington, where he majored in studio arts with an emphasis on sculpture. His brother eventually joined him in Seattle, and the two became close, spending a good deal of time together outdoors, hiking, rock climbing, and mountain biking. During these trips, Skarbakka says, "We would be depressed together, talk about collaborating on art projects, and figure out why we were so fucked-up."

During a rock-climbing trip when Skarbakka was in his mid-20s, he extended his rope too far. "I was stuck," he says. "I couldn't go up, I couldn't go down." A strong wind blew, and below him,



Kerry Skarbakka
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CHARLES ESHELMAN

Skarbakka's *Bluetree* and *Stairs*

about 700 feet down, a choppy river was giving kayakers a rough ride. "All I had to do was lean forward and that would have been it," he says. "I would have fallen." He remembers thinking, "I wonder what happens," and then wondering whom he could call out to for help. "God didn't enter the picture once," he says—and that's when he realized he was "finally out of the clutch of Christianity." He managed to communicate his predicament to another rock climber, who communicated it to his brother, who grabbed another set of ropes and came to his rescue.

The next time Skarbakka contemplated falling from great heights was in September 2001, when he was living in Logan Square and studying photography in grad school at Columbia College. A friend called that morning and told him to turn on the television. He did, just in time to see the South Tower get hit. Watching the World Trade Center burn, Skarbakka realized with horror that people were jumping from the buildings. "I wanted to be able to respond intelligently, conceptually, responsibly to what was going on," he says. If he couldn't, he figured, it was time to "make an exodus from the world of making art."

In the ensuing days and weeks, the image of people free-falling from the towers kept returning to his mind. "They had released themselves completely," he says. "They left the constructs of society, they left their family, they left

their bills they had to pay. They left everything but the choice of what they were going to do in their final moments." They had simultaneously abandoned and exercised control.

The jumpers became a catalyst for a photographic exploration of the idea of control, an important factor in Skarbakka's own life and one he believed both spoke to the human condition and had political resonance. "[B]eyond the basic laws that govern and maintain our equilibrium," he writes in an artist's statement, "we live in a world that constantly tests our stability," be it through "war and rumors of war, issues of security, effects of globalization, and the politics of identity."

"Our choices are never really our own," he says, "except in the final moment: whether to jump or go down with the ship."

But beyond the decision to jump is the question of what happens afterward, once you're past the point of no return, and that too was of metaphorical interest to Skarbakka. "You've got a couple of options," he says. "Let it go or fight it and twist and turn and pull yourself back into a position."

Skarbakka began photographing himself falling out of a tree in his backyard, enlisting friends to release the shutter on command. "I started to realize a body did not just fall," he says. "It danced, it flew, it floated."

Skarbakka submitted slides of his work, a series he initially called "Existential Blues," to the

Evanston biennial art show for consideration. They caught the eye of juror Michael Rooks, then assistant curator at the MCA. "Usually we only look at two or three slides," Rooks says, "but I looked at the entire kit he sent." Rooks then called Skarbakka and arranged a studio visit. "I was impressed by the relationship of his images to the history of recent cinema—the action-film genre. He seemed plugged into something vital and of the moment. And it was shortly after 9/11, so there was an edge to the work."

Skarbakka showed Rooks how he drew up storyboards for the shot he wanted and how he went about producing it, either by taking a free fall or rigging himself up with ropes and cables. Skarbakka had studied martial arts, and he knew how to fall to minimize the risk of injury. "I was impressed by his ambition and putting his own personal safety at risk for those shots," says Rooks.

He helped Skarbakka get a show at the MCA in December 2002, as part of its "12 x 12: New Artists/New Work" series. Skarbakka was the first graduate student to have a show at the museum. His work has since been exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Amsterdam, and Brussels, among other places. His photos are also on the covers of a new CD by the Dutch band C-Mon & Kypski and a forthcoming novel.

"The instability of the body is what I think some people relate with," says Skarbakka. "You get

people who go, 'I remember the time I fell off a ladder.'" For others the connection is more emotional. "You get people who go, 'Wow, that's how I feel,'" he says.

For most of the series, Kwit has been his main helper. Skarbakka sets up the shot—adjusting the lighting and the height and position of the cameras (he uses both large and medium format)—and tells her what he's aiming for. "Because he's so visual he'll usually draw it out," she says. They also discuss body position and mood. "He might say something like 'Catch the point before my head hits the ground. I'm trying to evoke tension and fear,'" she says. She'll stand or crouch by the camera during the jump and take the picture when it looks like what he said he wanted or when he yells "Now! Now! Now!"

To date, Skarbakka has made images for his series, now renamed "The Struggle to Right Oneself," in about 30 locations, capturing himself naked or in a suit or in jeans and a T-shirt falling from a cliff, trestle, porch, or billboard in places from Sarajevo to Washington State. Some look like purposeful leaps, some look like horrific accidents. All leave the viewer filling in the gaps as to what happens next.

Skarbakka's June 14 jump at the MCA will be an all-day event, coinciding with an outdoor farmers' market in the plaza, and will kick off a new series, tentatively titled "Life Goes On." The new work is an attempt to involve the

public in his art, Skarbakka says—to make it accessible to people who aren't academics or who don't normally go to museums. He's also planning to include onlookers in the shot. "I hope to catch the combination of my body and the viewing public and how their gestures and expressions tell the story of what's going on." Skarbakka's agent, who's based in Chicago, has hired a professional rigging team from the Chicago Flyhouse to insure Skarbakka's safety, and has got Skarbakka interested in merchandizing his work: there are T-shirt, poster, and postcard deals in the works.

"The Struggle to Right Oneself" is nearing an end, he says, since he has enough images for a book he wants to publish and is ready to immerse himself in other work. In addition to "Life Goes On," which he says will not be limited to falling but will be more about transforming public spaces, Skarbakka has begun another series—this one underwater—for which he's also risking bodily harm (he recently cut up his foot on coral while shooting in Hawaii).

But he imagines that every now and then he'll still get the urge to photograph himself in midair. Falling, he says, "is fun—it's a rush."

About a year ago, during a trip to Paris, Skarbakka proposed to Kwit at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Although he says he "left the business aside for that one," he admits, "I may have looked down and thought, 'That'd be cool.'" **G**