

Published in *Elina Brotherus : The New Painting*, Next Level, London 2005.
Andrea Holzherr, 2005

Of Landscape

Elina Brotherus' photographic work is essentially comprised of self-portraits and landscapes. If the photographs from the early stages of her career are marked by the emotions that have been brought about either by events from her private life or by the contemplation of nature, those from her recent series *The New Painting* (2000-2004) are the product of formal research.

It was in 1998, in the series *Landscapes and Escapes*, that the landscape first appeared in Elina Brotherus' work. These landscapes are still very much linked to the artist's personal history and their function is to constitute a space in which she can pose. However, they anticipate the importance which the landscape will take later on in her work.

In 1999, when Elina Brotherus arrives in France for a residency at the Nicéphore Niépce Museum in Chalon-sur-Saône, the landscape becomes a subject matter in itself, and along with the self-portrait, becomes the second major axis of her work. The landscapes from *Suites françaises 1*, which are generally composed in a geometrical manner, present a strictly symmetrical perspective with a centrally placed vanishing point. Elina Brotherus relies on formal order so as to convey a sense of calmness and tranquillity to the viewer.

In 2000, Elina Brotherus begins a series entitled *The New Painting*. Starting from the idea that photography is a new form of painting, she brings up the same problems faced by classical artists, but by using contemporary means - her camera. As opposed to previous series, in her self-portraiture, she is no longer inspired by personal experiences to construct the images: she now considers herself like a model, a figure situated within a given space, and a subject of formal research.

Elina Brotherus is indebted to landscape painters and to their research. She is interested in the classical ones as well as the more recent ones, and she draws from their various investigations with regards to composition, perspective, colour, light, space, etc.

Like Caspar David Friedrich, Elina Brotherus particularly favours Nordic landscapes and seascapes and like the German painter, she is capable of transmitting an emotion into the landscape. Her views of Iceland, such as *Horizon 6*, remind us of the fascination that the sea of ice had on the author of *Das Eismeer* (1824). Figures positioned within a landscape, as *Der Wanderer 1-5*, a theme which is also recurrent with Friedrich, co-habit in Elina Brotherus' photographs as though their primal function were to facilitate the viewer's access to the landscape, and to introduce a contemplative dimension to the work.

Elina Brotherus has also observed Impressionist painting at length. Like Monet, she likes to study the variations of light and to photograph the same motif at different times throughout the day – as in *Vue 1, soir* and *Vue 1, nuit*. Furthermore she also captures the extraordinary effects of light; *Baigneuse, orage montant*, with an electricity-filled, metallic, orange-coloured sky, is possibly one of her most astonishing photographs.

Another subject matter often explored by Elina Brotherus, the bathers, is a reference to Cézanne, amongst others, and to his outdoor studies. In her photographs and in her video triptych *Baigneurs* (2000/2003), Elina Brotherus studies the nude out in the open-air, modulated by light and colour.

A theme which becomes one of the core parts of *The New Painting* series is the horizon. The artist furthers her formal research through extremely simple compositions. She divides the horizon as a subject matter into several sub-categories: horizons which divide the image in half, which she entitles simply *Horizons*; horizons where the sky takes up more space than either land or sea, or *Low Horizons*; horizons which only contain a very thin strip of land at the bottom edge of the image, the *Very Low Horizons*; and finally those where the fine line is interrupted either by buildings or by other objects, and which she calls *Broken Horizons*. These geometrical compositions, unlike the landscapes in *Suites françaises 1*, comprise neither vanishing point nor depth (the landscape unfolds on a single plane). They contain a sense of great harmony and a somewhat distant beauty, which is difficult to penetrate.

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If the first images in the series *The New Painting* are influenced by Nordic pictorial tradition, the photographs of the "Italian Suite" from 2003 constitute a homage to Italian Renaissance painting. Here, the light and the warm colours play a particular role. Indeed, as she understands the impact which light can have on her landscapes, Elina Brotherus takes notes on what she is photographing in order to remember, once she has returned to the darkroom, the 'real' hues of the landscape. In the Italian photographs, as if to improve the viewer's welcome, curves and sinuous lines are substitutes for the rigorous geometry of preceding works.

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With or without figures, Elina Brotherus' landscapes are always characterised by their beauty. We can sense that nature, be it Nordic or Mediterranean, is of major importance for her; thus, she takes pleasure in portraying its beauty. Like many artists before her, Elina Brotherus feels the need to let her eye and her soul rest by being inspired by what she finds the simplest, and also the purest. Perhaps she shares the feeling that her predecessor, the American Alfred Stieglitz, expressed: "When you live in a city, where there are no trees and you are someone that is sensitive, you desire images."¹

Translated from French by Emily Butler.

¹ Alfred Stieglitz, quoted by Joel Smith in "Stieglitz and New York", *La Revue du Musée d'Orsay*, autumn 2004, p.67