

Discussion between Sheyi Antony Bankale and Elina Brotherus,

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Sheyi Antony Bankale: To begin with, I would like to know if your training in analytical chemistry had an influence on your decision to embark on photography.

Elina Brotherus: In 1994, I realised that chemistry wasn't what I wanted to do in life after all. It was one of those turning points where all paths are equally possible, and one has to choose. I could have ended up in something more rigorous or academic - musicology or literature for instance. The entrance exam for photography came first however, and I was accepted. Now, in retrospect, it was a very fortunate thing. Having said that, I don't consider it a bad thing that I have a degree in science. It was a good training for learning to study and to work meticulously.

SAB: This begs the question: Do you then analyse? You may say you don't – artists are constantly denying that they do. Looking back, specifically before the shift in subject matter, your work focused on your immediate experiences and those close to you.

EB: Analytical chemistry is actually about analysing what things contain. I was into environmental analytics, measuring for instance how much pollutants there are in environmental samples. Before specialising I did a lot of general chemistry, mathematics etc. If I think of the eventual influence of scientific studies on my art – I do have a certain tendency to look for organisation or clarity in my work. This might show in the compositions themselves, or in the fact that I work in a serial format. I also think that "collecting observations" is a way of looking at the world which is characteristic of photographers in general.

I see a big difference between my early work, until 1999, and more recent work, from 2000 onwards. The former was about the content, the latter about form. Aesthetically the change isn't that big, and this is why some people tend to read *The New Painting* as an autobiography. For me this is a false interpretation. Up to 1999, I focused on emotions and was looking for emotional "decisive moments", something personal but at the same time recognisable to all, "the human condition". Then, with *The New Painting*, there was a profound shift: the formal, visual qualities became the primary subject matter. My role in the image is that of a model, all personal narration is ruled out.

There are a lot of quotes in my work. My first series *Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe* (1997-1999) is a quote from Schubert's *Winterreise*. *Suites françaises 1* and *2* (1999) refer to Bach. *The New Painting* comes from a conversation with the Icelandic "art ambassador" Edda Jónsdóttir. She was the one who pronounced the thought that photography is the new painting. By this, I believe, she meant that photographers today can address the same questions that earlier had been the privilege of painters. I took up this idea, as it felt immediately relevant to me. I am interested in classical subject matters and pay a lot of attention to light, colour, composition, representation of the human figure and the space – things that I consider fundamental in all visual art.

SAB: The new painting, a passage of time - a metaphoric boundary between past and present. There are a growing number of historic paintings which have been either recreated or referred to in contemporary art. How is your work depicted?

EB: I'm not into remaking the *Death of Marat*. I prefer more subtle allusions. Sometimes I might have a specific painting in mind but often don't; it's more about an atmosphere, a pose, a subject matter in the large sense, like in the case of the theme of bathers.

My most direct reference is perhaps the famous man in the mountains by Caspar David Friedrich. Of Friedrich I have taken the figure that turns his back to the spectator. I love the back. The back is calm, discrete, polite, and distant. It doesn't challenge the spectator as the direct gaze would. The spectator is watching the same landscape as the model, but they don't disturb each other. The situation invites to contemplation, not to confrontation.

I have understood that Caspar David Friedrich was mainly interested in landscape, but because of convention he was obliged to add a human figure, as an excuse to be able to paint the landscape. For me it's more the opposite. I have done so many pictures using myself as a model that I need the landscape as an excuse!

I like to think that not so much has changed. I'm reading Ovid, who was writing more than 2000 years ago, and who is still able to move me profoundly. It also holds true for painters who were active in the 15th or 16th century. That contemporary artists are interested in old works of art is a sign of the strength of these works. I really liked the opening hang of Tate Modern, which completely ignored chronology. How fresh Monet's *Nymphéas* looked when hanging next to Richard Long! This is every artist's dream: that the work stays alive, relevant, and is not categorised only by its époque.

SAB: For me time and again, your exquisite images appear to communicate extremely well. How technical is the thought process before the execution of the work, or is it spontaneous?

EB: The working process can be divided into separate phases. A very important part is to be exposed to art: literature, music, and images. Another equally important thing is to lead a good life, with physical struggle alternating with sitting by the window and watching the sky. These moments of blank mind are necessary, for it is then that ideas emerge from the deep.

I love to watch. I'm shifting more and more away from words into images. This is probably because living in another country makes me somewhat handicapped with language in everyday life. I love to sit in a train and look at the passing landscape. I observe the changes in the colours throughout the seasons and different hours of the day.

I mainly work with a large-format 4 x 5 inch camera, which necessitates a tripod and a handmeter for light. The technical part is not difficult, but demands time and patience. One is simultaneously concentrating and relaxed. One is pragmatic and determined – and yet, intuitive.

There are several "sieves" before arriving at the final image. I carry around the contact prints in a sketchbook, look at them in the train, on the bus, in the metro, and finally I choose which ones to print in small format. From those, I later make a selection to be enlarged into exhibition prints, mounted and framed.

The dark-room work is a crucial step. I always do the small prints myself, experimenting with the negative, to see what I can get out of it. So much can be done in the dark-room! There the quality of the work is judged: if the image is strong, it's a pleasure to spend hours searching for the right colour. If I get bored, it indicates that the work is bad and it's better to discard it.

It's difficult to remember afterwards how things were. This is why I take notes, in the spirit of Bonnard, who wrote wonderful observations on colours on his daily walks. I try to describe what the sky looks like, what colour the water or the shadows are. Especially with the minimalist landscapes with a little rim of something and a lot of sky – they can be whatever: yellow, mauve, blue-grey, ochre... The correct answer is not hidden in the negative. The artist has to try and then assume responsibility for his or her choice. It can be as arbitrary as choosing a pigment among tubes of oil paint.

SAB: For this final question, what intrigued me during the interview are the silences between the words. The New Painting, with hindsight, what does it mean to you personally?

EB: At one point it was no longer necessary to continue with self-reflection. I went to look for help in painting. Other pictures that I saw in museums and books led to my pictures, in the

same way as poets who translated classical Greek poetry saw it filtering through into their own work.
Here in France I live a bit outside of society, but it is also deliberate. This work requires a lot of solitude.

My personal joy comes from visual occurrences of the following kind:

- when the sky and the water are of the same colour
- the happy surprise when a pose is graceful
- when something synesthetic happens: when I want to touch the skin
- the effects produced by long exposure times
- the white on white of the glass against the window in *Fille aux fleurs*
- covering and revealing at the same time, like a mist in a mirror or fog in a landscape
- when the light is unusual
- the beauty of controlled unsharpness

I guess this is the essence of it all: light and beauty.

Sheyi Antony Bankale is the editor of Next Level, UK, who published Elina Brotherus' monograph book *The New Painting* in September 2005. Elina Brotherus' previous book *Decisive Days, valokuvia-photographies-photographs 1997-2001* was published in 2002 by Pohjoinen, Finland.