



GO TO THE VIP ROOM

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY DOROTHÉE PERRET

ALL IMAGES TORBJØRN RØDLAND, GO TO THE VIP ROOM #1-7, 2007,
FUJI CRYSTAL ARCHIVE PAPER ON ALUMINIUM, COURTESY AIR DE PARIS, PARIS.

The Norwegian photographer and video artist Torbjørn Rødland has been wandering the globe for years in search of the ethereal beauty you can find only where you least expect it. Rødland's epic search lately brought him to Los Angeles, a city so inseparable from images of itself that it's impossible to even know the difference. A city of images, where everything has been photographed, LA still retains a mythical purity in spite of itself. Rødland's journey through this oversaturated landscape took him deep inside the substance of photography itself and into the layered, reflective light of the LA night.

Dorothee Perret: What brought you to LA the first time? Did you start the series *Go To the VIP Room* the first time you went to LA?

Torbjørn Rødland: No, during my first stay I was working outside the city, in the hills north of Malibu and in Joshua Tree. I didn't quite know how to tackle the city itself, until it all came together when I returned in 2007. I had to get used to the mix of urban and organic elements. I also discovered a type of Los Angeles painting that I hadn't been aware of, a highly textured type of oil painting with no clear sense of space but a heightened sense of tactility. I'm more familiar with the conceptual tradition – Ed Ruscha in the sixties – that's the type of work I associated with LA, but these multilayered, messed up

canvases somehow corresponded with my experience of looking at and moving through the city and set me on the track of doing multiple exposures.

So the work is multiple exposures. Was it a long process to reach the final result?

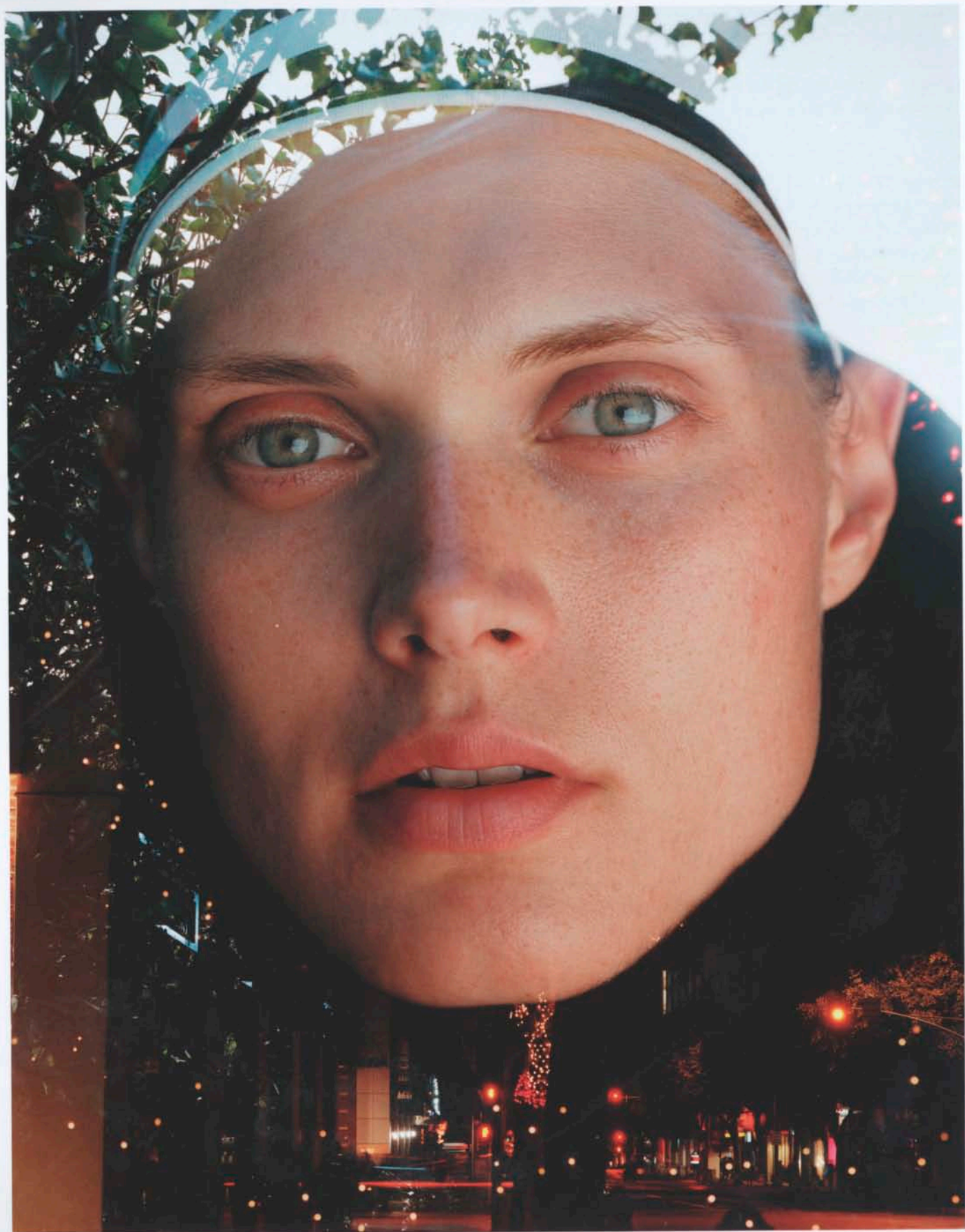
I met Malgosia Bela at a party in Koreatown, and for almost a week I didn't think I would do any pictures with her. She's been photographed so much and I couldn't see how. I was struggling with the idea while driving a lot, and the result is the *VIP Room* portraits. I needed to add a bit of visual noise to that face, because it's so strong. For each negative I kept some sort of log – a small drawing to help keep track of where on the large format

negative I added something. I didn't want the elements to overlap a lot, like in your typical double-exposure. Normally when you make a photograph, you do the whole frame simultaneously. Here I was blindly adding to the same negative, one element at a time, keeping the rest of the frame black.

It feels like you wanted to stay close to your subject by the way you framed the face?

Yes, I didn't need shoulders, just the face. A black turtleneck and a black background gave room for the lights and leaves and landscapes that would be added later. The face is close, but its connection to the viewer isn't necessarily intimate. It's as if – despite all the architecture and





all the stolen and redistributed water – the city of Los Angeles still speaks in mirages.

Somehow you wanted to describe the idea of a city built on the desert?

Not consciously, but I think I sensed this aspect of LA. When you recognize New York in the cinema, it's something concrete and vertical, a very present type of architecture. But what you recognize of Los Angeles in the movies is often a horizontal movement through a series of atmospheric fantasy-spaces.

Would you say the city influenced your work?

Definitely. I never thought I would do quadruple exposures! The city influenced these pictorial spaces, where elements don't link together in a realistic way. I worked at night in Santa Monica and on Melrose in East Hollywood, adding streetlights and neon-signs, and then I photographed the morning light coming through some small trees up in Beverly Hills. So there's no unity in space or time, which is a clear break from a normal photographic image. In LA, you never know where it all comes together, where the center is. Dorothy Parker touched on this confusion when she called Los Angeles 'seventy-two suburbs in search of a city'.

There is a kind of freedom in that space, isn't there?

Yes, and that's where the title comes from. In current internet-fantasies the VIP room is a place where hedonistic dreams come true. It's heaven and hell rolled into one. Sex, alcohol, and drugs are unrestrained. The rules of the regular club do not apply. The VIP Room is a mythological space, a paradoxical paradise.

Is that where you meet Malgosia, in that kind of space, in a VIP Room?

Well... [laughs] no, it was an Industry party, and this is another refreshing aspect of being an artist in Los Angeles: you feel that you actually provide an alternative to the mainstream – the entertainment industry, whereas in New York everyone seems to be an artist.

And apart from the work you did there, did you enjoy the city?

Very much so. Coming from Europe, LA is more challenging than the East Coast of America. The mentality is less familiar. But I also enjoy hanging around in private houses and gardens. The LA lifestyle is like a twisted mix of living in the countryside and living in a city. In the Norwegian countryside there's also a culture of taking your car over to someone's house before driving together to see a film or eat.

So would you say Los Angeles reminds you a little bit of Norway?

That's stretching it a little, but the mix of urban and rural is familiar. I also like people to be aware of the undesirable aspects of their city. At parties I was repeatedly asked why I chose to come to LA. This doesn't happen in Paris or New York, where most people seem convinced that the population of the entire planet, if free to choose, would prefer to live in their city. There's something sympathetic about a place with some sort of periphery complex.

Well, it's funny, because in Go to the VIP Room I found this mix of noisy activity, but also a muted sound, especially in the static attitude of the model – you

almost have the feeling of being in a dream, not reality.

That's a way to see it. And the dream is not only linked to reality, but to the whole image-culture. Reality and representations fuse constantly. Making art, it's not necessary to try to keep them apart. A lot of photographers look at the world as if it has never been pictured before. Sometimes this naivety frustrates me. [laughs]

Well, for sure you don't do a reportage type of photography. In your work it really feels like there is an idea behind each image.

I don't think the question is whether there's an idea behind the image or not. I think it's a question of how you approach reality. The images I've seen are a part of me. An awareness of language and history is an integrated part of looking at something. It adds to the experience. There is something basically human about this.

Still, you are bringing a certain thinking process to the image.

Yes, you can call it a thinking process. Hmm, it's difficult not to doubt my own words here. But I am struggling with certain photographic problems, and this struggle is always good for something. Strangely enough, it shows in the end result. The ideal viewer can sense the thinking or curiosity that has preceded the photograph.

And what's your relation with your work after you've presented it, either as a book or an exhibition? Are you looking back at it or just burying it?

I look at it, because I'm still thinking about how and what it can mean. And most new images lay around for quite a while.

They have to wait for the right grouping. I'm constantly looking at a lot of images that I don't yet know the context for.

So, when you realized *Go To The VIP Room*, you didn't really know it would become an exhibition at Air de Paris?

Yes, not at all. It could have been an exhibition in Los Angeles, but in the end I thought it would be more interesting to show it somewhere else. Maybe my way of approaching LA wasn't 100% surprising in Los Angeles? I wasn't sure. When *VIP Room* was exhibited in Paris there was no focus on LA. I don't think the place was even mentioned in the press release.

And the size of the print also, you wanted them very big, close to a human scale?

These images should be big enough for the viewer to almost fall into them. The bigger they are, the more you get in contact with the different layers and details, and the pictured head loses more of its ordinariness.

Do you have any plans to go back to LA and continue this work?

Not the quadruple exposures. I tried to do a few in the north of Norway last winter, but it didn't really work. It didn't have the same necessity as when I was in Los Angeles. The exciting part is to push your limits. When I picked up the first contact sheets from the Santa Monica lab, my hands were shaking. I had no idea what it would look like, and some frames were really bad. I'd added big neon words to some negatives, and it ended up looking like cheap graphic design, like cheesy house party flyers.

So, you've just said it's over, you don't want to be working that

way anymore – is that true? Well, I might return to multiple exposures at some point, but I do not have the motivation now.

Like when you stayed in Tokyo, you didn't feel like working that way? No, my Tokyo-months this year circled around other themes: the moe-image, paint or colour on skin, and the possible link between cuteness and sadism. Besides, I don't drive a car when I'm in Tokyo.

You mean because when you're driving, the images you see are in movement...

Thinking about the *VIP Room* now, I'm reminded of this quite clichéd cinematographic experience, where the city you see from the car is reflected in the car windows, and you see yourself reflected, and everything is coming together in one, constantly changing, multi-layered image.

Somehow it's funny, because you translate the atmosphere of the city in the work so well, but at the same time the way you portray the girl doesn't seem like the typical image of a California girl.

It's not the face of a Valley Girl, but it can still be a Los Angeles face. It has a bit of Classic Hollywood in it, don't you think – a Garbo-esque cool or something?

You always choose your model a bit that way – they always have in common this ageless beauty – no?

I'm not conscious of that, but more in general you can say that I'm looking for something ageless in something that is new. Yeah, I think that's true, but when it comes to casting, I often prefer cute to beautiful.

Your work is emblematic in the way it incarnates the eternal struggle between the beautiful and the weird.

Some sort of struggle is going on, that's for sure. Sometimes beauty or cuteness pushed a little too far can be challenging in itself. Sometimes a foreign element constitutes the challenge. Often, as in the books *White Planet Black Heart* and *I Want to Live Innocent*, there's a struggle with very different images that insist on being seen together as if they're made for each other. I find that deeply erotic. —PARIS, LA



