

Torbjørn Rødland

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Interview by [Asher Penn \(/contributors/asher-penn\)](#)

Portrait by TR



Torbjørn Rødland is a Norwegian Photographer based in Los Angeles. Finding early inspiration from The Pictures Generation, Torbjørn's images milk pleasure from motifs in commercial

photography exposing desire, power dynamics, and unsettling beauty. A photographer committed to his craft, Torbjorn has worked primarily in the art world, a context that has allowed to keep his highly problematized images pure.

So you're going to Norway this week?

It's actually next weekend. I have a show in my hometown, Stavanger.

What's Stavanger like?

It is the fourth biggest city in Norway and the most important for the oil industry, which is the basis for the new wealth in the region. Summers are cold and the winters are mild because you're on the water on the North Sea. The Gulf Stream heats up the water, so that keeps it from getting really cold.

What was your childhood like?

I was extremely introverted and isolated. I was asked whether I wanted to go to kindergarten and, of course, I opted out. I didn't have an interest in my peers, and didn't think I had any, so I stayed in my room with my drawings and scrapbooks of photographs I cut out of magazines.



Butterflies, 2007

What kind of drawings were you doing when you were a kid?

I made a caricature of a politician from TV at the age of five. From that early I was pretty set that I was going to do that for the rest of my life: be a caricaturist and work for newspapers. I was probably 16 when I started doing that for a local newspaper, and then I gradually started to turn more towards the ambiguity and possibility in the art world.

How were you introduced to photography?

My father, an amateur photographer, had a darkroom in the house. I started doing black-and-white darkroom work—probably at the age of 18—a little bit at home.

How were you exposed to American culture?

Oh, like large parts of the world, Scandinavia is absolutely steeped in American movies, television, advertising, music, and literature. I was drawn to it from day one.

How did you find out about art?

Of course you're exposed to art through the school system and from your parents, but I didn't get a positive view of contemporary art from home. It seemed like something strange. At 19 I chose to study Cultural Studies at the local university and that's when it opened up for me. I got more excited about ideas, and realized that I didn't have to make the overly nostalgic or less interesting art that I had encountered.



Arch Back Bride, 2007

Were you influenced by the Pictures generation?

Definitely after I started making my own photographs. Postmodern American photography was the first art that really made a lot of sense to me. So it became the starting point. Cindy Sherman was important, Sherrie Levine's "After Walker Evans" project was important. Learning to look at photography in a different grain.

Were you seeing actual works or just images in books?

You know, seeing "Untitled Film Stills" in person, I was terribly disappointed. There was no more detail in the exhibited photographs than what I had seen in smaller reproductions of them in books. It was pretty clear that I wanted my photographs to be of a different kind—so that there would be more to discover when you were in front of the original print on the wall, which you hadn't seen in the smaller reproduction.

Your use of professional models was a nice nod to the Pictures generation.

I wanted to work with people whose job it was to become images—to be something general rather than a unique individual. I've always been drawn to universals. I didn't have much experience working with people and giving direction. Then, what I realized was that the seasoned fashion models were quite stuck on the faces and poses they were used to getting approval for. For the first project, "Close Encounters," I halfway accepted and worked around that. But after seven Close Encounters I started working with a smaller camera for a while, a medium format, and I started finding my own models. I wanted to throw out even more photographic theatricality.



Bathroom Tiles, 2010-13

How did you get your own models?

I sort of embraced the most problematic male photographer role of approaching girls I found cute on the street and asking if I could photograph them. It was extremely difficult but it somehow made sense in the overarching project of breaking art rules. The more important it was for me to get a yes from a potential model, the more nervous I was. Very few said no, actually, probably because they felt sorry for this strange guy. I learned to choose people I could tell would give me what I needed, and not the fashion pout. After that I was better prepared to work with professional models, too.

Your interest in cuteness is another way you diverge from the Pictures generation.

I first embraced cuteness in the 90s and tried to push as far as I could in that direction. Later on I realized that there was some power play that followed cuteness into the pictures. Cuteness is linked to powerlessness. It's an appeal that cannot be fully controlled by the cute individual. It transcends theatre. In 1990s contemporary art it was a real taboo. I think that was one of the main attractions.

I've read that Otaku culture inspired you. How did you end up in Japan?

I went in 2002 for a group show and ended up going back for a total of six months. The culture there accepts and cultivates cuteness in a very different way. It was just really in your face. Cute logos were dominating the corporate world. In Western culture cuteness was seen as a commercial lie, a quaint Hallmark card from the recent past. This all changed with YouTube and the Internet in general. In the last ten years there has been a tsunami wave of insane cuteness in America. When I made my kitten photographs in the late 1990s it seemed like a very different situation.



Banana Black, 2005

The first piece I ever noticed of yours was Banana Black at PS1.

That must have been in the "Greater New York 2005" show. I hadn't really turned to still lifes in a big way until that year, 2004–2005. Living in the East Village, I didn't know photographically what to do with the city. I was curious about basic visual symbols like whiteness and blackness, what happens to your impression of a banana if it changes color from white to black.

It seems like you've really avoided doing commercial work.

Early on I met quite a few photographers who set aside their young ideas and artistic ambitions to pursue the big money, and I saw that they were no longer excited about picking up a camera. Photography had become another dreary job. You could tell how they started despising it, despising themselves. It was very clear to me that whatever I had going, I could lose it if I didn't look after it.

You have to preserve it.

Exactly. Don't get me wrong: I love popular photography. I want to engage with daily lives, with internal worlds and feelings, and in an aesthetic that is partly derived from commercial photography. I'm focused on mythical aspects of popular imagery –aspects that are not linked to time and space, but rather underlying structures and stories.

You're not selling anything, which changes a lot.

I think so too. But then there's this wide world of enthusiastic magazines that talk about art while they constantly want to trick you into promoting luxury items. I keep insisting that an art space with people who take seriously the complexity of the contemporary image actually exists for me.