

TORBJORN



RÖPLAND







All images (c) Torbjørn Rødland, Courtesy of the artist
Torbjørn Rødland is represented by David Kordansky Gallery (Los Angeles, New York), Air de Paris (Paris),
Galerie Eva Presenhuber (Zurich, Vienna), Standard (Oslo) (Oslo), and Nils Stærk (Copenhagen)



Torbjørn Rødland in conversation with Nick Byrne

I first saw the work of LA based Norwegian artist Torbjørn Rødland at C/O Berlin in February 2018 not long after I moved to the city. Winters in Berlin used to be old-school freezing hard, but now the cold snows of previous decades have sort of slushed into a grey, chilling dampness. Museums and galleries - particularly their cafés - play a big part in keeping body and soul ticking over till the greyness is replaced by a Berlin blue. Pale, and definitely not Prussian. Rødland's exhibition was a great fit to the city, to the time and to my mood. When you move to a new place to live your mind is such a hyped mix of constant observation, assessment, over-analysis, energy and fatigue. To spend time looking at his photographs was a wonderful experience. Gripping, involving, distancing, you can get lost in them or stand back and take in the mix of off-kilter realism. This can attract and unsettle you. You can simply stare, linger for a lot longer to take in the image, or you can let your mind wander and imagine a narrative suggested by the strength of the atmosphere. The photography is sharp, clinical, intelligent, serious and not without humour. Tight-lipped and mordant. And with an edgy eroticism which is latent not blatant. These are pictures to be read and not just looked at. And each one is a damned good read.

Nick Byrne: The theme of this edition of King Kong is "liquid". It's visibly present in various forms in your work. What importance does it have for you?

Torbjørn Rødland: It's where bodily life comes from. It's the source. Maybe I shouldn't use this as an argument against digital photography but it does make sense that images rising from liquids have a special power. I also sometimes add liquids to surfaces before photographing them in order to increase tactility and excite the imagination. I think we can also say that liquids are associated with intuition and the unconscious mind.

NB: In a short interview I saw, you talked about "touch". The importance of touch, and how you show or imply touch. The way you need to physically touch things to create, as a way to touch the viewer. How do you want to connect with your audience?

TR: Oh, mainly through the images. They make sense to some viewers and not to others. It's always like that.

NB: Your photography can have an initially promotional, advertising, almost fashion spread sharpness which can stop the viewer in their tracks. Then the details kick in, the unexpected, the unsettling...I've read that nondualism is an element in your work, present in the way you structure your images. It reflects how you see the world....How do you see the world, and what role do you give your work as a way of looking at the world?

TR: I hope they can help move art-as-photography forward to reflect the paranoid and complex ways we perceive the world these days. It's increasingly complex, isn't it? It's becoming impossible to tell a photograph from a promtograph. We have to be more careful than ever trusting our feeds and senses. But I'm not starting with answers like these. I make photographs in part to flesh out how the world is seen now.

NB: There's a razor-sharp clarity and clinical element in your photography, but there's such a variety of human life in the shots. It can be very human. Age, youth, men, women are of a variety, and show expressions of calm, surprise and confusion as they're placed in situations where oddness sometimes playfully, sometimes threateningly invades and takes over their lives. How does your art reflect our relationship to the world and the lives we try to live?

TR: Rather than being rooted in reportage, it's wide open to symbolism. I try to make picture that viewers can relate to directly, without having to imagine my issues and motivations. Often

we do not know if something playful is also a threat.

NB: Your films have an eloquence that goes beyond their actual duration. I like the way they almost come out of the screen towards the viewer, and their soundscapes set a mood that's intriguing...unsettling...calming. What do you like doing in film that you can't get from photography? What are the advantages?

TR: I get to experiment with sound, music, movement and pace in a more direct way. Almost all my movies have music recorded especially for them. All in all it's a much more immersive medium, but the still image is my first love. I don't spend my day imagining how to translate an action into an edited movie sequence but I constantly ponder what I can possibly do in photography.

NB: I know Bergen - it's possibly my favourite city in Norway. Is there a sense of the place, the country, the landscape that's permanently ingrained in your work? Or would that be too facile? (There's been a big Munch retrospective in Berlin so I'm probably over-channeling Norway!)

TR: I don't think Bergen is ever-present. Even the landscape images I made there aren't at all typical of the place. If I spent time there now I would make rainier, foggier photographs, but back then I managed to make them clear-skied and sunny. It's a city surrounded by mountains, and that verticality is everywhere in my work though. But that's not caused by my time as an art student in Bergen.

NB: The move to LA seems permanent. No return to Europe? What brought you to LA, and what keeps you there? Does it inspire you? Support you? Irritate you?

TR: It's both inspiring and a bit deadening. I love the driving. You're actually finding me in Europe now. For the first time since 2010 I'm spending a year away from the US, but I look forward to returning in June. Los Angeles is an extra large bouquet of villages that you in some ways can inhabit like the countryside that it isn't. It leaves you alone if you want it to but also holds a lot of private worlds that are only real and available if you've invited in.

NB: How explicit would you go in your work? An eroticism in your work is there, but how far would you go in the visual portrayal of sex and fantasies?

TR: If you move "further" and into pornography things tend to flatten out rather than deepen; layers disappear. Explicit material is endlessly available and not so interesting. We don't need artists to produce that. If you present me with a pornographic photo-novella I will probably prefer the early pictures where there's tension but the narrative seems open-ended. But in theory I can go further than I have in the past. I would just have to find a way in; find something fresh that I suspect I can or maybe cannot achieve. Right now that's not the direction I'm curious about, but liquids are of course also erotic.

NB: Do you need to get away from your art? How do you take a break after a key exhibition? Do you need a pause button, or can you, do you need to carry on?

TR: After an exhibition there may very well be a need to stop presenting and discussing finished work, but this typically coincides with a curiosity and a need to try something new. A season of harvesting is followed by a season of sowing.

NB: What's next?

TR: I'm putting together a 'selected photographs - 1993 to 2023'-kind of book, a larger volume with fifty texts, while at the same time experimenting with 135mm film in tiny cameras. This spring I'll spend time in Florence, Arles and Berlin.