

## To see the water for the rain.

Sophie Howarth

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An interview with Elina Brotherus

Sophie Howarth: Your video triptych *Spring* reminded me of passages in Andrei Tarkovsky's films, in which it seems to be almost constantly raining, sometimes just thin drizzle but quite often thick sheets of torrential downpour which contribute to the sense of emotional immersion. Interestingly Tarkovsky said that he could not imagine a film without water, that is was a very cinematic element in his work, one which he used to express the idea of passing time, depth, transformation and reflection. You have said that your work is concerned with emotional landscapes and I wanted to begin by asking you about the metaphorical properties of water in the two works you have made for the Wapping Project?

Elina Brotherus: These works are about my desires but not in a straightforward sense. I don't really like to use symbols in my work. However I can say that when I'm unhappy I turn inwards and my work tends towards self-reflection while when I'm happier I turn my eyes outwards to observe the environment. But really it's the formal properties of reflection which are most important to me in these works. In the installation on the roof, the water in the tank reflects the landscape in the lightbox like the surface of a river or a lake. I'm making a reference to the history of the building as a power station using water and also to the River Thames which seems to function as a continuation of the water surface over the edges of the tank.

SH: How does the image on the rooftop relate to the video triptych *Spring* installed in the Boiler House?

EB: I shot the footage for *Spring* in the end of March this year. It had been raining, raining, raining, grey, grey, grey all winter in Paris and I felt really claustrophobic and as if I did not even know whether spring had come. So one week, my boyfriend and I decided to get out of the city and we drove to Southern Brittany and the Loire valley where much of the land was heavily flooded.

SH: So it was a journey in search of spring?

EB: Yes. You see in Finland winter is so depressing, it's something almost intolerable. So spring is very special for me, a kind of culmination of longing and desire. But in Scandinavia it lasts such a short period of time, the most beautiful time is often over in just two weeks. Everything happens so quickly, and every year I've been so busy, often in the darkroom printing, that I've seemed to miss it, to miss this huge promise.

SH: Is it significant that this exhibition will take place throughout the winter?

EB: Absolutely. I miss spring, a lot of people do. This exhibition is all about comforting us, to remind us of the blue dusk and the emerging green and the birds. I wanted the image on the roof to be very luminous, to be giving out a great light in contrast with the horrible cold, dark winter surrounding it. And I wanted the reflections to be very clear and undiluted because of that darkness.

SH: Of course, being England, it will probably quite often be raining when people go up to the tank, which will muddy the reflection but emphasise the connection between this work and the video pieces installed in the Boiler House below.

EB: A blurred reflection can be very beautiful too.

SH: In *Spring* one is very aware of the effects of seeing the landscape through the windscreen and the camera seems to observe the hierarchy between close-up and distant images much more strictly than the human eye would. In the first part, *Rain*, for example, we see water seeded on the windscreen glass, and in the third part, *Flood*, there is a strong visual emphasis on the immediate roadside landscape, the edge of the tarmac and the close-up trees. Those aren't necessarily the things the eye would pick out.

EB: I'm interested in how the camera and the eye perceive things differently, and in the different layers you get with the photographed or filmed images. As you say the foreground becomes almost imperceptible because it moves so close and so fast. It's a kind of stroboscopic effect. Once, when I was taking a photograph of a bridge at night, around ten people walked past during the five-minute exposure time. But their movement was so quick in comparison with the exposure time that they hardly left any trace on the film. In a sense it's the same with these trees.

SH: Do you often use long exposure times in your still photography?

EB: I often work in the early morning, in the evening or at night when the scarcity of light means long exposure times are necessary. In a sense this means that my photographs are about capturing a period of time, rather than being about the decisive instant that photographers such as Cartier-Bresson were after. With long exposure times you capture visual effects that can't be seen by the eye. Do you know the theater photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto?

SH: Yes.

EB: Well I adore that work. It's so uncluttered and intelligent. All the light in the photographs comes from the movie that was playing in the cinema. He just leaves the shutter open for the whole duration of the film.

SH: It's interesting you should mention Sugimoto, because like him you place great formal emphasis on horizon lines.

EB: The horizon has been an important motif in a lot of my landscape work. I think it is the essence of landscape, its most basic element, and also a route for the gaze to go deep inside. If you only draw a straight line across a sheet of paper, then in a sense it has already become a landscape. Living in a big city, I miss open space. It's something I need both as an experience and visually within a picture. The horizon is an edge but it's also a rim which you can always imagine there is something wonderful behind. That's an important aspect of the longing in my work, to go behind the horizon.

SH: The image on the roof is a kind of pure horizon, though a close-up one.

EB: I took the image in Iceland where the landscape was so simple, often only the horizon line was there. I love to be amazed by the qualities of a landscape and in Iceland I was completely stunned. In ten days I exposed about a year's worth of film. This image is beautiful to me because it's just green moss, grey sky, nothing else. You know the world is so chaotic, so full of visual noise. I think the artist's job is to frame the meaningful fragments, to show just the essential things. And for me the clue is to keep the visual language modest, not to yell, but to whisper.

SH: Tell me how you whisper visually in your work?

EB: For example by using a restrained palette of colours. And in general I try not to add but to take away. In the studio you start with nothing and then you add, but I always work in real environments where I have to concentrate on taking things away.

SH: Has that paring-down approach affected the way you edited the video material in *Spring*?

EB: The way the different parts are edited and looped means that they are forever appearing in new combinations. I want the looping to be imperceptible so that the scenery seems to flow by the spectator in a continuous, calm, never-ending movement. For example the second part, *Oak Tree Forest*, will seem like an eternal woodland.

SH: We have come back to one of the essential the properties of water, the idea of flow.

EB: It's an important idea for me. I love to be between places, to look out of the window of a train or a car and watch places flowing by.