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TORBJØRN RØDLAND
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ON THE ROAD TO REALITY
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IMAGINED MULTICULTURALISM
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Torbjørn Rodland, *Nudeist No. 2*, 1999, c-print. Courtesy of Galerie Wang



Sentimental Education

During the past decade it has become exceedingly difficult to determine the cultural status of a certain kind of photographic image. Photographers like Wolfgang Tillmans, Collier Schor, Mark Borthwick, and Anders Edstrom have produced images that look as if at home – some would say more at home – in fashion magazines as they do in the gallery. These kinds of images have an everydayness about them, a faint realism and a snap-shot aesthetics that privilege the illusion-seduction of the 'here' and 'now'. The Norwegian artist Torbjørn Rodland's deceptive photographs belong and don't belong to this image-making context. BY BENNETT SIMPSON

HERE'S A DESCRIPTION of a recent photograph by the Norwegian artist Torbjørn Rødland. A young woman, a girl really, stands in a lush, churned-up forest glade. She's nude. Her back is to the camera. In front of her is a kind of lean-to, a small primeval looking cave made from dead branches, underbrush, and pine boughs. The forest floor is thick with dirt, patches of grass, saplings. The girl's body, like the light in the picture, is bronze and gold. Her ass is white (she has a tan line from a bathing suit). She's wearing white Nike cross-trainers (futuristic and blobby) and holds a plastic carry-all bag limply in her hand. Even without the register of her face, the girl seems contemplative, fatigued, lost. Her posture says so. Another photo: A man, middle-aged, balding, also in high-tech running shoes, lies on the ground of the Northern Woods. He's nude too and as muscular as the girl is supple. The man could be a university professor of literature, or a banker, or a chef. He looks proud, but harried. In the shelter of his body, two kittens sit passively on a red cloth. He's nuzzling one of them with his hand.

These are deceptive images. They're not kitsch and they're not erotica. They look staged, but their subject matter seems casual, even playful at first. They're presented as art, but does this automatically short-circuit their smarminess? Are they clichés? The photos come from a series of images of 'nudists', entitled *Joy Inside My Tears*, that Rødland has produced over the past two years: images of people so advanced in their cultural appetites that they've chosen a life apart from culture – or at least apart from clothing and cities. In an earlier suite of photographs, titled *Even Now*, Rødland similarly positioned – displaced – his figures in the wilderness: girls cavorting with billy-goats, girls dressed in police uniforms stranded in the woods, lone images of the artist, *pace* Friedrich, standing on the crests of mountains. These photographs, like those of his 'nudists', have a contrived melancholy, a built-in out-of-place-and-time Romanticism about them. They're sentimental, but their sentimentality is *performed*.

During the past decade it has become exceedingly difficult to determine the cultural status of a certain kind of photographic image. Photographers like Wolfgang Tillmans, Collier Schor, Mark Borthwick, and Anders Edstrom (one might also include Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Latitia Benat, and Terry Richardson) have produced images that look as at home – some would say more at home – in fashion magazines like *Purple*, *iD*, and *Self-Service* as they do in the gallery or in Artforum or Frieze. Whether casual or composed, these kinds of images have an everydayness about them, a feint at realism and a snap-shot aesthetics that privilege the illusion-seduction of the 'here' and 'now' over the manifest critical irony of the 'Pictures' generation (Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman) or the post-conceptualism in a photographer like Christopher Williams.

In an important essay from last year, critic Jeff Rian (himself an editor at *Purple*), described the common quality of many of these images as "paranoia soft."¹ Their subjects were "youth on the lam from big media." Their style was subjective and informal, but cosmopolitan. In much of this work there was (and is) an impulse towards lyricism and minor-keyed Romanticism, a naturalization of the quotidian, of a life adrift in the world. Much of this image-making is rigorously 'present tense' and obliquely (though often deliberately) reactionary to discursivity beyond the local. Rian noted that making images for start-up international fashion zines was initially a pragmatic way of countering the corporate strictures of places like *Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. It was also a way of dealing, in less of a conservative way than we have been led to think, with the increasingly proscriptive discursive atmosphere of an art-world that had only just begun assimilating the high-theory of the '80s. Such images were sophisticated and naive at the same time. They sold 'style', a look, a basement worldliness. The contradictory impulses of Romanticism were (and continue to be) everywhere in this fashion-art photography – expressive but mute with ecstasy, effusive but ineffable, celebratory but melancholy (if not nihilistic), subjective but historically impinged – only they were not called Romantic, or even sentimental, as such but 'cool', 'edgy', 'realistic', 'personal', 'vernacular', or 'dark'.

Rødland does and doesn't belong to this image-making context. He has published his pictures in *Purple* sporadically over the last few years, and many of his subjects – kids, girls, displaced youth, displaced culture, a nature no longer recognizable to our jet-lagged eyes – are familiar ground for anyone fluent with the twin-histories of recent fashion and art. Rødland is not, however, a fashion photographer influenced by art (like Borthwick) or an art photographer influenced by fashion (like Tillmans). His evocations of youth and style participate willingly in a fashion Zeitgeist. But like a number of other late-90s photographers (the American Roe Ethridge comes to mind), such participation seems strategic – a way of linking contemporary modes

of image production to a more general attention to art historical issues; in Rødland's case – the feasibility of pastoralism and lyric Romanticism in an era overdetermined by rationality, excessive constructionism, and the diffusion of the once autonomous spheres of nature and culture.

Rødland is not a 'present tense' photographer, though his pictures often flaunt 'presentness'. His images are subjunctive; they operate under the yoke of a doubt, an impacted desire, a possibility of an impossibility. To put this another way, hinted at earlier, Rødland's images *act out* the limit conditions of acceptance or rejection of an historically and culturally proscribed kind of image making. It is absurd to photograph naked girls in Nikes lost in the woods, isn't it? And isn't it doubly absurd to *position* naked girls in the woods and have them *look* lost? I once mentioned to Torbjørn that his pictures reminded me of the images put inside cheap, department store frames as place holders, as examples, as generic ideals. He liked this. His smile gave a little something away. Historical Romanticism has come down to this: cliché sentimentalism, a mass-market stand-in for emotion, familial bond, the experience of nature, communion. In an age so in love with its knowledge that culture has over-produced every affect, uncovered every innocent urge as ideology, can we figure it anyway else?

From Coleridge and Wordsworth and Friedrich through to Nan Goldin, Tillmans, and Doug Aitken, romanticisms have had a few especially centra-



Torbjørn Rødland, *White Wreck*, 1998, c-print (top); *Close Encounter*, 1997-98, c-print (bottom).
Courtesy of Galleri Wang.

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lized thematic concerns: innocent youth, the rived unity of nature, the impending crisis of culture and industry, liberation. These are Rødland's themes as well, but his approach seems more reflexive than many of his contemporaries. Indeed, an image like *Nudist No. 6*, with its man of culture naked on the forest floor, *with its kittens*, is more than reflexive – it's perverse. Rødland's willingness to go so far overboard in his performance of the limit conditions of the sentimental borders on the pornographic – image as excessive cliché. Rødland is patently not Jock Sturges (he's too earnestly conflicted and too smart) and he will load his images with soft titillations just to prove it. Does such a strategy work? Isn't it time we knew?

There is never a better time to reread the past than the present moment. Rødland's photographs attempt to ask the most fundamental question that can be asked about works of a past or alien culture, especially if we have received those works through our own earlier experience of them (and Rødland's sentimentalities are as familiar as television, greeting cards, and children's books are ubiquitous). His images hold his – our – current moment in image making, with all of its latent Romanticism masked as realism and immediacy, up to a mirror of historical agitation and reckoning. Nymphs in the woods have been pictured for centuries – what can they do now? Where have we arrived to think they can do nothing, that the very idea of 'the woods' is preposterous, an illusory cultural artifice? It is impossible to look at Rødland's 'nudists' – or at his more recent 'spiritual' images of girls with secular 'halos' (any white matter on the head will do: a snowball, soap bubbles, a piece of white thread) – and not be reminded of the impulses of a past age or the representations such impulses promoted. Equally, we would be the worst kind of critics if we did not recognize in our remembrance the distinct difference between the past and now. It's by bringing us to the recognition of this difference – a gulf of history in which 'history' has been constantly re-interpreted, accepted, or modified – that Rødland's images are able to speak critically – or at least interrogatively – to their own time.

The literary critic and historian Jerome McGann once wrote that our interpretations of Romanticism had been doomed by either "the fire of repetition" or "the ice of reification".² The "fire of repetition" (stemming from Coleridge) held its object of interpretation so closely it couldn't but instantiate its affects – no judge being able to advocate for his own cause. The "ice of reification" (stemming from Hegel) maintained that Romanticism was an historical necessity, the expression of an age, thereby affirming it as a transcendent fact. In both of these normative cases interpretation furthered and participated in what McGann called "the Romantic ideology". In his view, it becomes the job of the critic or the poet or the artist to understand the constraints this ideology puts on any attempt at interpretation – to understand how all interpretations of Romanticism are subject to its inherent contradictions, but how certain interpretations might elucidate their self-motivations as such and thus say something about the present as well.

There is a problem, however, in my invocation of this kind of interpretive critical framework: works of art, *especially photographs* I want to add, are not works of criticism, though they may certainly be critical, judgmental, and interpretive. The conflation of art and art criticism over the last thirty years, specifically through the linguistic means of Conceptual art, has aligned critique with discursivity per se. In photographs, especially ones as muted as Rødland's, discourse is a phantom's giggle at best. And yet, it would be an act of bad faith to recommend that the visual's capacity to hold critique were being neglected in an image practice so engaged with the influence of past ideologies on the present.

Even if they are critical, works of art are ideological and produce ideology. What is produced by Rødland's photographs? His practice is revisionist, to be sure, but it also asks if revision is an affirmative act. And more than this still, Rødland's images offer a symbolic and iconographic vocabulary up for grabs. Do we want the snowy mountain top? Do we have a use still for autumn fields? Is the mechanical breakdown in a picture like *White Wreck* at all resonant with the way we believe cultural forays into nature should be? Or is it too hopeful, too eager to give some symbolic power back to the woods? Perhaps Rødland can't answer such questions – even now. Perhaps his images in twenty years time will have answers to the questions he is raising today – we are the best interpreters of our own work, despite ourselves. All the same, we know our motivations best in the asking, and in the asking if we can ask. Especially now. ■

—Bennett Simpson

1. Jeff Rian, "Paranoia Soft," *Flash Art*, Vol. XXXII, No. 209, November-December 1999, pp. 89-91.
2. Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983.