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Even

IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT

× Climate change will scorch the American west; it will dry up its land art too. A high-emissions road trip to three earthworks, recast by a warming planet *by Annie Godfrey Larmon*

THE PRICE OF SHARES

× All selfie backdrops are created equal. Museums have become recreations like any other, and cannot escape the logic of social media; dumbing down may even be a fiduciary duty *by Rob Horning*

THE FOUR WHITE STITCHES

× Perhaps fashion just has no more room for Martin Margiela, an invisible man in an image-driven age. Paris pulls the curtain back, very slightly, on a Belgian enigma *by Daniel Penny*

TWO INTERVIEWS × Torbjørn Rødland on the endurance of roll film and the viscosity of honey; Jason Moran on improvisation and the right way to wear a butterfly collar shirt

PLUS × Cape Town turns off the taps; the verdict on Renzo Piano’s courthouse; a Bollywood drama spills offscreen; playing video games with Hezbollah; reviews from New York, Washington, Beirut, and Sharjah; and a portfolio by Wiktoria Wojciechowska

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Interview

Torbjørn Rødland

A rapturous young woman with honey dripping down her face, a model whose skin is peeling off her nipples, two eclairs with false teeth embedded in the icing: they look so seductive, but so wrong. In the images of the Norwegian artist Torbjørn Rødland, among the most penetrating and attentive photographers of the last two decades, glamour and perversity are interwoven into dreamlike scenes that intimate symbolic meaning, but never fully clarify themselves. His photographs integrate the intellectual challenges of the Pictures Generation with

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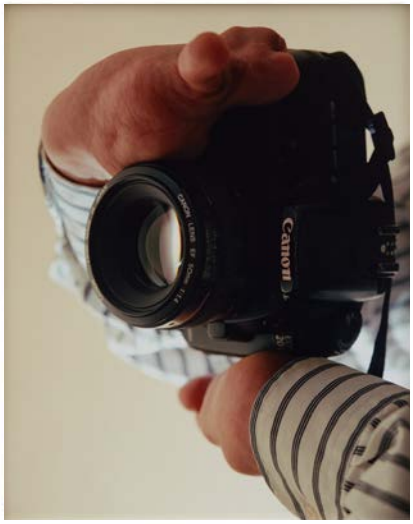

The Photographer. 2015. C-print. 30 × 23½ in. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

the ubiquity of fashion imagery and celebrity snaps in prints whose surfaces appear to be liquefied. The subjects, too, are often dripping with fluids, and frequently lit from behind—like a Madonna in a provincial church or an attention-seeking Instagram influencer. For Rødland, the pair are kindred spirits.

Rødland was born in Stavanger in 1970, and after studying there and in Bergen he hit the road. For the last decade he has lived in Los Angeles; he works out of a studio in a well-groomed residential neighborhood of Burbank, hidden down an alleyway my Uber driver struggled to find. He is busy preparing shows for the

Fondazione Prada in Milan, Bergen Kunsthall, and David Kordansky Gallery here in LA; in conversation he is soft-spoken but insistent, and thinks precisely about the uses of self-portraiture, the language of memes, and the legacy of feminism for a male artist shooting women. Later, in his garden, he goes to a tree laden with kumquats, and he plucks one with skin so bright and tight it could merit a closeup. It is the best kumquat I have ever tasted. × *Jason Farago*

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× We ought to start with the photograph called *The Photographer* (2015). It's in vertical orientation, and the camera in the photograph is turned vertically as well. The hands gripping the camera are malformed, though—and seem to struggle to operate the shutter release. I am the last person to read your work autobiographically, but this one image, with this title, seems to require it.

When I taught at Otis *[College of Art and Design]* in 2014, I was assigned a teaching assistant who didn't have fully functional hands, and so I was thinking about what type of tasks I could and couldn't ask him to perform. It dawned on me later in the semester to ask if he would help me make a photograph. The camera in the photograph is actually his camera, and the title is pointing to him as "the photographer." But I told him: I can't guarantee that reading, just as I can't guarantee any reading of any image that other people help me make.

But my interests were, of course, also linked to this idea of an image maker's shortcomings, manifest as something physical. I'm interested in the need to make images, to make art, as a way to overcome personal obstacles. Or personal shortcomings. Which can take many forms, far beyond the physical.

× You came to photography later in your youth, right?

No, I got to it pretty early; I was just more interested in drawing at first. I had a camera from the age of 10, 11. Back then it was a bit more of an investment than it is now.

× Where did you get your first camera?

From my father. He was an amateur photographer. We added a floor to the house when I was 15, and he built a little darkroom up there. So a few years later, I would also start doing my own black-and-white work in that darkroom.

That's when I started taking the medium more seriously. I was already doing editorial and political cartoons for newspapers at that time, and growing less and less interested in that dying art form.

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× What sort of black-and-white photography were you looking at, at that age? Was it *Life* magazine, Magnum style?

There were a lot of Cartier-Bresson books in the library in Stavanger. Like, way too many. But also other photographers, like Lucas Samaras, who had a more personal, experimental '70s approach.

Then I really started taking the medium, and the idea of contemporary art, seriously when I discovered the Pictures Generation a couple of years later. I was around 20.

× And you were seeing this in books, principally?

Exactly. Mostly theory books, in fact; not purely visual volumes. I was reading cultural studies at university, and I didn't need convincing that these photographs were important. It immediately made sense to me: our relationship to images, the ownership of images, all these questions.

And also the way the Pictures photographers pointed out the ridiculousness of having artistic ambitions within the medium of photography. I was embarrassed when we went to exhibitions and listened to painters talk about their work, and how they listened to *Tristan und Isolde* in the studio... I thought that was pathetic. It didn't seem relevant to me, and even with my friends, there was this linguistic distance between ourselves and everything that seemed pretentious. Everything that tried to do anything. Which, of course, is a teenage state of mind. You go through that on the way to becoming an adult.

× One of your earliest series, *In a Norwegian Landscape* (1993–95), took on Nordic stereotypes about the solitary man in nature.

That was one of the first arenas that I took on as an aesthetic challenge. To see if I could win it back. I started going back to the house I had lived in, up in the hills north of Oslo, just before I moved to Bergen. I wanted to do this type of *Rückenfigur*, as you would say in German...

× The figure turned away from the viewer, like Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer*.

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And I just couldn't do it. It felt embarrassing. It felt as if I was not being true to my state of mind. And then I realized that if I carried a plastic bag, then I would be able to stay there, be in the image, and somehow indicate to the viewer that I knew about the problem.

I worked on that first project, *In a Norwegian Landscape*, for all three years that I studied in Bergen *[at the National College of Art and Design]*. I started getting feedback that wasn't quite the feedback I wanted, and so I skipped the plastic bag and worked more on the landscape—because I wanted to take the landscape seriously, and not make some sort of ironic rejection. Which is how they were perceived, widely, because the art world, especially in Scandinavia, was just waking up to art that showed landscape as a construction.

One really important exhibition for me was a show of James Welling's train photographs, which I saw in Oslo, probably in '91. On one level they look like photographs by a camera-club amateur. An uncle who loves trains. But at the same time they were in this prestigious space. So you knew that just depicting trains wasn't the reason why…

× There had to be something more. The interrogation of the image, but also the American straight black-and-white tradition, especially in the west.

That was an important show for me to figure out what was going on, and how I could find my own position in photography.

Soon after that I also saw, in the same institutions, shows incorporating the other, more famous artists from the Pictures Generation. And those shows left me feeling a bit disappointed, because there was nothing… Because I'd also been studying paintings. I went to painting collections everywhere I traveled in Europe, and I was interested in pictorial spaces. And then I would be disappointed when in *[Cindy Sherman's] Untitled Film Stills*, there was no more information, no more tactility, when I saw the prints as compared to seeing the reproduction in a book. It might have looked more fascinating in the reproduction, actually, because then you could imagine what the film still was pointing to, which is this original that you haven't seen yet.

That was when I realized that I needed my prints to also satisfy in a classical way. To have those aesthetic qualities.

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The Man in the Moon is a Miss, 2016–18. C-print, 22½ × 17¾ in. Courtesy Bergen Kunsthall and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

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× One thing that has always struck me about your prints is that there's a liquidity to the surface. They can often look as if they are not fully dry.

When I started studying I was more interested in having my photographs in books. Then, when I started seeing my work in print, I saw just how many factors were out of my control. And how wrong it ended up, how bad the printing was. My images got cropped, or inverted. I started to appreciate the gallery as a controlled space, where I could show the images the way they were intended, the best possible version of them.

You're trying to make a satisfying object. A lot of people who are not into photography will tell you that photography isn't interesting because it doesn't have an interesting surface, like a painting does. For me the solution has been to try to render surfaces in a satisfying way in the photograph so that you're not bored by the surface of the print. The tactile quality becomes key for more cerebral uses of the medium: to move on from what conceptual art had become in the early '90s. It had lost the "mysticism" in the first of Sol LeWitt's "Sentences," and become something much more intellectual and preplanned.

× You bring up LeWitt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art"—and of course you have also written, for Triple Canopy, your "Sentences on Photography." The one I come back to often is: "Banal ideas can be rescued by personal investment and beautiful execution." Maybe we can talk about execution a bit. How much setup goes into these things? Are you sketching? Are you storyboarding?

It varies. Sometimes I know quite well what the photograph should look like, and I know how to get that. But most of the time it becomes a back-and-forth, and trying different versions until I either exhaust it or think that I have something —or that I have enough versions to choose from to find one that I will be happy with. That last stage is not very different from what you would think of as straight photography.

I can be very particular when it comes to angles of the head, angles of the eyes. Small adjustments to get it right in that way… I know, from being photographed myself, that it's very individual. Some

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photographers are not comfortable giving any type of direction, and others are looking to find the best possible angle for, say, a face.

I depend on my models to externalize a very vague idea I have. They give it form, give it finality, and therefore contribute very actively to what it becomes. It's very close to casting someone for a feature film. Different actors will take the same direction differently and give you a different performance—and then you choose between the takes.

× Your development as an artist took place not just as conceptual photography was being reassessed, and as the market was paying greater heed to photography, but also amidst a surge in popularity for fashion and celebrity. When you did magazine editorials, did you see them as extensions of your work as an artist, or a break from it?

I don't see them as editorial, and I'm in constant conflict with magazines, because they want to present my work as an editorial. I understand an editorial as the magazine's idea; they hire a stylist, and they hire a photographer to come in and shoot this set up and add their personal flavor to it. I don't really do that.

But I do what I call collaborations with magazines. They often ask, "Would you like to photograph this person?" I say no, not really, but here, I'll find people that I would be interested in. So then I use that entry point to get access to places and people that I couldn't contact myself—because their publicist wouldn't think it was a good idea for them to do an "art project." Still, it's not quite what someone like Roe Ethridge or Ryan McGinley does, which is actually working as a commercial photographer and having agents who get jobs for you. With that, you sort of lend out your name and give over a lot of decision-making power to the client.

Then we have the other position, the clearly conceptual one, where the artist hires a commercial photographer to do the work for him. Like Christopher Williams, or Elad Lassry, who does this more than people think. I'm not doing either of those things. I'm working from a position that isn't so established. And I think that's also why it can be confusing.

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× The other thing that confuses viewers, I suspect, is the use of visual tropes—teeth, hair, liquids that drip and flow—that cry out to be read symbolically.

As an artist you're always trying to correct some kind of imbalance. And throughout the 20th century you see these rejections of the previous position. Abstract expressionism was rejected by conceptual art, and then conceptual artists taught critics not to read pictures in a traditional sense, not to look for symbols or for content. To see only the idea. There are generations of critics and historians who will not allow themselves to read a picture in any other way.

That's what I'm also probably alluding to in "Sentences on Photography." For me, that conceptual, critical viewing seems not to acknowledge the full human experience of images. When we sleep, our brain produces images that are supposed to be read symbolically. It's part of human perception. You can of course choose to exclude that, but if you do you're excluding part of what it is to be a human being.

My project is more one of synthesis: acknowledging these different levels of human evolution, from childhood to adulthood, that we have all gone through. And to say, well, all of these levels have their place. It's trying to give room for an image to function at these different levels at the same time, and not cut one out.

× But how do you give a contemporary audience permission to think symbolically when images are falling on top of their heads 100 times a minute?

I think I'm trying to use the white cube for that. I was taught by a generation of artists that used the white cube to take images from popular culture and isolate them. They made you spend time with those images in those spaces to see: what are the mechanics? What is the manipulation here? What are the actual values hidden in these? So my next step is taking my own photographs, which have a similar photographic language, putting them in the white cube, and then forcing people to realize that they are trying to do something different. If you're inclined to it, you will start to project yourselves onto them. And if you're not, it's not going to be able to reach you yet. And that's fine.

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× It can be fascinating to see different viewers' reaction to a photograph like *Goldene Tränen* (2002), and the honey that drips from the model's face—more dripping liquid. Who finds it lecherous, who finds it reverential...

It was inspired by a photograph I'd seen in a magazine: someone with honey on her face. But that photograph was much more erotic and expressive. What I ended up doing in my version—probably because I liked going to Sunday school; I was always inspired by the imagery—was push it more towards a religious depiction, a weeping Mary, that you can recognize from certain Renaissance paintings and sculptures.

× Which many true believers have seen actually shed tears—liquids on those surfaces too.

Goldene Tränen is an early example of a picture that can have both a pornographic read and a traditional Christian read. It's up to the viewer either to see both or to see one of them. That's something that I'm continuously interested in: both activating the viewer and letting the viewer decide. I'm also generally interested in the link between the Protestant and the pornographic, but that's just another layer. And then there is the feminist critique—that says this double role has always existed, and we are just hiding behind biblical and mythological stories to feed the male gaze.

× One of the stickiest matters in your photographs concerns the representation of women. You describe your photos as collaborations with your models, but society is always in the studio too...

I started out as my own model, and it was important to me that I was the one in the frame, struggling with making a picture in nature, acknowledging that someone had been there before. That acknowledgement was the only way I could make something that was really my own. Later, when I moved on to landscape, I tried to see if I could still keep that feeling of mediation. That feeling of having already seen, of seeing the world through a filter.

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Goldene Tränen, 2002.
C-print, 19⅛ × 15¾ in.
Courtesy the artist and Galleri
Nils Stærk, Copenhagen.

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When I went back to photographing people, the interesting challenge, and the most problematic part, seemed to be photographing beautiful women as a straight male. Something that wasn't allowed. Something that I'd learned I couldn't do. But I also knew that if it were possible at all, it would be *because of* the feminist projects that I had looked at as a student. It would be because of artists like Sherman, who had created another space around images of women and around the reading of them. And then the question became: how can that be carried forward, and partly blown to pieces, by *my* doing it?

I understand that it can be seen as problematic for some, and it's one of the main reasons people were skeptical of my project for a long time. Maybe it would have been smart of me to leave that type of production to women. But again, it means something else when I do it. And there is a potential for it to be read in different ways that I think is also interesting.

× You felt you had less room for maneuver?

I felt this really early on. Within the pluralistic/postmodern mindset, as a straight white male, it's a little bit more limited what you are allowed to do. Because of course central to—and what's important about—the pluralist discourse is giving room to voices that haven't been heard. Any type of minority. And then there's more room to be emotional, and to show erotic desire, because they are giving voice to positions that haven't been fully heard.

× And because they naturally have a political character in that way.

Yeah. So the position that I was left with was to hold up the ridiculousness of the iconography that my type of person had sent out into the world. My job, at this point in history, would be to show that iconography as a construction, and to deconstruct it. To show that it's shallow. To show that it's violent.

And that never really seemed like an interesting project to me. What if? What if I allow myself? What happens? How can it be right? How can I make it interesting? Can I try to make it work? *Despite* the

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feeling that I can't do it. *Despite* the feeling that it's not something that the art world wants right now. That was part of the project from the beginning. It's similar to when I first moved into the forest and tried to take on romanticism: I know I can't be romantic, but what if I try?

So beautiful women are something that I've chosen to include in my project. And even though it may be hard to see exactly what it is right now, I think it's more of a problem to create a project that's fully respected and safe and understood in the moment than to do something that everyone has to struggle with for a while. It is one of the ways that I'm trying to incorporate some of these rejected modes of photographic expression, something that has a very direct appeal. I mean, it's no secret that both women and men really like to look at photographs of women. It sells magazines. Both men and women want a photograph of a woman on the cover.

× And on Instagram, too, I suppose. You don't use Instagram as seriously as Stephen Shore or Wolfgang Tillmans do, but you have an account, and don't seem to dismiss it.

It's one mainstream way where photography is being talked about and categorized. And for that reason, it's endlessly fascinating to me. I also think that because I'm OK with not staying cleanly in a safe white space, I should participate in it, to learn. To investigate the edges of it. The limitations of it. And the possibilities. Because so many of the changing mentalities to visual material are apparent really quickly.

× What astounds me about the generation younger than mine, the generation that grew up on social media, is that for them, photographic truth is back. "Pics or it didn't happen." Whereas I grew up being taught, to put it vulgarly, that all images were a lie.

I see a parallel between my project and that change, because I was taught the same thing as you: that everything is a construct, that there's no reality in a photograph. But of course that's part of the 20th-century tradition of rejecting whatever came before. The balanced truth is that there is an aspect of photography that is before language, that is close

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to the act of seeing. There is a physical, indexical closeness between the image and what was in front of the camera.

× Susan Sontag's last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), was about this. She rolls back *On Photography* and says that she went too far in dismissing the truth value of documentary imagery.

But neither should be the only reading. Looking just has to be balanced with a critical understanding that incorporates institutional manipulation and Photoshop and everything else, so that looking becomes much more layered. Because people are desperate to be moved, desperate to be spoken to. And what's lacking in that critical project is that there's no human content in the photograph anymore if everything is just a construction.

I've said this before, but it's almost like memes are ahead of parts of the art world, which is not the way it should be. Memes have moved on from the early pleasure of the fragment, the languages of the LOL Cats. Now memes are more like poetry; they give language to an experience that hasn't previously been described. And if you manage to do that, then that will communicate with millions of people who recognize this with a surprise and say, "This is actually me."

× That's a very optimistic reading. It's also one that I'm sure Mark Zuckerberg would be thrilled to hear. The ease with which all images can become fundamentally about "me"—from your photographs to a Beyoncé GIF to that war criminal who drank poison in The Hague—may indicate a sophisticated understanding. I'm not so sure it's a healthy one.

But I think I'm more focused on the desperation that it grows out of. And the lack of viable alternatives, or at least alternatives that do a better job addressing human experiences for people who are not sensitive to the classics. I'm not saying that memes are a solution. I'm saying that it indicates the desperation to move from a focus on linguistics and surfaces to actual human content and personal identification.

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Vacuum Cleaner. 2002.
C-print. 30 × 23½ in.
Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris,
and STANDARD(OSLO).

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The art that I was taught to believe in was art that tried to acknowledge what people were actually interested in, by using a more popular language. But it would do that with some kind of underlying moralism, forcing some kind of critical thinking on the viewer, saying: *This is your language.* But it's actually there to manipulate you. And I think meme culture is just one layer of a much more complex way that photographs actually communicate to us. It's not one to be missed.

× There does seem to be, despite the perversity in some of your photos, a half-avowed hunger for the old humanistic values—the values that Renaissance art espoused.

Sure. But I still think that people who have an ongoing need for humanistic values and stories are probably not my "audience." Especially in photography, there's this whole world that just continues the reportage approach of telling stories, bypassing pluralism, bypassing the whole postmodern revolution. It goes on with that business as if nothing happened. And to that audience, my work will seem cynical.

But for me, I see value in the postmodern, and building on that. One way of seeing my portraits where liquids and substances hold and violate and squeeze faces—that can be seen as a struggle with the classic humanistic photographic portrait. And a challenge to it. I have to push it, and violate it, to try to make it mean something. Because it had become just this automatic, dead gesture for me. I just could not believe that if a person with no expression looks into the camera, and then you capture it, then that qualifies as a meaningful humanistic representation.

So maybe the end goal is to incorporate these humanistic values, but it's very difficult. It's almost like the whole culture war—and just how easily you can have different interpretations of images and everything that's around us. For a representation to actually mean something to me, I have to challenge it more, and to try to assimilate its critique. Not to devalue it through critique, not to let critique be the final word, but to reactivate it.