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Magne Furuholmen at his Payne's Gray exhibition.

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Art of reinvention

Once the 'joker' of A-ha, Magne Furuholmen is now a serious artist. Well - quite serious

ANDREW EATON

A MONDAY MORNING IN EDINBURGH, and I'm chatting to an artist from Norway about his first Scottish exhibition, Payne's Gray. He is enthusing about the film *The Five Obstructions*, a document of a peculiar experiment involving director Lars Von Trier and his mentor, Jorgen Leth. In the film, Von Trier forces Leth to remake his 1967 short film, *The Perfect Human*, again and again, each time following a set of different, increasingly absurd rules - to make it, for example, in Cuba, using shots of no more than 12 frames in length.

"I like that idea of tripping yourself and forcing yourself to do stuff that you're not good at," explains Magne Furuholmen. "It's quite important as a way of progressing." For Payne's Gray, Furuholmen - who is represented in the UK by London gallery-owner Paul Stolper, whose client list also includes legendary designer, Peter Saville - decided to work only in the colour of the show's title, a grey with a tint of blue. ("An important Norwegian artist once said that blue is the colour of love. It's a very Nordic statement, that very melancholic orientation that we have.") Furuholmen also makes music, and has a Von Trier-like rule that his band must change five elements of the performance every time they play, often at the risk of alienating their audience. Once they played all the fast songs first. They have also played the entire show with no lights. "We should never ever look back on the last tour and say 'how can we do that again better?'" reasons Furuholmen. "We should rather say, 'what changes can we make to

make it more interesting?' I like making things difficult. It keeps you on your toes a little bit."

Let's stop there for a moment. Is this any way to introduce an interview with hunky Mags from A-ha? Shouldn't we be talking about fabulous cheekbones, big hair, leather wristbands and falsetto vocals? For it is he. Take On Me, The Sun Always Shines On TV, James Bond theme The Living Daylights - Furuholmen co-wrote all of these 1980s pop hits, and millions of teenagers across the world screamed at him in gratitude and lust. And that's what you want to read about, right? Well, tough. That was then. Mags, now Magne, has moved on.

Only just, though. Twenty years after A-ha formed - a new book, *The Swing of Things*, tells the whole story - you get the feeling Furuholmen is only now getting over his pop idol years. "Coming into the art world in Norway, it took me a long time to be recognised outside of a sort of celebrity painter status," he says. "I was kicking myself every time my past was dragged into an art review." Let's be careful here; in print the comment risks sounding like the bitter whining of a spoilt pop star. In person it doesn't. Furuholmen is articulate and self-deprecating, with a wry sense of humour.

The truth, he says, is that A-ha always regretted that their record company, Warners, marketed them as teen idols. "If we'd grown up in the UK I'm sure we would have had a different approach to becoming famous and been much more conscious of the mechanisms. But we sort of embraced it all - letting yourself be photographed in every stupid way, not really questioning anything, thinking the music's going to shine through, that everybody's going to see it for what it is. But it doesn't happen like that."

In the language of teen magazines, Furuholmen was labelled "the joker" of A-ha, clowning about on a skateboard during live shows. "It's incredible how solidly these ideas lodge in people's minds," he says now, "and how hard it was to recognise myself in anything that was written." The problem, he quickly realised, is that if you fight too hard to escape a fun-loving teen pop star image, you come across as puffed and, he concludes, "pathetic ... which is a very interesting situation to be in, because then you're really fighting for your life, to be less of a cartoon character and more of a human being.

"It was an interesting time, I have to admit. Not many people get to see that. And not many people get to be such a useless bunch of pop stars as we were. We were always the least celebratory, the least at

ease..." He grins. "I'm quite proud of the way we handled it." He doesn't make it sound much fun, though. "We weren't fun-loving animals. We were sourpusses." He laughs. "But how can you be serious with an image like that?"

Recently it has been getting easier. Furuholmen has exhibited widely, and was even asked to design a Norwegian stamp. Two years ago he made the kind of international headlines that Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst would be proud of, when he was asked to decorate a Christmas tree in Oslo and chose to make the work out of his 14,000 kroner (£1,180) artist fee, turning notes and coins into ornaments. All the money/art was promptly stolen. Furuholmen told journalists - in a very Emin-like way - that he didn't mind because the thieves were essentially completing the artwork. Much of the press saw it differently, dismissing it as pop star decadence.

Paul Stolper admires Furuholmen's perseverance. "It's always easier for artists to hop into another world and hop back into the comfort of the art world than it is for anyone in any other discipline," he says. "Magne breaks these barriers down, and people are shy of it. They don't want to accept it."

It's a sign of Furuholmen's confidence that he is now taking a serious PR risk. Having just turned 40, he is returning to the pop world, launching his first solo album, *Past Perfect, Future Tense* (due out here in February) in conjunction with Payne's Gray. The show consists of 12 prints in which lyrics from the album are cut up and thrown around randomly, giving them a different context and meaning. "It's a little bit like building a sand castle," he says. "You spend all day perfecting it and the real fun is jumping up and down on it. I made the lyrics as pointed and as sharp as I could then I just cut them all up."

The project has caused some confusion. "People were not sure," he says. "Is this an art project? Is it a commercial record? Before, I used to have two lines of work, two ways of expressing myself, in the band, through film music or whatever. I kept them very separate and I tried desperately to make sure the art wasn't always lumbered with my high-profile luggage." Now, he says, he doesn't care. "I find it quite interesting to see how it confuses people."

It helps that popular opinion of A-ha is changing. Internationally respected bands such as Coldplay and Travis have come out as fans - Travis's Andy Dunlop, and Coldplay's Guy Berryman and Will Champion are now friends and performed on *Past Perfect, Future*

Tense. "It's a great feeling to have people you respect quote your work as a source of inspiration," says Furuholmen. "That's more important than anything, really." Norway itself is producing a wave of credible acts who grew up with A-ha, such as Kings of Convenience and - one of this year's great discoveries - Sondre Lerche. Meanwhile, a generation of teenage A-ha fans now writes about music for a living - a Guardian review of A-ha's last tour made the bold claim that "Manhattan Skyline [from A-ha's second album, Scoundrel Days] alternates soaring melodrama with avant-garde rock figures to better effect than Radiohead's Paranoid Android".

This is perhaps pushing things a little far, but A-ha and Radiohead have been mentioned together again more recently, in the NME's famous description of Keane as "Kid A-era Radiohead covering A-ha". It's a wave of reassessment that can be traced to U2's 2000 single Beautiful Day, whose chorus was uncannily similar to A-ha's biggest hit, The Sun Always Shines On TV. "In Norway there was a big scandal," laughs Furuholmen. "People reacted a little bit like they'd touched the crown jewels." U2 denied plagiarising the song, but guitarist The Edge confessed he was an A-ha fan, and that he thought they were underrated.

Furuholmen's new music vindicates this reassessment. It's lush, epic, folk-tinged rock, the biggest revelation being his singing voice. He's no Morten Harket, certainly, but this works in his favour; it's a rough-edged thing reminiscent of the Flaming Lips' Wayne Coyne, far from the slick crooning of today's boy bands. Musically, we're in the territory of Jeff Buckley, Radiohead and classic U2. If this sounds a long way from A-ha, you probably haven't heard the best of their later albums, East of the Sun and Minor Earth, Major Sky.

What unites all of this work, interestingly, is that Nordic melancholy. It was there from the very first A-ha record - the not very reassuring sense that the person being searched for in Hunting High and Low or Stay on These Roads would never be found; the fact that every A-ha album ends on a bleak, hopeless note, often involving rain (Here I Stand and Face the Rain, Soft Rains of April). If they were starting now, it's hard to imagine them being sold to an audience used to Westlife and Busted. They would be sold as the new Coldplay. Instead, Coldplay is the new A-ha.

No wonder Furuholmen got tired of being branded "the joker". That said, his current work has a light, playful touch which is part of its appeal. "Total w*** (but hey, that's OK)" says one of his prints,

breezily tempting ridicule. "People see what they need to see more than anything but it's not my job to correct it anymore," he says. "It's my job to do what I want to do." This seems to have served him well. The 40-year-old looks healthy and happy. I find him having breakfast with his wife and children, who have been dragging him around Edinburgh in search of some miniature Warhammer figures. That night, I go to see him play at the Venue. It's an unpublicised gig, arranged against advice. Again, Furuholmen is making things difficult for himself; told he should wait until there was an album in the shops, he responded that the show would complement the exhibition so he was going to do it anyway - even if it was on a Monday night. As it happens, there's a good crowd; some of the audience, Furuholmen notes, have travelled further than him to be there. There is a conspicuously large contingent of women who would have been screaming teenagers in 1985. But it's the men who make the most noise. Who saw that coming?

- Payne's Gray is at Edinburgh Printmakers until 20 November.