

Nudes in Waterscape.

Baigneurs, a video by Elina Brotherus

he brochure for *Baigneurs* was published for an Istanbul biennial side event organised by FRAME in 2003.

In traditional paintings of nudes, characteristically in bathing pictures, as referred to in the title of Elina Brotherus' videowork, *Baigneurs* (2001/2003), the focus of the gaze is usually a naked woman, who is so absorbed in the cleansing process that she does not notice the spectator: the model's gaze is averted. The viewer can ignore the person in the picture, her wishes and her needs, rather it is her body that is laid bare for inspection. In this way, the body can also be turned into an object of desire. The viewer of this event in its disguise of innocence is generally a clothed male artist. Even though we do not see the author of the painting, he affirms his presence with his gaze and the touch of his brush.

Rembrandt van Rijn's painting *Hendrickje Bathing in a River* from 1654 depicts a woman dressed in a long shift stepping into some water. The water almost comes up to her knees; she is taking a further step and walking in deeper. She holds up the hem of her shift with both hands, so that it will not get wet. Yet, it takes little effort to believe that she will be unable to return to the river bank without getting wet all over, since the water feels too appealing. The shift will be soaked anyway. Rembrandt has painted the woman holding her garment up so high that her thighs are totally exposed. The shift would slip off her shoulders at the slightest nudge, exposing the model's breasts. The water and the background are very dark. The light focuses on the woman's body. We do not see the eyes of Rembrandt's bather; her gaze is directed down into the river.

Regardless of the many other little eroticising and objectifying narrative elements in Rembrandt's work, the main incident in the picture occurs in the woman's face. Her expression is intent on pleasure. The moment when water first touches skin and the bather dips herself into the warm water is almost autoerotic. While being careful of the unevenness of the river bed, so as not to fall over, she enjoys the touch of the water rising ever higher up her naked flesh. Rembrandt has placed his signature on the work at the level of the woman's knees. This as though sets the limit beyond which not even the water is allowed to rise. The rest is reserved for the artist. The actual event and the painting are one.

Brotherus' gaze does not make the people dabbling around on the Finnish shoreside rocks the focus of any very obvious sexual desires. The gaze retains a certain innocence, with time and the landscape playing the main role. It would be odd if the people in the pictures were dressed. The moving image in the video and the static framing, which permits the swimmers to exit the picture as it suits them, affords them a kind of privacy. Although the characters are anonymous, they retain their own will. The comparisons characteristic of the gaze are also made difficult, as the nude people in the pictures are men and women of approximately the same age, somehow androgynous, and commonplace. There is nothing to compare, because they are all alike. These people are not attempting to imbue their movements with any special charm. The air is a little cold, perhaps the water too, since the swimmers apparently do not want to stay in for very long.

The eroticism associated with some of the images in the work is, nevertheless, concealed in the exact same touch of the water as in Rembrandt's painting. Some of the images contain a beautiful landscape. The surface of the small lake is completely calm and still, it is twilight on a warm summer's night. As often in Brotherus' works, the artist makes her

own presence visible by personally appearing in her work. She appears in the picture from precisely the point where she has positioned us to look at the landscape and peacefully dips into the dark water alone. Then she swims further out from the shore and returns to the same spot from where she started, behind the camera. A moment later, the water has calmed down again, the landscape is unchanged. Brotherus does not eroticise what is in itself already an erotic event. The artist is herself present in her video, as one of the models. She does not possess them by placing her signature upon it.

Despite its three parallel videos, Brotherus' *Baigneurs* is not actually a triptych, since each of them duplicates the same thing. They do not give each other support, they are one. The artist's gaze is resolutely riveted to a single spot. It remains almost motionless and calmly observes the waterscape and the people going swimming in the foreground. Big ships too can sail in and out of shot without her following their progress with her gaze. Likewise, the people in the video simply come into the frame from somewhere and leave it for somewhere. The artist has no interest in events occurring outside the frame.

This almost obstinate framing makes the videos more a set of moving photographs than films. In particular, the waiting that is part of linear film narrative – soon something will happen – has gone. The tension of waiting is missing. Even if there is something happening in the pictures, the viewer is certain that nothing is going to happen. Brotherus uses her camera to mark off a piece of the landscape in the manner of a photograph; even though there is motion in the pictures, time does not pass. The video contains a statement typical of her: Look, here, this is all there is; the moment you are living is here now, there is nothing complicated about it, and there is no reason to make it that way. This kind of attitude can be associated with a certain disillusionment. Brotherus does not have that, since there is so much warmth in her directness. And, for that reason, nor do the pictures have the element of danger, unless we consider slipping on the rocks on the shore a danger.

Brotherus does not enact the gaze's tendency to follow moving objects. The fact that the artist's gaze does not follow the naked people entering from out of shot, but stays put, tells us that the focus of her interest is the landscape, and not the bathers. The gaze, of course, is delighted by the events in the picture, but they remain a part of the landscape. The images of small lakes and open expanses of sea calmly give way to one another, and sometimes we get a glimpse of a town on the horizon. Viewers sit immersed in their own thoughts and look at the landscape. We are alone, even when others are present.

The projection of the mute video images on a very large scale onto the walls of rooms or buildings as pictorial wallpaper makes the walls transparent and mobile. What was solid a moment ago is no longer so. Whereas, if the images are projected into a small three-postcard collage, we can give ourselves up to the seduction of memories: This is what it was like in summer.

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Hannele Rantala

The writer is a visual artist.

Translated from Finnish by Michael Garner.