

Elina Brotherus in conversation with Birgit Eusterschulte

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The series Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe of 1997 to 1999 records “decisive moments” in your life – as you say yourself. Were you living with the camera at that time? Was it your permanent companion?

I wanted to look into the fluctuating emotions that characterize different moments in life. There are things that all human beings relate to: love and death, sorrow and beauty. I wanted to speak about the “human condition”, the big existential questions if you like, but in a silent way. Precisely because the issues were so big, the language had to be subdued. I was living alone, so it was easy to leave the camera on a tripod and seize it when something meaningful was happening. These “decisive moments” – a *clin d’oeil* to Henri Cartier-Bresson – were not about the composition but about the emotions. They might last a single minute or a whole week. The important thing was to react immediately. If I didn’t, the moment would be gone, and as I was striving for emotional genuineness, something approaching some sort of a “truth”, I never wanted to reconstruct images afterwards.

In an interview with Jan Kaila you talk about photography helping you to take control of the world. What meaning does photography have for you?

In the part of the interview you are referring to, I am explaining my first months in France. I didn’t speak the language, and in that situation I found help in work. I made a series about learning French, *Suites françaises 2*, in 1999. I placed post-it stickers on everything with the French word written on the sticker, starting from banal everyday objects in my room, and gradually moving on to more abstract things. I advanced like a child who is learning to speak. Learning the language and taking photographs of my environment both served the same goal: to get a grip on my life in a new country, to attain a level of conceptual thinking, to find basic security, to get sufficiently over the terrifying sense of being an outsider. I say sufficiently, as I do believe that in some extent being an outsider and solitude are necessary for an artist in order to work.

What does photography mean to me now, six years later? I don’t feel too attached to the tradition or history of photography but much more to the history of art in general. Since 2000 my work has been dealing with notions of painting – *The New Painting*, from 2000 to 2004, and the series *Model Studies*, which I began in 2003. Photography is my means of

expression, my vehicle, and I love to master its techniques so that I can get where I want to. But essentially I'm an image-maker.

After a series of self-stagings related to personal biography your interest shifted more and more towards rather formalistic and aesthetic research in photography. Suites françaises 1 turns the view outwards while Suites françaises 2 still focuses on your personal life. How do you see the relationship between these two series originating from the same time?

In *Suites françaises 1* I continued the landscape theme started the previous year in Finland with *Landscapes and Escapes*. However, I couldn't find a way to integrate my figure into this "foreign" French landscape, and that is why I made a whole series of empty views, all united by a central vanishing point. I was interested in low-light conditions, often photographing late in the evening or before sunrise. The long exposure times create interesting, unpredictable effects. Later on I realized that the post-its could be my way into the image, if I wanted to be in there myself. I could be in the landscape if I was "presenting" something there: showing a bike or a bag of oranges.

Suites françaises 2 is a transition between the old and the new approach. There is still the story of this girl who is talking about her life, feelings, actions and being, but at the same time the presence of language lifts the series on to a more general level. *Suites françaises 1* then clearly leads the way to the geometrically constructed simple landscapes of *The New Painting* series.

The series you are referring to was made between 2000 and 2004. At first sight it seems to be rather unusual to call a series of photographs "new paintings." Can you tell us about the initial idea?

It all initiated from the interest I take in art history. Some earlier works already had a clear connection with certain epochs, *Contente enfin* with Flemish painting, or *Le lit pour rêver et pour mes nuits de tendresse* with geometrical formalism, to take two examples from the *Suites françaises 2*. I wanted to develop the idea of working the human figure purely as visual material with no narration involved. Then I was in Iceland in 2000 for an exhibition, and the gallerist Edda Jónsdóttir said that she finds, in a way, that photography is "the new painting". I found this a good working title: it was short, comprehensible, a bit provocative, at least half true, and it referred to tradition.

What properties does painting have that my photography could speak about? The scale, the slow way of working which is necessary with the large-format camera, composition, control of the colours, figures in space, the use of light, the importance of making choices, how a person takes his/her place as the object of the gaze. With the camera I wanted to approach

what I consider the fundamental questions of visual art. The works did not aim at drawing a psychological portrait of the subject, but rather presenting him or her as an object of investigation, not for the inner properties but for the external ones. The person in the picture is a model, in the same sense as painters have been using models. I take this notion further in the most recent series, *Model Studies*.

The New Painting series contains disparate motives. Especially some of the landscapes within this series are reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, in fact not only when you quote him directly as in Horizon 6 or in Der Wanderer. The age of Romanticism, its deepened appreciation of the beauties of nature and the idea of the sublime must be of interest for you?

In fact *Horizon 6* was not at all a Caspar David Friedrich reference to me, and I only later found out about his painting *The Sea of Ice*. Quotes are not always direct, on the contrary I would say that they most often are not. Rather than speaking about quotes, I prefer to think that it's about an atmosphere, a subject matter, a certain kind of lighting or surface texture or a geometry that interest me, as they have interested artists throughout history. *Der Wanderer* is the most direct quote, it refers to this famous painting that everybody who ever talks about Friedrich always mentions. It has almost become an archetype or an icon. My version is different of course, because the person contemplating the landscape is not a man but a woman. Furthermore, as my colleague Lauri Astala pointed out, it is meaningful that the artist's act of watching takes place both behind and in front of the camera. This reinforces the artist's invitation for us to watch with her. The subject matter would therefore actually be the artist's gaze on the landscape, or to show what she has chosen to see.

Otherwise, when it comes to Romanticism, it's not at all my favourite period in art history. I greatly prefer the Renaissance.

That preference is mirrored in your photographs in the harmony of composition, in the emphasis on a central perspective and in the observation of the human body within a space. You go as far as to assure The New Painting series doesn't have a theme, but is concerned with basic visual questions. In this context I would like to ask you what beauty means to you.

The beauty of an image lies in its structure – in the lines – and in the light that defines the forms and the colours. The subject matter is in a way a pretext. One of the most fascinating forms, though, is the human form. It is full of possibilities; it has the ability to evoke emotions, allusions, memories; we can recognize ourselves or our fellow men in it.

For me beauty is often associated with calm, an open place where the mind is at rest. I have to have a good reason to tilt the camera: for me, a "default" landscape is frontal, a straight

horizon, and the vanishing point, if there is any, is centered. This is the most stable solution, and it pleases me.

Finally, colours have a great importance for me. There are many photographs for which the “correct” colour is not evident at all. Landscapes at dusk with a huge lit sky can be anything from yellow through mauve to blue. It all depends on the choices the artist makes in the darkroom, and this is a really crucial and time-consuming step – just as significant as the act of exposing the film. I have taken the habit of taking notes when photographing, trying to describe the colours I see with words. This helps me to remember in what direction to start to look when printing.

Besides photography you have also made a couple of films. The video loop Miroir made in 2001 consists of a short sequence showing you in a kind of half portrait standing in front of a mirror. The mirror is steamy from the humidity of the space, but during the film it gets clear, and foggy again and again. There is also a similar photographic work which consists of a series of photographs showing the same process. For me it's very interesting how you reflect in these works on the act of filming, and of taking photographs, and the possibilities of knowledge and self-knowledge within the (mirror) image.

The photographs *Le miroir*, from 2000, and the video *Miroir*, made in 2001, are not about “the female identity” or anything like that, as some people have suggested. I simply wanted to see what this everyday physical phenomenon of the disappearing vapour would look like when photographed. On second thought, the work can be seen as a small allegory of photography. At its beginnings, a photograph was a silver-coated copper plate – thus a mirror – from which a portrait emerged in the process of development. Here, too, we see the image gradually appearing from the mirror. It is curious to observe how different the two works are, even if the only difference between them really is that the photographs show separate instants whereas the video interpolates the gaps between the individual images into a continuous timeline. The same holds true for my photos of people by the waterfront and the video triptych *Baigneurs* on the same subject. This type of video, representing one thing rather laconically, and in which the camera hardly moves, is closer to still image than to cinema. Nevertheless, the element of time brings realism to it that is stronger than in the respective photographs. It is some sort of uneasiness, a feeling of being too close. Perhaps we are more at ease to looking at nudes in still images, in the safety of the good old art context.

In your most recent series, the Model Studies, the body is again the focus of attention. It is again your own body, but – as earlier mentioned – without a personal narration.

There is no gap between *The New Painting* and *Model Studies*. They overlap both in time and in subject matter. I felt it was time to change title, and wanted to emphasize even more strongly the fact that I see my figures as models, not as protagonists of any stories. I have

hardly begun *Model Studies*, and as I have exhibited the first works only twice so far it's hard to say in which direction the work is starting to lead. I want to work to a greater extent with other models and find it perhaps unnecessary to underline that so far it's often my own body – it's a model like any other. Having said this, it's easier to work alone. With other models I tend to rush and not to demand enough. Furthermore, I have used my own form so much that I have become somewhat attached to it. It's like a sign, or a word in my vocabulary.