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Torbjørn Rødland Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, Norway



Torbjørn Rødland

My inability to look away from Torbjørn Rødland's photographs feels like prurience. Many make me uncomfortable, yet I linger over them. His images are slick, controlled and exactingly composed, but also outlandish and uncanny. As 'Sasquatch Century', this survey of two decades of the Norwegian artist's output made clear, Rødland has always been an exemplary analogue technician. What has developed over time is his talent for conveying textures, devising peculiar juxtapositions and revealing the underside of desire – qualities that evoke conflicted responses like mine.

Rødland's photographs often include people, yet they're not exactly portraits. Few of his human subjects look directly at the camera and most are in bizarre poses or circumstances. In *The Measure* (2010–13), a shirtless, mop-haired blonde boy sits patiently inside a dog cage, his hands clasped on his lap. A muscular black man with his head bowed likewise has *Folded Hands* (2012), yet the tight black briefs that encircle his wrists contradict the piety of his gesture; they're all he wears. In an untitled photograph dated 2009–13, a naked young woman in a forest wears socks and shoes over her wrists and hands. Bending forward, her four limbs akimbo and her head tucked behind one arm, she looks like a hairless fawn struggling to right itself.

Rødland's photographs of objects are, likewise, not quite still lifes. In one image, several oranges are coated with fine, sandy-blond hair. The title, *Trichotillomania* (2010–11), names the disorder that compels people to pull out their hair. In another recent photograph, *Napkins* (2011–12), six crumpled napkins have ineffectually wiped up chocolate syrup poured on stone tiles. Incongruously, downy white feathers stick to the liquid. The abject elements in both pictures suggest anxiety or pain just beyond the frame.

There's something 'wrong' with all of these photographs, which capture or create scenes most of us would not find picture-worthy, yet each is beautifully staged and shot. Similarly, the installation decisions, which the artist made together with curator Milena Hoegsberg, appeared odd at first but were patiently worked-through. The white and mint-green walls came together at strange angles; the photographs were hung lower than is typical; small black and white pictures punctuated the larger colour prints. Though the show forwent chronology and thematic groupings, its unusual atmosphere proved a carefully plotted corollary to Rødland's art. Karlsruhe

One challenge seems to be that most viewers think about pictures, whereas Rødland seems to think through them. He uses the camera to resolve questions no one else would imagine asking. Some are practical, having to do with achieving certain qualities of light or ensuring a remarkable depth of focus. Some are sensorial: how can a flat, texture-free surface create physical empathy, phantom sensations? What sets Rødland apart from other contemporary photographers who skirt the edge of propriety is his professed lack of irony. Don't mistake this for a lack of sophistication. Rather, it's a deliberate reaction to postmodern predecessors and to the hollow criticality of contemporaries using tired strategies.

As Rødland has said: it's harder today 'to come to terms with the complexity in a photographer's approach to a breathing world of beauty, life and consumption'. His most captivating photographs use conventions like genre to explore what sensations the camera can convey. Some of his best images meld portrait and still life. In them, he treats bodies like objects, cropping them to render his subjects unidentifiable. What's left – a woman's toes encased in gelatinous-looking ice; a forearm entwined with an octopus tentacle – are like undiagnosed fetishes. We can't be sure that what's wrong with these photographs might not dwell within us, too.