

A Girl Who Looked Past and Beyond the Camera

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Someone should have perhaps warned Elina Brotherus before she seriously started taking photos. This someone ought to have pointed out that the photographic genre of flirting with reality and especially doing it via ones own female body has in recent years over-grown into a huge and annoying trend. Thus, the advice would be that she might want to have second thoughts which way to pursue and which way to turn.

One must be very happy that this enlightened "someone" did not exist. Instead of Brotherus as a sculptor or a tennis star, what we have is Elina Brotherus as a very daring and sentimental photographer. More importantly, we have a selection of works which hardly ever fail to touch a nerve or two. Self-portraits that go and reach beyond the border of personal contact. But hold on, did I say sentimental. Yes, I did, and I will continue with words such as dramatical, romantic and neo-realistic. Words, which one can utter in art discourse normally only under heavy influence of alcoholic beverages.

There is one particular reason why some people tend to get itchy when confronted with seemingly casual but simultaneously deeply touching self-portraits - again especially if the object is a fragile and beautiful young woman. The responses are rather well-known. This style is too easy, it is too insular, focusing only at the joy of navel gazing. And, they might add, who really is or even should be interested in the psychological traumas of another cute little lost girl somewhere out there.

I think these claims can be quite often correct. However, what follows, is a kind of an argument why Elina Brotherus' works luckily and powerfully fall on their feet, extensively outside of these traps. In other words, I try to put forward my experience why the sentimental season that they provoke is not even close to social pornography or narcissistic dwelling in ones inner problems.

So in what ways could Brotherus be different? Let me start with a detour. One can with legitimation ask, whether it is simply enough to take well carved and constructed moody photographs on oneself and ones misery. I agree - it is not enough. There has to be more, and that more very much so exists and lives on the surfaces of her photographs. I could actually choose from various feelings such as disgust, insecurity, fear, madness, loneliness or sadness, but I will concentrate on loneliness, and especially on loneliness on the verge of emptiness.

Have you ever tried to portrait yourself in such a way that the photo directly and without any whatsoever mercy or aesthetization pictures you in the state of burning loneliness? Hmm, I do not know about you, but what I do know and see is that Elina Brotherus does it, and does it very often and coherently.

Let us take an example, the photo titled "Fundamental Loneliness." It is a good example of her visual style - both formally and thematically. The photo is of herself, sitting on the table, there is a piece of melon on the table. Timid, direct and solid. There is not one single part of the image that is superfluous. There is nothing to add, and nothing to take away.

What there are, yes, is a truck load full of feelings that I assume do not need to be mentioned. What about the background, the personal story behind the photo. Should I tell you that? Naaaah, what will it be, should, or should I not? Let me repeat it: Fundamental Loneliness. You guessed - personal problems, such as, broken marriage, later love lost and not found etc. Certainly, there is haunting and demanding unhappiness around. It is a kind of lonely unhappiness that fills the emptiness, not asking for permission, and not negotiating but with force confiscating and filling every corner every second and every tiny particle of air that is left to breath. Loneliness that rules and fulfills the empty spaces as in the natural phenomenas.

But exactly at this point, it is highly important to wonder who is telling the story, who is speaking and who is watching, and whom. Who has the power to decide and to define? I would claim that Elina Brotherus is using self-portraits as a means to watch. She is watching herself, but not only that, because that would be simply boring narcissism. She is watching herself, and her relationship to herself and to her surroundings. It would again fall to pieces and regress into disappointing narrow narcissism if she would openly enjoy the situation. But no, she is not, even if she is definitely the one pulling the punches. She is through the camera's eye shaping and making a certain, even if only momentary, space and time for herself.

Thus, she is not actually looking at the viewer. She goes beyond the first wave of feminist critique of claiming the gaze for the female eye. In my opinion, she is gazing far beyond and past the camera and the viewer. It is no longer she who is there, and it is no longer at all important whether she got divorced or what kind of personal dilemmas she has. These details are only important as the starting point. The story has to begin somewhere, it has to be anchored into some particular and personal setting and a version of reality. Elina Brotherus' choice is clear: herself.

The second level is then something else, something that again can be scrutinized through various elements, but I will hold on to loneliness. There are at least two reasons why her photographs are so significant and meaningful. First one is connected to the visual images that we are daily confronted. How often does one see a picture of an evidently unhappy and insecure person, who is not a victim but who is actually in control. She has decided to show how utterly confused and scared she is. Try doing the same thing, but don't come back and say it was too difficult. Of course it is difficult.

The second reason is even more important. Time after time Elina Brotherus has the courage to face and confront these sentiments and feelings that our present day visual imagery detests and almost forbids. And the point is that she comes out of this struggle as a winner, dealing with things such as loneliness, unhappiness and fear, which we all know and feel but which we have hard time to cope with. She does not just do it for fun, I am convinced she has no choice, but to do work it over and over. Thus, the results are not necessarily more authentic or real, but they very are convincing.

Elina Brotherus. She is there. Wounded but awake - in the pictures. Watching the photos sets an ultimatum: stay or disappear, take it or leave it. And yes, I take it, I take the chance to confront the emotions that hurt and burn and bite - and possibly heal.