

Val Williams on Elina Brotherus 2001

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There is a photograph in Elina Brotherus' series *Suites françaises 2* in which the artist stands in a corner of a room. It is a shabby room, the bright yellow door scratched and scored, revealing layers of paint and wood, official notices are pinned upon it. The walls and the carpet are functional, almost institutional. There is a feeling of a cell, a solitary place, not so much of refuge, but of a kind of personal imprisonment. On her chest, Elina Brotherus has pinned a post-it note, which says 'Desolée.' On the yellow door, another note reads 'la porte'. She has labelled the light switches, her shoes, the carpet and the door lock. Surrounded by this strange signage, she is a silent and immobile figure, surrounded by words, by language. So reticent is her figure, standing to attention like a reprimanded child, that the proclamation of the signs assumes ascendancy in a space in which the personal struggles with the institutional. These photographs were taken during a residency in Chalon-sur-Saône, France. Unable to communicate with those around her, she remembers: "There were many friendly people, but I couldn't say any more to them than 'hello, how are you?' I had to learn the language like a child, word by word. Without language, one feels insecure, without roots in society. When you're in this state, little things become important, familiar things like eating, cycling, your own room, your own bed. I observed myself, my feelings and my state of mind, as well as the environment: the landscape, the lights, the colours."

Much of Elina Brotherus' work revolves around a careful, meticulous observation of the solitary self. In other of her photographic series she is most often alone in rooms which themselves have an intense feeling of loss. She seems to interrogate the space which she inhabits, the mirror becomes a window to the soul, the act of bathing an almost ritualistic cleaning and self-examination. "The world," she has written "is white noise, visual chaos. Making a photograph is always about making choices. The artist's job is to take meaningful fragments out of this mess. In my earlier work especially, there was always some underlying reason for each photograph, an urge to make a certain statement. And at the same time, I'm striving for visual simplicity and clarity. I'm not ashamed even to use the word 'beauty' in this context."

In our normal lives, we move through the spaces we inhabit in a careless kind of way, accepting the objects which are around us, knowing what they are called without thinking, without having to remember. We live in a world of objects, a vast array of clothing,

equipment, reading material, decoration, furniture, a pressing empire of possessions, all ignored until, landing in a foreign country, we realise that we do not know their names. Elina Brotherus' photographic works are concerned with disorientation, the experience of living in a strange city where she has lost the opportunity of discourse, or of being at home in a space which despite its familiarity is suddenly fragile and foreign. These photographs are complex comedies, about the experience of being a young woman navigating culture and society, using photography to provide a visual key to a shifting and unsettling range of emotions and events. "When life is shaky" she explains "I get the urge and passion to make photographs... In every person's life there are both large and small tragedies, much and little happiness; there are emotions and needs. That is why fragments from my life might seem familiar to others as well. In a way, I provide the viewers with a blank screen, a surface on which to project their own feelings and desires."

Recent works by Brotherus, such as *Suites françaises* and *Le Miroir*, become autobiographical theatre, which has important roots in a contemporary tradition of women's art. Like Tracy Emin, who also uses language and text in combination with drawings, patchwork and video to express an autobiography, or the late Jo Spence, who drew extensively on the family album to explore her social and sexual self, Brotherus has made a document which repeatedly crosses the line between fiction and reality. There is a dreamlike quality about these photographs which mirrors perhaps the remarkable 19th century photographs made by Clementina Hawarden, the early English photographer who pictured her two daughters against the austere interiors of a London mansion. Important too, when considering Brotherus' photographs are Cindy Sherman's groundbreaking work of the late 1970s, *Untitled Film Stills*. Sherman, in a series of photographs which explored the representation of women in the contemporary culture of post-war America developed the notion of scenario, which recent artists like Brotherus have used to express their own exploration of their social world. Elina Brotherus is in many ways perfectly representative of the new Nordic photography. Artists from the five Nordic countries who began their careers in the 1990s (including Marjaana Kella, Miriam Bäckström, Vibeke Tandberg, Ulf Lundin) have taken a particularly incisive photographic direction, looking closely, personally and critically at Scandinavian society. Like Miriam Bäckström's ongoing photographic series looking at unpeopled film sets or Marjaana Kella's photoworks around the state of hypnosis' Elina Brotherus' photographs are constructions, the result of an alchemic process in which the ordinary becomes dramatic-gripping tales of journeys from innocence to experience.

Val Williams was Curator of the Hasselblad Center, Sweden from 1998-2002 and of the Printemps de Septembre à Toulouse in 2001. She is currently Research Fellow at the London College of Printing and also teaches at the London College of Fashion.