

## The Spirit and the Animal

Elina Brotherus in conversation with Patrick Scemama, August 2007

Published in Elina Brotherus : *Études d'après modèle, danseurs*, Les éditions textuel, Paris 2007.

-How do you situate this series in relationship to *The New Painting* series, and to your work as a whole?

From the beginning my aesthetics haven't changed much. I prefer to strip away rather than to add, I often use a reduced palette. Series have followed one another almost without any interruption, with a certain natural logic. After the first series of self-portraits, *Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe* (1997-1999), still very much connected to personal events, came the *Suites françaises* (1999) which brought on a more general point of view as well as an interest for different genres in visual arts. This deepened with *The New Painting* (2000-2004), where I continued the research on fundamental questions - light, color, composition, human figure in space. My last series, which I am continuing to work on, is called *Model Studies* (2003-). It concentrates on the figure. I am hoping to underline with the title that even if I might pose in my photographs, it is no longer to tell a personal tale. The figure is like a painter's model, a compositional object of the image. *Études d'après modèle, danseurs* (2007) forms a sub-series within *Model Studies*.

-What has driven you to work with dancers, and particularly dancers with a classical background?

I am fascinated by the particular physique of dancers, natural and extremely self-aware at the same time. The relationship between sophistication and the bodily is unique in them. The animal and the spirit are both present. Classical dancers are disciplined and available, and used to being observed. All this makes of them excellent models.

-Most of the time, in your pictures, you have been your own model. In what fundamental way does working with different models change things?

The greatest difference is that one can watch instead of anticipate. Being simultaneously in front of and behind the camera creates a lot of uncontrollable mess; with another model these sort of problems don't come up. On the other hand one is constantly conscious of the presence of the other. The model is submitted to the eye of the artist. This all-scrutinizing, undressing artist's gaze, which at the same time is admiring and surprised, is one of my principal themes. In the photographs depicting the artist and the model, I try to show it and deconstruct it. The directions are important: what happens when all of a sudden the model decides to look at the artist? "Artist and model" is a recurrent theme in art history, I think notably of Picasso in his late engravings.

-In this series, you photograph both boys and girls alike. Was the approach and the work the same with both?

I think that the age and the experience matter more than the gender. I love all my models for their beauty, girls and boys alike. While they posed, we talked very little. I know almost nothing of their lives; they were visual material for me. As stage artists they are used to this, there is something clear and honest in all of that.

-All the photographs in the series were taken in your studio, at La Ruche, with the same type of light. Were your intentions to give a serial aspect to the whole?

For me, it was clear from the outset that I did not want to photograph dancers at the opera or in their rehearsal studio. I was not looking for "the perfect pose" but rather for ordinary gestures, like in genre painting - domestic scenes, combing one's hair, dressing or undressing, or shapes softened by movement. I have had the opportunity to work at La Ruche, one of those artist communities from the beginning of the century. In my studio there is a very beautiful sculptural light in which the figures bathe even during the dark days of February. This environment, together with the large format camera I use, create in my view a timelessness in the work. These images interact as well with the photographic sketches that late nineteenth century painters made of their models, as with contemporary practices. I draw a lot from art history and I was happy to read William Forsythe say in an interview: "In my view, there exist no boundaries to stylistic reference. One simply appropriates things. There is nothing inappropriate in that."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Roslyn Sulcas: In the wake of Masters, brochure for the Balanchine/Brown/Forsythe performance, Ballet de l'Opéra, Opéra de Paris, Season 2006-2007.