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Torbjørn Rødland, *Paads*, 2010–14.
C-print, 23 1/4 x 29 1/4".

Dream Work

INA BLOM ON THE ART OF TORBJØRN RØDLAND

WE'VE SEEN IT BEFORE: the hazy glow, the casual perversity, the entire picture made punctum. But we hadn't seen it before photographer **TORBJØRN RØDLAND** took up the lens more than twenty years ago, capturing scenes of allure, sex, style—and we've never seen it quite like this, in strange focus, unsettlingly backlit, infused with tactility and dread. Despite a recent resurgence of interest in the artist's work, it remains elusive to critics and viewers alike. In the pages that follow, **INA BLOM**, who has known Rødland for nearly his entire career, reflects on the artist's deft touch—and on the uncanny connectivity that surfaces in his photographs.

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From left: Torbjørn Rødland, *In a Norwegian Landscape 2*, 1993, C-print, 19 1/4 x 19 1/4". From the series "In a Norwegian Landscape," 1993-95, Torbjørn Rødland, *Water Lilies and Seeds*, 1996, C-print, 30 3/4 x 23 3/4".

Rødland prefers the "wet" contingencies of photochemical processes to the temptations of infinite digital control.

I CLEARLY REMEMBER the first work I saw by Torbjørn Rødland. It was a photograph that many others at the time also saw, and that drifted to the top of the local pictorial surf and stayed afloat for a while. This was in the early 1990s, but even today it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what the image, *In a Norwegian Landscape 2*, 1993, is about. It shows a clearing surrounded by dismal fir woods and, in the middle, a young hipster type—the photographer himself—wearing black jeans and a black suit jacket over a cardigan and button-down shirt. His hair is long and blond; dark aviator sunglasses cover his eyes. He is dressed for urbane darkness—if only a house party with the parents out—and looks a bit self-conscious in the sunlit wood. In his left hand he carries a white plastic bag with the logo of a big supermarket chain.

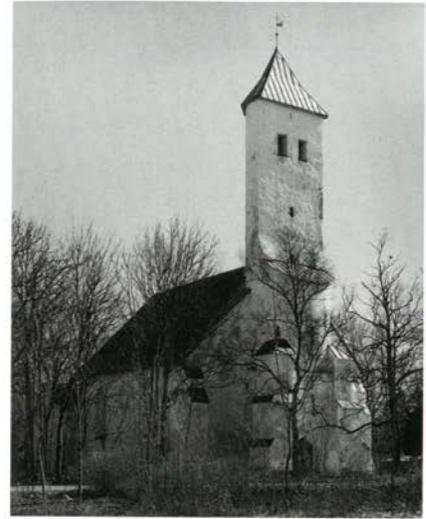
The image strikes a chord in every Norwegian wannabe who has ever braved unwieldy spots of nature to access smoky rooms, loud music, and (hopefully) intellectual conversation, carrying the requisite six-pack of beer. It is a slightly embarrassing thing, a situation where carefully constructed alternative realities, flimsy veneers of "subcultural" or "metropolitan" life, are exposed as just that. And perhaps this is why the image, as well as the variations of the motif throughout Rødland's series "In a Norwegian Landscape," 1993-95, was so quickly

circulated and also so quickly labeled and stored away. Critics saw a return to the Romantic appreciation of nature found in the early-nineteenth-century paintings of Johan Christian Dahl and Caspar David Friedrich. Critics also detected an ironic appropriation of those same paintings' motifs, serving the "whatever" spirit of the slacker '90s. Yet the half-truths conveyed in these descriptions have relatively little traction when it comes to the larger body of photographic work by Rødland—in which the image of a young man in the woods with a supermarket bag is not exceptional, but typical.

The Romantic claim for Rødland's photographs may have gained support from a heartbreakingly beautiful 1996 image of water lilies and pinecones floating atop a luminous bluish-white sheet of water. But the slick, liquid gloss filling the image from top to bottom might just as easily be an homage to the powers and desires invested in photographic surfaces, the more obviously commodified examples of all that is invested in the surfaces of modern artworks in general, from Monet's water lilies onward.

Subsequent images by Rødland were even harder to place. Norwegian summer landscapes containing cars, dismal architecture, and beautiful nudists with sneakers on their feet gave way to the bizarre: priests clutching animals and trees;

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Left: Torbjørn Rødland, *Trees and Stripes*, 2001, C-print, 22 1/2 x 17 1/4". From the series "Striped," 2001.

Above: Torbjørn Rødland, *Church no. 1*, 2003, gelatin silver print, 19 1/2 x 15 1/4". From the series "Churches," 2003.

black-metal musicians in full regalia melding with the dark, knotty fabric of deep woodlands: women with various kinds of fuzzy white stuff on their heads. There was a series of churches in washed-out black-and-white, as well as a plethora of object "still lifes": music cassettes, cream cakes, posters, burning skulls, and signed baseballs. There were complex double exposures in black-and-white, challenging the indexicality or realism of the photographic medium. There were also numerous portraits, remarkable for their

disquieting normalcy or almost idiotically contrived poses, and further complicated by disarming props and emphatic lighting. Somehow, in the work of Rødland, the two approaches—the ordinary and the extraordinary—seemed to be of a piece.

Increasingly, then, critics had trouble describing what Rødland's images were about. As a result, many reviewers tended to focus, single-mindedly, on details that seemed topical or fetishistic, such as the presence of too many pretty, gently erotic girls,

combined with too many overly cute animals. The strangeness of these images might have triggered other intuitions—perhaps related to the question of what exactly it means to "be" a photographic image amid a veritable surfeit of new-media technologies, environments, and objects. But such intuitions were harder to formulate. Under any circumstance, Rødland's work seemed to avoid all forms of recognizable intellectual investment, such as critical appropriation, social documentation, expression of radical subjectivity, or conceptual distance and rigor. It didn't exactly help that the images were meticulously composed and produced, or that a large number were bathed in a soft summer sunlight illuminating people and objects from behind or from the side, in more than a passing nod to the photographic world of David Hamilton or—to cite a different genre—the almost perverse emotional craftiness of a Carpenters song. (Later, the photographs of Ryan McGinley would extend this trope.) A low winter sun served the same purpose.

From the image of the hipster in the woods onward there was, in other words, a certain ambient halo around things and a sense of enchantment—"a spell affecting the eye" and "a kind of haze in the air," as in early definitions of the word *glamour*. Part of that glamour also had to do with the glossiness of Rødland's work, his attention to the specificity and

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Rødland's work engages the new digital reality at other levels of experience than the technological.

objectivity of what are, for lack of a better word, called "surfaces": the stand-out color and texture of the plastic supermarket bag against the wooded landscape; the smear-and-drip patterns of sauce on a tiled floor in *Napkins*, 2011, the constellation of brightly colored paper ribbons and metal chains on a dark wool sweater dominating the multiple-exposure nonspace of *G Minor no. 2*, 2013.

Previously, engaging with image surfaces would inevitably have meant finding your critical position within the tortured modern dialectics of the flatness of the picture plane versus the illusion of depth, or that of substance and structure versus fleeting appearance. To be on the side of the flat surface around 1900 was, as art historian T. J. Clark has pointed out, to be on the side of the popular as well as the modern. It was to evoke a world of mass-produced posters, photographs, labels, and fashion prints—but also to imbue painting with an awkward, in-your-face facticity. In contrast, to evoke flatness and surface qualities in a '90s art context informed by appropriation strategies, neo-geo "simulation," and the texts of Jean Baudrillard implied an engagement with the vast archive of interchangeable media images that attests to a virtual economy of signs referring only to themselves. To relate one's work, that is, to an overarching narrative of meaning's evacuation, and therefore a loss of aesthetic and economic ground.

Neither of these discourses corresponds very well to Rødland's struggles with photographic surface, even though the Pictures-generation engagement with ubiquitous imagery and its critique of the notion of artistic originality was the main critical currency at the school he attended. A 1997 text published in the short-lived Norwegian journal *Hyperfoto* is telling. Denouncing the objectifying use of the telephoto lens, which tends to remove any trace of the spatial relation between photographer and photographed, Rødland described a new and self-aware subjectivism



in the work of artists such as Beat Streuli and Merry Alpern, in which the use of the telephoto lens not only gives us an informal world seemingly unaffected by camera presence, but also foregrounds the voyeuristic and even illicit actions involved in such productions. As it happens, Rødland's discussion of the telephoto lens served mainly as a pretext for approaching a photographic relationality that side-tracks what seemed, around 1995, like a particularly constraining set of photographic alternatives: *either*

the extreme autobiographical and documentary subjectivism of Nan Goldin or the impersonal, free-floating image signifiers of Richard Prince. In other words, internalism or externalism, with no other options available.

At this point, Rødland's only hint about his personal approach centered on another technicality: the use of the wide-angle lens as a device that signals the active presence of the photographic apparatus of production. The sharp perspectival lines and spatial

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Opposite page: Torbjørn Rødland, *G Minor no. 2*, 2013, C-print, 22 1/2 x 17 1/2". From the series "G Minor," 2013.

Right: Torbjørn Rødland, *Napkins*, 2011, C-print, 55 1/2 x 43 1/4".

distortions such a lens produces indicate and even exaggerate the precise location of the camera in relation to its object. In fact, in many cases the lens posits the camera's presence among the things *in* the image itself, as an active agent "sharing their reality." This was the type of terminology Rødland used when discussing his early attempts to photograph a hedgehog in a way that would elicit a proximity and sympathy different from that found in most images of wild animals. The accompanying illustration conveys the impression of a camera practically sniffing the same leafy ground as the looming creature it portrays.

The discussion of the use of wide-angle lenses might have been another iteration of the familiar postmodern argument about the constructedness of the image and the materiality of its media. It was not. Or, to be more precise, it reconfigured the terms of such constructedness. Rather than emphasizing conditions of production or the loss of representational ground, Rødland's text zeros in on the various forms of connectivity at work in the construction of any image, the forces that bring things together in a newly assembled piece of reality called the *photograph*. It emphasizes, in short, the affective aspects of image construction—the processes of attachment or detachment—that define bodies and things in terms of their transformative encounters with other bodies and things. Such a perspective, which foregrounds the precarious and emergent features of shared reality, neither privileges nor excludes human subjectivity. Subjectivity is not the master signifier of the image, nor is it lost in a vortex of abstractions: It is quite simply one point of connectivity among many. The camera, with its associated range of lenses, aperture settings, lighting devices, and film types, is another.

It is perhaps significant that these insights concerning the affective forces at work in images emerged alongside technological changes that deeply transformed the identity and specificity of photography as



a medium and as a technical device. By the mid-'90s, the familiar concepts of indexicality and frozen instantaneity—photography's indelible link to the real—were increasingly displaced by an expanding digital regime in which images might be subject to constant and subtle modification, their material support an electronic network, a live real-time framework based on constant transfer and updating. In the course of a few years, photography not only became simultaneously ubiquitous and was cut

adrift—distributed among a multiplicity of devices and platforms—it also became, just as importantly, a locus of connectivity.

Rødland, for his part, never really adopted the digital reconfiguration of photography at a technical level. In his exhibited works, he sticks to his Pentax 6x7 or Sinar f2 cameras, preferring the "wet" contingencies of photochemical processes to the temptations of infinite digital control. Yet like a number of artists emerging in the '90s, his work seemed to

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Above: Torbjørn Rødland, *Kneefix*, 2010–14, C-print, 43 3/4 x 55 1/4".
 Right: Torbjørn Rødland, *Priest no. 2*, 2000, C-print, 29 7/8 x 23 1/4".
 From the series "Priests," 2000.



engage the new digital reality at other levels of experience than the technological (in the limited, tool-oriented sense of the term). Sustained exposure to the networked, time-critical infrastructures of the digital environment—an environment based on electronic microtemporalities beyond the grasp of human perception—led, more or less intuitively, to changing conceptions of things as well as of nature, and provoked new understandings of agency and relationality. Image supports premised on constant modes of connectivity (such as phones and tablets, and the platforms running on them) changed the very sense of what it meant to “be” an image or to be “in” a picture, and increasingly displaced the notion of the digital as cool, affectless calculation.

Even more significantly, exposure to the new media reality changed the very conception of the glossy surface, since such surfaces were no longer just forms of packaging or dissimulation (and hence inherently suspect). Now, surfaces were increasingly also experienced as interfaces, points of touch and encounter, navigation and transformation. Suddenly, the quasi-animist vitality of surfaces (recognized by Marx in the commodity) also had relational depth—if only in the sense that it would expose our inevitable engagement with them.

At first, the emphatic sheen, glamour, and glow of Rødland’s images simply reactivated the magic of attachment and connection in relation to the vernacular and the shopworn: the black-clad young man and his abject ambitions, the “Nordic nature” of tourist brochures and museum exhibitions. The recurrent emphasis on “cuteness” in the work served a similar purpose and actually presaged a much larger cultural trend. If anything, the past decade of screen-based sociality has taught us a lot about the

mediating powers of kittens, puppies, and all things small and furry. Yet what’s significant here is that the cute, despite its apparent simplicity, is actually a complex aesthetic figure, mobilizing both violent attachment and detachment. As scholar Sianne Ngai has pointed out, the initial feeling of tenderness that the cute tends to provoke is often quickly tempered by a sense of being manipulated and exploited. And this was of course precisely the conflicted zone of affect that emerged in and around Rødland’s early

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Above: Torbjørn Rødland, *Golden Lager*, 2007, C-print, 22 1/2 x 17 1/2".

Right: Torbjørn Rødland, *Backlit Puppy*, 2006, C-print.



Knees are tied together with a thin, loose rope; elegantly poised fingers dip into a glass of liquid; faces are mere supports for writing and drawing, image surfaces half-hidden under other images, like an Eminem poster.

work, traceable in the critical responses and in the sense of trouble caused by the images' often blatant sexuality. The cute was an early measure of what was at stake in the work's constant appeal to come closer.

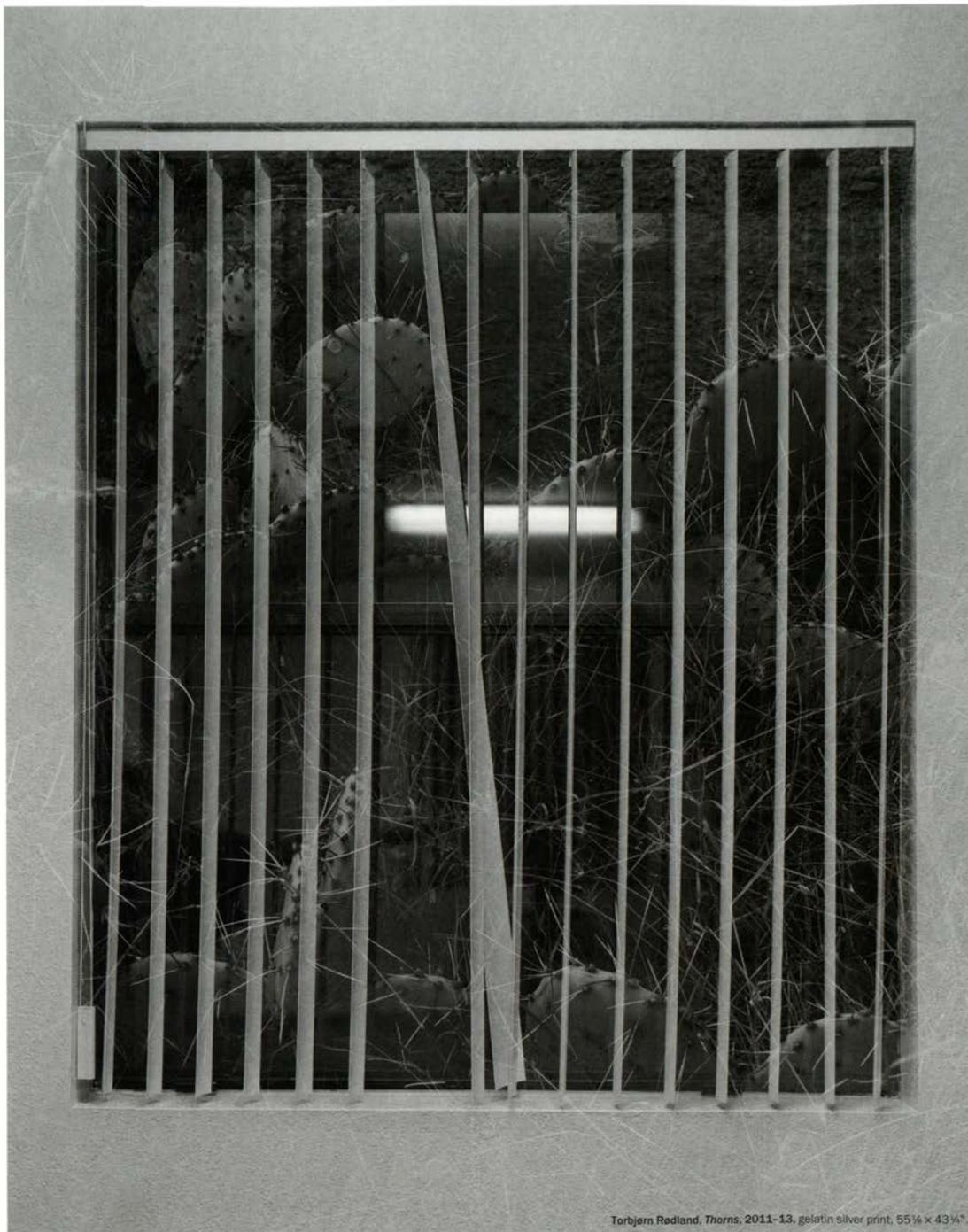
Gradually, however, Rødland's emphasis on surfaces became a means by which entirely new types of photographic objects could be produced. Increasingly, his photographs became sites of strange and complex relations, while never letting go of the basic promise of predigital photography: that the image offers a

spatial continuity analogous to that of a real, existing space. This was a deft strategic choice, given the fact that his photographs often produced constellations that might be more at home in a photomontage. Had *Priest no. 2*, 2000, Rødland's image of a priest solemnly facing his own gigantic mirror distortion, been part of the more explicitly defamiliarizing encounters in a Dadaist or Surrealist montage, no one would have flinched. To attribute the same power of aggregation to an entirely traditional analog photographic space produces a very different realm of strangeness, since the act of pulling things together, of creating new folds in reality, here seems to take place in a world in which actual bodies move and navigate. In contrast to the montage surface of flat, cutout picture elements that are obviously culled from a range of disparate sources, Rødland's photographs conjure up a deeper, more sedimented and textured material composite, increasingly appealing to a sense of touch.

In fact, attention to tactile zones of encounter marks photograph after photograph in Rødland's recent work, very often revolving around object relations. If humans are present at all, it is mainly as body parts: legs, hands, and feet mere objects among

others. Knees are tied together with a thin, loose rope; elegantly poised fingers dip into a glass of liquid; faces are mere supports for writing and drawing, image surfaces half-hidden under other images, like an Eminem poster. Increasingly, the glistening hair that formed sunlit halos around so many of Rødland's human heads takes on an independent existence, migrating to new textural realities: Tiny, silky tufts caress the skin and meaty insides of luminous oranges; limp wet and dry extensions hang from a metal basket down to a tiled floor; a brilliant magenta river flows from a shaved skull. Most remarkably, in *Thorns*, 2011–13, a barely visible skein of shimmery, messy, hairlike lines covers a window, its vertical blinds left half-open. Behind those blinds, a dark room with a lit neon tube can be glimpsed—but also, on closer inspection, the delicate half-transparent shape of outsize cactus plants covering the entire frame of the window, their thin, whitish spines melding with the luminous strands. The constellation does and does not make sense, in equal measure. But then, this is one among a number of black-and-white double and multiple exposures in which the emphasis is less on the disjointed objects and spaces that pull in many directions than on a

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Torbjørn Rødland, *Thorns*, 2011-13, gelatin silver print, 55 1/4 x 43 1/4"

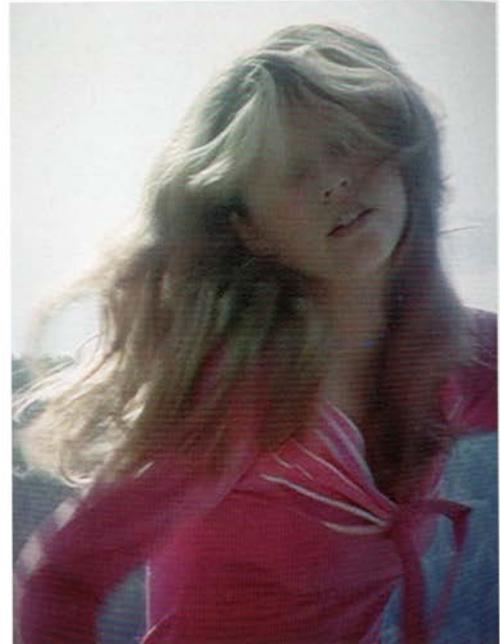
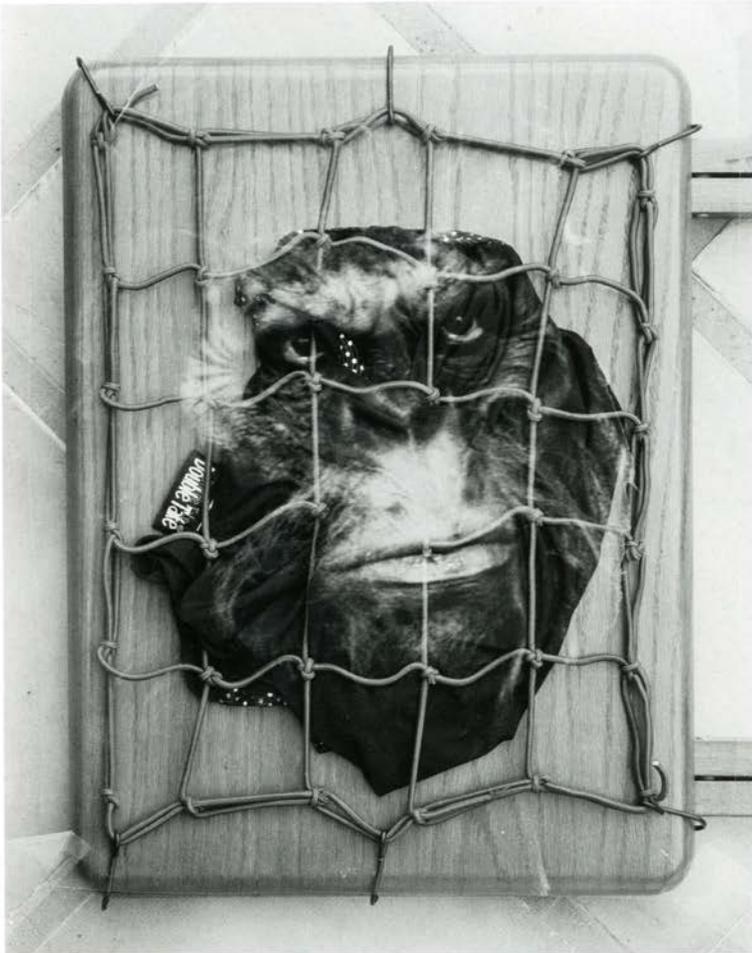


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Torbjørn Rødland, *Apple*, 2006, C-print, 23 1/4 x 29 1/4"

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Left: Torbjørn Rødland, *Elastic Net*, 2011, gelatin silver print, 12 1/4 x 9 1/4". From the series "Eighteen Analogue Double Exposures," 2011.

Above: Torbjørn Rødland, *♥ All This & Dogs*, 2004, digital video, color, sound, 14 minutes.

Few works so clearly articulate the way in which modern media technologies actually direct our attention to the vitality of the material world.

kind of visual and spatial fait accompli. A new photographic thing has simply emerged, take it or leave it. Blame the camera.

Blame it for *Elastic Net*, 2011, for instance, in which a smooth wooden board is covered by a mesh that fastens around something extremely specific yet very hard to make out—at once a piece of dark fabric with a bit of patterning here and there and a fragment of a gorilla face. It is hard to decide if the deep crevices under the net are gorilla wrinkles or fabric folds. On first view, the whole thing looks very much like another photograph of an object: a contained, distinct, three-dimensional entity placed on a tiled

floor, not unlike the music cassettes that Rødland has captured under relatively similar conditions. But it's not: Its thinglike aspect only serves to drive home that this is a photographic object through and through, a phenomenon that does not exist beyond the camera's reality. The rules and constraints of double exposure in analog photography—that only the darker elements on the film will be read by the camera as transparencies on which new gray tones may be inscribed—are the key operators here. So the elastic net, shown in knife-sharp relief, in some places has to pass through, not just above, the gorilla face. Spatial laws are obeyed, but they are essentially

the laws of the camera and the way in which it distributes light on a photosensitive surface. As if to underwrite its own authorial power, the photographic thing has included a signature of sorts: a small tag with the legend *DOUBLE TAKE*.

Double take, indeed. Few works so clearly articulate the way in which modern media technologies ultimately direct our attention to the vitality of the material world, and to the active existence of things. Even Rødland's most abstract photographs—and their numbers are increasing—rarely appear self-contained. Instead, they seem restless, rife with the same vague ambitions or desires that mark the rest

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Torbjørn Rødland. *Blues for Bigfoot*, 2005, digital video, color, sound, 14 minutes.

of his images—a condition exacerbated in the six short videos he produced between 2004 and 2007. For these videos seem to have been created for the sole purpose of responding to the affective potential of specific images. Every long shot is, essentially, a precisely composed photographic still that just happens to include a modicum of movement, but that is otherwise similar in style, composition, lighting, and general feel to any other Rødland photograph. (In fact, two of the videos have the vertical book-page format seen in many of Rødland's prints, with the camera turned sideways.) The transition between these image-scenes is slow and measured, not unlike leafing through an album whose pages have come alive. There is no narrative and no real protagonists—only loose themes and a lot of texture and atmospherics.

The videos' themes are, unsurprisingly, often vaguely related to the supernatural, as in *Blues for Bigfoot*, 2005, an ambient report from the deep woods

of the Pacific Northwest, where Sasquatch sightings are part of the local folklore. The video makes no claims as to the existence of Bigfoot, but produces, through its measured sequence of photographic planes, the sensations and perceptions of an environment in which a Hampton Inn message board announcing a Sasquatch symposium in the east wing seems like a fairly logical thing. That these sensations and perceptions should include not just fog, grass, earth, and animals, but also an arrangement of broken plastic cutlery, colorful Mylar bands waving in the wind, religious graffiti, and a destroyed mattress, indicates that the magic of image surfaces does not, as philosopher Vilém Flusser argued, reside in their ability to mediate between humans and the world. Their magic is simply that of a material world about which all is never known. □

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