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Elina Brotherus

At a first glance it may appear strange that Elina Brotherus has, in one year (**1999**), completed two such different sets of photographs as *Suites françaises 1* and *Suites françaises 2*.

Suites françaises 1 consists of exquisite landscapes, where the colour, light and space – ‘purely’ visual elements – capture the magic and symbolism to be found even in ordinary places. On the other hand, *Suites françaises 2* is a tragicomical conceptual essay of images, which observes the meaning of verbal communication from the perspective of living in a foreign country without knowing the language (i.e. French).

The *Suites françaises* series may be separate entities, but viewing them one after the other raises interesting questions about the relationship between the language of images and verbal language, such as: Does anything purely visual exist? Do colour, light and space create language-like systems without naming or conceptualising the objects in the image? Or does naming the object change the way we understand a picture – and if it does, will even a fraction of the visuality of the picture remain ‘free’, as its own system? What about a verbal language that we don’t understand – can it function as a visual element like an image?

Questions such as these have been discussed widely in art history, aesthetics and psychology for instance, but they remain current, especially when considering the nature of photography as **visual art**. Most of the photographs we see are ‘tied’ to verbal information, or subordinated to verbal language (as in documentaries, journalism, advertising). Therefore, when looking at a photograph, the first questions tend to be What? Where? When?, rather than allowing one’s own sensory perceptions and imagination to have an effect, as often happens when viewing paintings. In other words, the subject matter or the narrative easily dominate when considering the meaning of what is seen, while the visual qualities of the photograph remain secondary.

Elina Brotherus’ earlier works before the *Suites françaises* series were mainly autobiographical, with an informative ‘topic’: for example, *Divorce Portrait* (1998) depicted the just-divorced Brotherus. *Suites françaises 2* can be seen as a culmination of the autobiographical era of Brotherus. The circumstances of the artist are expressed by banal Post-it notes, which label the surrounding objects. The poetic but tragic humour of the series is created by the inability of language to add anything more to the images, except for the didactic and *per se* useful system that tautologically repeats the name of the objects that we see. It is almost as if verbal language had become too restrictive as an artistic tool for Brotherus.

In the *Suites françaises 1* series, on the other hand, Brotherus clearly moves towards pure visuality. This continues in a logical way in her large series, *The New Painting*, which she began in 2000.