

Art

Like an Ad, but Unsettling and Arousing

The photographer Torbjorn Rodland is having a moment.

By THOMAS ROGERS

BERLIN — One of the most striking images in the new retrospective of Torbjorn Rodland's photographs currently on display at C/O Berlin greets visitors as they enter the exhibition. It is a picture of a young woman, lit from the side by a powerful red light, with honey streaming down her cheeks onto her chin. Like many of Mr. Rodland's works, the image — titled "Goldene Tränen," or "Golden Tears" — looks like the kind of high-gloss photograph that might appear on a billboard or in a magazine advertisement, but it is unsettling in a way that can be hard to pin down.

Sitting on a windowsill in the gallery, Mr. Rodland explained that the photograph was meant to arouse a variety of reactions depending on a viewer's cultural interests. An art historian, he said, might see it as a reference to the weeping Virgin Mary, while a 22-year-old consumer of online pornography would see something more obscene. "If there's only one possible reading of a photograph, then I'm less interested," Mr. Rodland added. "The photographs are reading you if you're reading them."

Last year was a banner year for Mr. Rodland, who is 47 and spent the early part of his life in Stavanger, a city on the southwestern coast of Norway, but now mostly makes his home in Los Angeles. In the fall, the Serpentine Galleries in London hosted a retrospective of his work, and the C/O Berlin exhibition is his first institutional show in Germany. "He is currently a shooting star," said Ann-Christin Bertrand, the curator of the C/O show. "He is a mirror for how we interact with photography today."

Mr. Rodland's work has drawn admirers on both sides of the Atlantic for his ability to use the language of commercial photography to create beautiful works that also point to something darker. "We are permanently surrounded by advertising, whether it's product photography, or old genres, like portrait photography or landscapes," Ms. Bertrand said. "He takes up these genres and quotes them, but manages to create something completely absurd and surreal."

Mr. Rodland, a soft-spoken man, tends to punctuate his conversations with long silences and looping digressions about theory and popular culture. He described his work as "one-third Nordic melancholia, one-third Japanese cuteness and one-third American vulgarity."

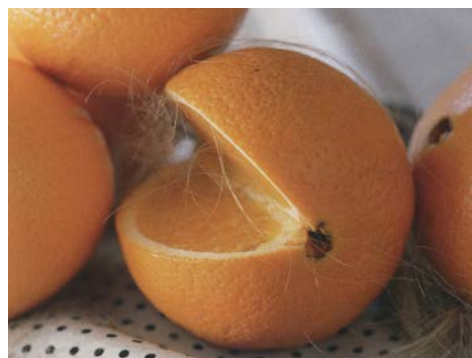
The exhibition in Berlin showcases the breadth of Mr. Rodland's work. It features some of his more recognizable works, like



A self-portrait by Torbjorn Rodland, taken in Oslo in December 2017



"Untitled", 2009-2013



"Trichotillomania", 2010

"Trichotillomania" (2010), a sensual photograph of oranges arranged on a spotted tablecloth along with tufts of human hair, and a more recent, untitled photograph of a naked woman contorting herself in the forest. At first glance, the forest image seems like a straightforward nude, and it's only after a closer look that viewers will notice the fact that the woman is wearing sneakers on her hands.

"You see it's a woman bending over, but these shoes make you completely irritated," Ms. Bertrand said. "What I value about his work is that it turns around things so that our perception is suddenly tripped up."

**Before memes
manipulated and
remixed images,
there was Rodland.**

David Kordansky, a gallerist in Los Angeles who represents Mr. Rodland, wrote in an email that "Torbjorn is one of the most important photographers of my generation," whose works "speak to the ubiquity and artificiality of our internet-based image culture." His work's intimate yet critical relationship with pop culture in many ways prefigured the rise of social media, and the development of a meme culture built on manipulating and remixing images.

When he was growing up in Stavanger, Mr. Rodland's parents worked for the post office and had little interest in contemporary art. But the photographer began drawing as a small child, and once he hit his late teens, he was regularly contributing illustrations and political cartoons to the local newspaper. When he began sending in drawings that were less easily legible, though, the editors turned them down. "I was rethinking everything that the child Torbjorn believed in," he said. "Then I realized photography was the thing."

Mr. Rodland went on to study photography at the Bergen National Academy of the Arts on the west coast of Norway, where he developed the ideas that have come to motivate much of his work. He said he wanted to produce photographs that depicted the real world but that acknowledged the ways photography had been turned inward by the practices of appropriation, which drew attention to the act of taking a picture. He also wanted to reflect his personal relationship with popular culture. "My desires have been expressed through the ads I looked at as a child," he said. "It's personal; this is the only iconography we have."

"'Lord of the Rings' or 'Star Wars' or 'Harry Potter,' or whatever, all of these big successes grow out of and carry these mythic truths or worldviews," Mr. Rodland explained. "It's part of being human."

The first photographs Mr. Rodland felt comfortable exhibiting in public depicted him walking through the Norwegian landscape carrying a plastic bag. "I was a romantic wanderer trying to have a subjective experience despite the feeling that it was too late, despite the whole postmodern revolution," he said. After graduating, he spent over a decade moving between cities, including Melbourne, Australia; Oslo; Tallinn, Estonia; and Tokyo, producing a huge number of photographs, always using film and without digital manipulation.

His work was included in the 1999 Venice Biennale and he had his first retrospective at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo in 2003. After that, he branched out into black-and-white photography and also made six films and several photography books. He has been exhibited at MoMA PSI, in the roving Manifesta biennial (Mani-

In 2016, the Whitney Museum chose Mr. Rodland to take part in a public art installation on the outside of 95 Horatio Street, across from its new building. The museum's curators and Mr. Rodland selected "Blue Portrait (Nokia N82)," a photograph of a hand, set against a backdrop of yellow fall foliage, holding an outdated cellphone with

an image of Anne Frank on it.

The photograph is one of a number of works Mr. Rodland has made that allude to World War II. As with the religious and pop-cultural imagery that appears in some of his work, his interest in the topic, he explained, stems from his fascination with the myths that shape contemporary society. In his view, the war has replaced the New Testament as society's vehicle for understanding good and evil. "The Holocaust," Mr. Rodland explained, is "the main mythical story of our culture." He said this explained why "movies dealing with that story are seen as Academy Awards contenders, while ones dealing with biblical stories are laughable."

"I am interested in the older stories, and in the modern and contemporary ones," Mr. Rodland added.

For the last seven years Mr. Rodland has mostly made his home in the Laurel Canyon neighborhood of Los Angeles. As he put it, "It makes sense to me to be in a place where the main industry is mythmaking, and where these images are being constructed, and scrutinized and believed in." He said he doesn't watch TV, because he is addicted to the medium — "like these alcoholics who can't have a glass of wine" — but that he enjoys movies and has been recently drawing inspiration from original recordings of Broadway musicals.

David Ducaruge, a Berlin-based musician who performs under the name Andrew Claristidge and who has known Mr. Rodland for over a decade, said there were three words to describe the photographer: "very quiet person." The two met in 2005, after Mr. Rodland heard Mr. Ducaruge's former band, Sex in Dallas, and asked the musician and his collaborators to create an original score for his film "132 BPM."

"He has a very clear idea of what he likes and what he doesn't like," Mr. Ducaruge said. He explained that Mr. Rodland is a private person, and that, in real life as in his photographs, the stranger aspects of his personality remain just under the surface. "All of us have our deviance, and a lot of people have pride in showing their deviance to everybody, but he doesn't need to show it," Mr. Ducaruge said.

Mr. Rodland's Serpentine show will move to Fondazione Prada in Milan, and he has shows slated for the Bergen Kunsthall and Mr. Kordansky's gallery in Los Angeles. Mr. Rodland's popularity might be a reflection of the way his work has predicted the evolution of online visual culture. In recent years, Mr. Rodland argued, memes have shifted from the irony that characterized the LOLcats — an online joke in which silly text was superimposed over images of cats — toward something more personal and sincere, and more akin to his work.

"Memes now are about seeing yourself in the ridiculous imagery online," he said. "It's all about this represents me — this is my spirit animal, this is my mood — and so it's not about critical distance, it's about seeing this is the only language I have."



"Wordless No. 3" (2010-17). Credit Torbjorn Rodland



"The Cut" (2016). Credit Torbjorn Rodland



"Cinnamon Roll", 2015