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## ‘I Like the Wetness of the Process’: Artist Torbjørn Rødland on the Pleasure and Perversion of Analog Photography

The soft-spoken photographer says the most important aspect of his work is the image itself.

Taylor Dafoe | February 12, 2021



Torbjørn Rødland, *Hood Ornament* (2019). © Torbjørn Rødland. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York.

“Perverse” is a word often used in describing Torbjørn Rødland’s photographs. Usually it’s in reference to the Norwegian’s artist’s subject matter, which is rich with symbols culled from a bank of diverse sources—art history, religious iconography, Japanese manga, tawdry porn—and typically deployed to unsettling effect: a cinnamon roll is stuffed with artificial teeth in one shot from 2015; a cherubic child lunges for an apple studded with coins in another from 2006.

But it’s more than that. His use of analog film in our all-digital world is perverse, as is the commercial polish of his pictures, which recall sleek fashion ads but have no product to hawk. (“A photograph that refuses to market anything but its own complexities is perverse,” Rødland once wrote. “Perversion is bliss.”)

Even his insistence on practicing rather straightforward photography in the art world, where conceptualism is king and painting propels the market, feels deviant.

Two new exhibitions of the artist’s work are on view now: “Bible Eye” at the Contemporary Austin in Texas, and “More Than Tongue Can Tell” at Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich. Both are installed in a relatively traditional way: photographs hang in white frames on white walls. The artist has always embraced the gallery cube—a perverse space to be sure.

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Torbjørn Rødland, courtesy of the artist.

“It just seems better for me to not take more attention away from the print,” Rødland, a thoughtful, soft-spoken man in his 50s, explained to me over the phone in a rangy interview about his interests. Pregnant pauses punctuate his responses.

“It’s more about helping the prints to be as clear or layered as they can be.”

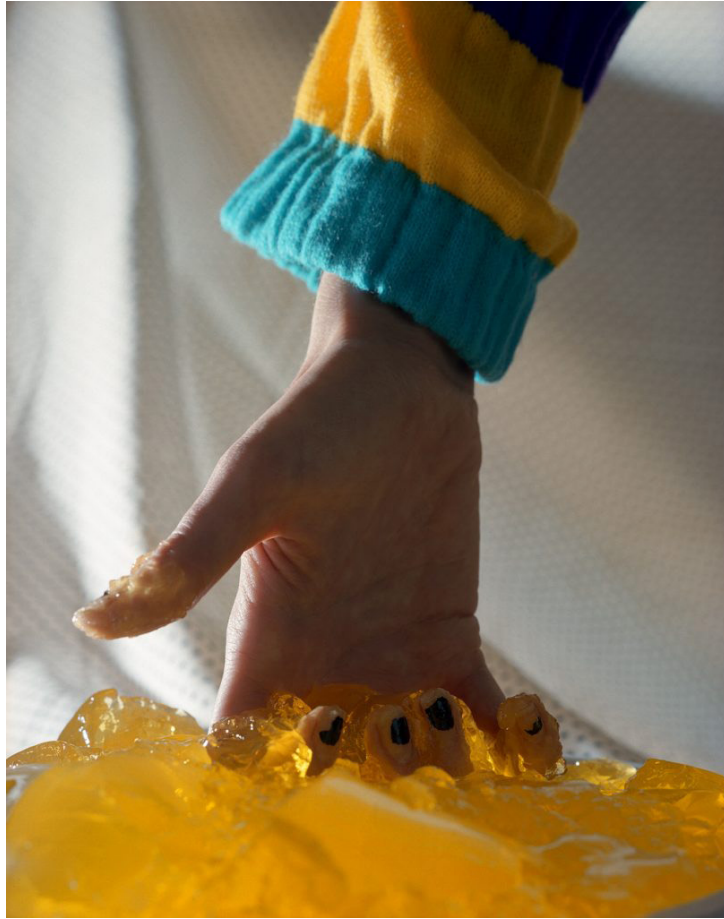
**“Transpluralistic photography” is a phrase you’ve used to describe your work, and curator Heather Pesanti alludes to it in the text accompanying your show at the Contemporary Austin. What does that phrase mean to you?**

When I studied photography in the early-to-mid 1990s, I was enthusiastic about the Pictures Generation and that type of appropriation-based photography. But at the same time, there was this feeling like it had been done—even though it hadn’t been done where I was studying in Scandinavia, or at least not in Norway.

At that time, I think it’s fair to say, that type of very image- or language-conscious photography was getting more contrived with Jeff Wall’s *Vampires’ Picnic* or Cindy Sherman’s “History Portraits.” There was this feeling that a bit of the energy had left that movement and people were looking for other photographic expressions. Then there was this sudden focus on the work that Nan Goldin had done 10 years prior, and the type of work that Wolfgang Tillmans did in the early 90s—both of which seemed to represent a return to the idea of investing in documentary again.

It seemed to me that, when moving on from pluralism—or what used to be called postmodernism—there was a tendency to go back to something more direct, something less complex, something less layered, like a pre-pluralistic art. Of course, now it turns out that Nan Goldin’s work is a bit more complicated than that and Tillmans evolved into a much more interesting artist than he may have seemed to be in the beginning. But for me the big question was always, How can you continue on from the clear shortcomings of a pluralistic art or a pluralistic photography without reverting to a simpler approach? Not to be nostalgic, not to reject the new lessons, but to move towards a new art and a new type of photography.

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Torbjørn Rødland, *The Man in the Moon is a Miss* (2016). © Torbjørn Rødland. Courtesy the artist.

So that's basically what the phrase means to me. The vocabulary is inspired by integral theory, which I discovered eight ago. It helped me think about what I'm doing. I've mostly stopped using that phrase, though, because it's too complicated. It's not really very helpful, I find.

**Pesanti talks about your analog work as being a kind of fish-out-of-water in a digital world. You've long shot on film, but I've never considered that as being central your pictures. What about this way of working is important to you?**

For me, it's mainly about process. It's a productive way to get away from what I can control. I like to work more blindly, to wait. It's helped me to accept and learn to love what I've actually done, rather than what I set out to do. With the digital camera, you're more able to avoid mistakes and to get closer to some kind of preconceived image or idea. I find it productive to not do that, but to be more experimental.

I also like the fact that the original is an object—a piece of plastic that I can put away in an acid-free envelope, rather than a file that has to be backed up on different hard drives. And it makes sense, I think, in terms of the subject matter—that it's life rising from liquids. I like the wetness of the process and I think there's a dialogue between that and just how objects are birthed in the pictures themselves.

**As dirty as your subject matter can be, your presentation is often very clean and even fairly traditional. You've spoken before about how unappealing the surface of a photograph is—a frustration that I think leads many photographers to sculptural interjections or more elaborate installations. Have you ever been tempted to experiment with alternate forms of showing your work?**



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Torbjørn Rødland, *Brass Pole, Black Boots* (2020). © Torbjørn Rødland. Courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery.

Quite early I saw myself as an image maker and learned to insist that that is enough, just in the same way that it's enough to be a great painter. Everything else just seems like complications that can take away from the power of the image. I do look at the white cube as a format, as a medium unto itself, and I'm very conscious of composing and installing in the space. I avoid a classical photography presentation where everything is the same size and hung in a line and where the viewer has to actively engage with each little window as she moves along the walls. But still it's about presenting these very neutrally framed prints. It just seems better for me to not take more attention away from the print.

One of the things that I'm trying to prove is that it's possible to be an image-maker in the art world without moving into sculpture, moving into installation, moving into conceptual art. As we both know, this is how photography was introduced to the top of the hierarchy that is the art world. It wasn't that 20th-century art photographers all of a sudden convinced critics that photography was a great art form; it was that the students of painters and the students of performance artists who started making photography [that did that]. The art world doesn't quite know how to deal with a photograph that is confident in being a photographic image and not trying to be something else. I think it's very important to me to just stick to that. You can almost say that my work is provocative in the art world because it insists on the photographic image.

**You once wrote that "a backlit object is a pregnant object." It's a technique you use in many of your pictures, often to varying effect—a holy glow, for instance, or an alien presence. What is it about backlighting that interests you?**

It's just one of those preferences. That's what makes it sing for me. It started when I was working with daylight. I would photograph something in the sun from different directions and I always ended up using the backlit version. There's something about being on the same side of the light source as the main object in the picture—it creates some kind of intimacy. It opens up ideas about what's on the inside. I guess that's back to the quote you mentioned, about "pregnant objects." It helps me to feel and fantasize about what's inside rather than being hung up on the surface the way commercial photographs are.

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Torbjørn Rødland, *Candlestick Pattern no. 2* (2020). © Torbjørn Rødland. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York.

**Another tendency you have is to withhold a sense of place. Your world often has a generic “anywhere” quality—so much so that it seems like nowhere. It’s very suburban in that way. What about that sense of “anywhereness” interests you?**

I think it’s the movement from the specific to the general, or from the descriptive to the mythological. The photograph isn’t linked to a specific individual in a specific place. I’m embracing some qualities of the medium that are similar to what a documentary photographer does, but that basic premise—that it’s important to describe place and person—I’m much less interested in, and therefore actively moving away from. I’m moving towards something that’s more interior.

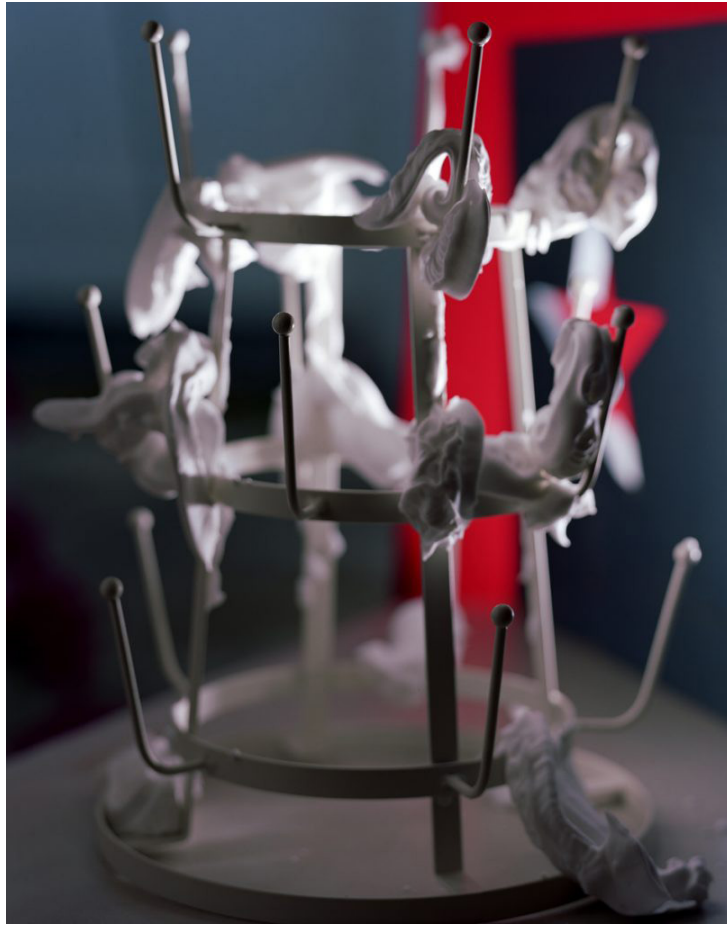
At the same time, I’m often bringing ideas from one culture to another. Rather than strictly working with Americana, I’m just as focused on, say, something I picked up in Japan or something I’ve carried with me from Scandinavia. Then I rework it in a Los Angeles setting. It’s this push towards a fantasy space, while sticking within the straight, almost conservative rules of photography.

**The idea of photographing across racial, cultural, or gender lines makes people uneasy because of the camera’s capacity for objectification or fetishization. But your work is all about objectification or fetishization. Are you ever questioned about photographing the bodies of Black, brown, queer, or disabled people the way you do?**

There seems to be two different lines of criticism that work against each other. One is about inclusion—this question of who is worthy of being looked at and being presented in photographs. And then you can be criticized if you exclude certain groups or certain minorities. “Why do we need to look at more photographs of young blonde people?”

And then, on the other side, you have the competing criticism of, “Who are you to put a young black woman in a vulnerable position?” It’s something I have to navigate and enjoy navigating. Our world is getting more complicated and I find that endlessly fascinating. It is, of course, a problem if it limits what I can do, but I haven’t really let it limit me. I also feel that I’m much less criticized for this now than I was 20 years ago, paradoxically.

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Torbjørn Rødland, *Hedgehog Foam* (2019). © Torbjørn Rødland. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / New York.

### **Why do you think that is?**

I think maybe that was mainly a Scandinavian criticism. I think the criticism happened when there were more young women and fewer other groups. It's possible that there could be criticism from queer couples, for example, but I have more often experienced the opposite—just enthusiasm. Sometimes I get questions—typically from white people about representations of nonwhite people. It's an art project that raises certain questions, about how we see and relate to inherited tropes. We're all evolving. Growing up is just as important as waking up.

### **To what extent do you plan your pictures in advance? How much room do you leave for spontaneity or mistakes?**

I am controlling. I decide the stage and who's on it; I decide what they wear and who they interact with. But it could be that I just have a lot of different objects or props to try out and I do. It's not fully baked at all. I need the material to deliver on a completely new level, something beyond what I had sketched up before. Sometimes I have a clearer idea of what the image should look like and manage to get there. Other times, I realize that it isn't interesting enough or that it's not stageable, and then something else happens in trying to get there that I think is equally or more interesting.

Then I work as any other photographer would—reacting to what I see. Of course, when there are people involved, there is more of an opportunity to try different things and there's more that can happen that can surprise me. But when it's working with objects, then I feel more like an abstract painter who doesn't really know the outcome.

"Torbjørn Rødland: Bible Eye" is on view now through August 15 at the Contemporary Austin in Austin, Texas.

"Torbjørn Rødland: More Than Tongue Can Tell" is on view through March 13 at Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich, Swit-