Interview with Craig Burnett for Next Level magazine

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Craig Burnett: Some of your earlier work in *The New Painting* was reminiscent of Modernist and 19th century painting (surrealism, romanticism), but some of the new work (*Nu Endormi*, 2003, and *Baigneuse de Saturnia*, 2003) reminds me of Rococo painting or even Poussin. You've said before that you conceive intuitively, and yet you bring a strong visual memory and knowledge of art history to the work. How does the history of painting inform your processes?

Elina Brotherus: In art history, the periods that affect me most, are Italian Renaissance (Titian, Giorgione, Rafael, Leonardo...), Flemish painters (Vermeer, van Eyck...), and some turn-of-the century French painters (Cezanne, Gauguin, Degas, Bonnard...). It's the serenity and the skill that are stunning, and I find that their work is still completely relevant today.

I don't especially like baroque or romantic painting, I often find it too sugary. Lorrain and Poussin, though, yes, for their interest for a high viewing point and a route for the gaze in the image; and the omnipresent Caspar David Friedrich (I wonder why he seems to be about the only name to whom people refer in contemporary art context.) My two works that make reference to him, *Personnage dans un paysage (montagne)*, 2000, and *Der Wanderer*, 2003, are a bit of a humorous clin-d'oeil. Both comment this famous painting of his, with the man standing in front of a "sea of clouds" in the mountains - in the first one, I turned the figure around so that we see the face and not the back; in the second one, the title *Der Wanderer* is directly borrowed from this painting of Friedrich's, but the figure - contrary to what the masculin form "der" in the title suggests - is female.

What comes to *Nu endormi*, it makes reference to the sleeping Venuses, especially the one of Giorgione. The landscape in the background repeats the forms of the figure. The yellow light of Toscany plays an important role.

It's curious, by the way, talking about the colour of light: I have always had this idea that somehow the information of the correct color values is hidden in the negative. One just has to be a skilled printer to get the colours out right. With this in mind, I have always strived for some sort of neutrality: neutral gray sky, gray clouds, no aberrations. My trip to Toscany this spring opened my eyes, as I noted that the light was so clearly yellow. Even in the "aerial perspective" where one would think that the landscape fades into blue, it faded instead into greyish yellow. Then, after the trip, with the lousy lab-made contact prints and my vague memories of the "true" colours, I was in the darkroom, puzzled. I realised that the color of a photograph can be as arbitrarily chosen as in choosing a pigment among color tubes.

I still have a pile of Italian landscapes to print but I haven't started yet as I'm aware how slow and important it will be - thus I need patiance and plenty of time. I feel that for the first time I'm facing a situation where I really need to take full responsibility of my darkroom choises. These minimalistic landscapes, with a lot of sky and a rim of hills, can be just whatever: mauve, blue-gray, ocre, yellow... I have to try out everything and choose. It's passionate!

Baigneuse de Saturnia belongs to my series of bathers, commenced in 2000 with *Personnage dans un paysage (eau)*, continues with *Les Baigneurs*, 2000, *La Baigneuse*, 2001, *Figure au bord de l'eau*, 2002, and a video triptych *Baigneurs*, 2001/2003. It pays hommage to the tradition of bathers starting with the renaissance (Diana with her nymphs for instance), and of course Cezanne and his contemporaries. Saturnia is the name of the place where the picture was taken.

To summarise: I never copy any old paintings as such or make my versions of them, I rather consider that I get inspired by the same subject matters as these painters. I find it enough to treat in my work the very basic, fundamental questions of all visual art: light, color, composition, human figure, space - and beauty, if I dare say. In a way, the subject matter is only a pretext. Working, for me, is watching the world with a sensitive eye, to stay alert and ready to react rapidly when I see something that I want to make a picture of. Seeing is most

important; sensing the light; guessing the inherent possibilities of some view; distillating the essential. There is no rules for this really - that's why I think we can speak about intuition, or sensitivity.

Why art history? During my education (MA in photography in Helsinki) we did of course have some basic classes in art history, but later I felt that it was really quite superficial and that I had gaps in my knowledge. I wanted to know more about the tradition and our roots, why do we perceive things in certain ways etc. This is why I started to study art history in Paris. (I did not continue for long, for other reasons - I did not enjoy the attitudes and atmosphere in French university world, but that's another story. Anyway, I continue on my own, buy books, go to museums - not in the academic way but more for my own artistic practise and inspiration.)

Craig Burnett: The light, colours and sense of space in *Figure au bord de l'eau* create an image that is striking and gorgeous, but it is also slightly comic because the model looks vulnerable and slightly out of place. In fact, in many of the images in which he appears there is a sense of playfulness. Why do you think his presence tends to lighten the mood of your photographs?

Elina Brotherus: It's the glasses! This is a funny detail, but I think that a nude figure that wears glasses does look funny. Further, I think humour is not a bad thing in art, it makes it more human. There has been, especially in my early work, so much tragedy, that I think it's good if I can occationally make people smile.

Craig Burnett: The earlier self-portraits explored or recorded how you felt or what you were doing at a very specific time (and I think the viewer would think about you when looking at the pictures), whereas the new images that feature you look more formal in their concern, about figures in space and human presence in landscape. Do you agree that there was a change in emphasis and how did it come about?

Elina Brotherus: There was indeed. The "hinge" series is the *Suites françaises 2* from autumn 1999 (the work where I'm learning French and exploring my surroundings with the aid of post-it notes). This work still has the personal story: this young woman arriving to a new country, her feelings of outsiderness, the shy beginning of a new love story. The starting point of the series is practical - everyday life, the need to learn to communicate in a new language - but it grows into something more theoretical and general. There is the question of naming and classifying objects. There is the tension of image and text present in the same work, much treated in 20th century art, which can produce a dramatic and/or a funny effect. There is the problem of linguistic and cultural outsiderness, experienced by more and more people in the modern world.

Parallel to *Suites françaises 2*, I did *Suites françaises 1*, a series of empty landscapes, composed with a classical central perspective, characterised with peculiar lighting conditions. The raison d'être of these pictures was purely visual. So the turning point was my first stay in France in 1999. It is so that the work moves forward with life: with changing living conditions, different surroundings, different people around, new books that one reads – work changes.

Since 2000 I'm working on the series *The New Painting*, and I still don't see the end of it approaching. There are so vast possibilities, or let's say that the title is sufficiently open, and the more I learn, the richer the iconography gets. In these pictures it is not at all important that the model be me - it's only a figure in space, a model, in the same sence as a painter might use a model (hence the title of the series), and there is no personal narrative whatsoever.

Craig Burnett: You have mentioned before that one difference between painting and photography is that you can never get away from the trace of a real place or object in a photograph. It can never be wholly abstract. I agree with you.

Elina Brotherus: Yes. I think this is definitely one of the charms of photography. No matter how abstract it might look, it always remains a trace left by the reality. Light from the subjetc matter exposes the film and leaves its image for us. Here of course I am talking about analogue photography made with a camera and film with no digital interfearance. This is, by the way, why digital technology does not interest me. It breaks the magic of the photograph. I guess I'm old-fashioned but I don't mind. One has to do what one has passion for, and for serious work there will always be a public, even if the materials and methods will one day seem archaic.

Craig Burnett: But I also think photography has an amazing, and underrated, capacity to make images of great meditative power the way a lot of abstract painting and east Asian art functions.

Elina Brotherus: I agree. But in your opinion, is it only abstract art that has a great meditative power? I have some difficulty to get interested in most of the non-figurative art. One exception is Mark Rothko, and the reason is that in his paintings the history of the making is so present and materialised, giving to their colors an amazing power. We can feel the numerous layers and understand that without them the result wouldn't glow the way it does.

Craig Burnett: How do you feel about the balance between representation and non-objectivity in your work? In *Broken Horizon 2*, 2001, for example, the apartment blocks are sinister even though the image is beautiful. So how can subject-matter collide with the pleasure of looking?

Elina Brotherus: In the *Broken Horizon* works, the importance is in their connection with my *Very Low Horizons*. The former ressemble the latter, except that there are some bits missing, the continuous horizon line has been broken into pieces. That's all it is about. Then in each individual picture there are its individual reasons why it has been made, like in *Broken Horizon 2* the opal-coloured sky.

In the end of the day, they are only images. They are projections of small fragments of the three-dimentional reality, flattened and framed and lifted up on a wall. They are made to be looked at. I have tried to seize something meaningful, and by this I mean visually interesting.