

Exhibition, Kunsthalle Wien, 2000



Norden

Someone should have perhaps warned Elina Brotherus, before she seriously started taking photos. This someone ought to have pointed out that the photographic genre of flirting with reality, and especially doing it via one's own female body, has, in recent years, proliferated and become a huge and annoying trend. Thus, the advice might have been for her to consider having second thoughts about which path to pursue and which way to turn.

One must be very happy that this enlightened 'someone' did not exist. Instead of Brotherus as a sculptor or a tennis star, what we have is Elina Brotherus as a very daring and sentimental photographer. More importantly, we have a selection of works, which hardly ever fail to touch a nerve or two. Self-portraits that go to and reach beyond the border of personal contact. But hold on, did I say sentimental? Yes, I did, and I will continue with words such as dramatic, romantic and neo-realistic. Words which one can utter in art discourse normally only under the heavy influence of alcoholic beverages.

There is one particular reason why some people tend to get itchy when confronted with seemingly casual, but simultaneously deeply touching self-portraits – again, especially if the object is a fragile and beautiful young woman. The responses are rather well known. This style is too easy, too insular, focusing only on the joy of navel-gazing. And, they might add, who really is or even should be interested in the psychological traumas of another cute little lost girl somewhere out there?

I think these claims can quite often be correct. However, what follows is sort of an argument why Elina Brotherus' works luckily and powerfully fall on their feet, avoiding these traps by far. In other words, I will try to put forward my experience why the sentimental season they provoke is not even close to social pornography or narcissistic dwelling on one's inner problems.

So in what ways could Brotherus be different? Let me start with a detour. One can legitimately ask, whether it is enough to simply take well-carved and constructed moody photographs of oneself and one's misery. I agree – it is not enough. There has to be more, and that more very much exists and lives on the surfaces of her photographs. I could actually choose from a variety of feelings such as disgust, insecurity, fear, madness, loneliness or sadness, but I will concentrate on loneliness, and especially on loneliness on the verge of emptiness. Have you ever tried to portray yourself in such a way that the photo depicts you in the state of burning loneliness – directly, mercilessly, and without aestheticism? Hmmm, I don't know about you, but what I do know and see is that Elina Brotherus does it, and does it very often and coherently.

Let me give an example: the photo titled *Fundamental Loneliness*. It is a good example of her visual style, both formally and thematically. The photo is of herself, sitting at the table on which there lies a piece of melon. Timid, direct, and solid. There is not one single part of the image that is superfluous. There is nothing to add, and nothing to take away. What there is, yes, is a truckload of feelings I assume do not need to be mentioned. What about the background, the personal story behind the photo? Should I tell you that? Naaaah, what will it be, should I, or should I not? Let me repeat it: fundamental loneliness. You guessed – personal problems, such as a broken marriage, later love lost and not found, etc. Certainly, there is haunting and demanding unhappiness around. It is a kind of lonely unhappiness that fills the emptiness, not asking for permission and not negotiating, but with force confiscating and filling every corner, every second and every tiny particle of air that is left to breathe. Loneliness that rules and fills up the empty spaces as in natural phenomena.

But precisely at this point, it is highly important to ask: who is telling the story, who is speaking to whom, and who is watching? Who has the power to decide and to define? I would claim that Elina Brotherus uses self-portraits as a means to watch. She is watching herself, but not only that, because that would simply be boring narcissism; she is watching herself, as well as her relationship to herself and to her surroundings. Again, it would fall to pieces and regress into disappointing narrow narcissism, if she openly enjoyed the situation. But no, she does not, even if she is definitely the one pulling the strings. She is, through the eye of the camera, creating and shaping a certain, even if only momentary, space and time for herself.

Thus, she is not actually looking at the viewer. She goes beyond the first wave of feminist critique which claimed the gaze for the female eye. In my opinion, she is gazing far beyond and past the camera and the viewer. It is no longer she who is there, and it is no longer important at all, whether she got divorced or what kind of personal dilemmas she might be in. These details are only important as a starting point. The story has to begin somewhere; it has to be anchored to some particular and personal setting and to a version of reality. Elina Brotherus' choice is clear: herself.

The second level is then something else, something that again can be scrutinized through various elements, but I will stick to loneliness. There are at least two reasons why her photographs are so significant and meaningful. The first one is connected to the visual images which we are daily confronted with. How often does one see a picture of an evidently unhappy and insecure person who is not a victim, but actually in control? She has decided to show how utterly confused and scared she is. Try doing the same thing, but don't come back and say it was too difficult. Of course it is difficult.

The second reason is even more important. Time after time, Elina Brotherus has the courage to face and confront these sentiments and feelings that our present-day visual imagery detests and almost forbids. And the point is that she comes out of this struggle as a winner, dealing with things such as loneliness, unhappiness and fear, which we all know and feel, but which we have a hard time coping with. She does not just do it for fun. I am convinced she has no choice but to work it over and over. Thus, the results are not necessarily more authentic or real, but they are very convincing.

Elina Brotherus. She is there, wounded but awake – in the pictures. Looking at the photos sets an ultimatum: stay or disappear, take it or leave it. And yes, I take it, I take the chance to confront the emotions that hurt and burn and bite – and possibly heal.

### **Suites Françaises II (Die Post-it-Serie), 1999**

PEJA-Gastaufenthalt im Musée Nicéphore Niepce, Chalon-sur-Saône, Frankreich

Durch Sprache erzeugen wir Ordnung im Chaos. Wir benennen Objekte, klassifizieren und kategorisieren Dinge, analysieren Phänomene. Sprache ermöglicht das Denken.

Diese Arbeit erforscht die klassischen Themen der Fotografie: Landschaften, Porträts, Interieurs, Stilleben, Studien des menschlichen Körpers. Aber was noch wichtiger ist: Sie setzt sich mit Lernen und begrifflichem Erfassen auseinander sowie damit, das Leben in den Griff zu bekommen. Wenn man die Sprache, die um einen herum gesprochen wird, nicht versteht, lebt man in einem merkwürdigen Zustand der Instabilität. Sprache ist unerlässlich, um das Gefühl grundsätzlicher Sicherheit zu erzeugen. Als ich Anfang September nach Frankreich kam, war ich kaum in der Lage, mir eine Metrofahrkarte zu kaufen. Diese Arbeit ist der Versuch eine neue Sprache zu lernen, sich mit einem neuen Land und einer neuen Kultur vertraut zu machen. Sie erzählt davon, ‚außenstehend‘ zu sein, von der Inkohärenz zwischen einer Person und ihrer Umwelt, und von den einfachen, kleinen Dingen, mit denen man versucht, seinen Platz in der Gesellschaft zu finden.

Wie in früheren Arbeiten, kombiniere ich auch hier Selbstporträts und Landschaftsbilder. Werden sie zusammen gezeigt, so reflektieren sie sich gegenseitig; diese Querverbindung produziert einen neuen Inhalt in beiden Genres. Die Landschaften werden mit Bedeutung aufgeladen, und die Selbstporträts werden ruhiger.

Ich möchte meiner Freundin Andrea danken, die mir die bewährte Post-it-Zettelmethode vorgeschlagen hat, um Französisch zu lernen.

**Suites Françaises II (The Post-it-series), 1999**

PEJA residency at Musée Nicéphore Niepce, Chalon-sur-Saône, France

Language is a way of creating order in chaos. We give names to objects, classify and categorise things, analyse phenomena. Language makes thinking possible.

This work explores classical themes of photography: landscape, portrait, interior, nature morte, study of human figure. But even more important, it deals with learning, conceptualising, getting a grip of one's life. When one does not understand the language spoken around oneself, one lives in a strange state of instability. Language is essential in creating the feeling of basic security. When I arrived in France in the beginning of September, I was barely able to buy myself a subway ticket. This work is an effort to learn a new language, to get acquainted with a new country and a new culture. It tells about 'outsiderness', the incoherence between the person and her environment, and about the simple small means with which one tries to take one's place in society.

I continue, like I have done earlier, to combine self-portraiture and landscape work. When shown together they reflect on each other, and this cross-linking produces new kinds of contents in both genres. The landscapes get charged with meanings, and the self-portraits become more peaceful.

Thanks is due to my friend Andrea who recommended the proved-to-be-efficient Post-it-sticker method for learning French.

Chalon-sur-Saône  
November 25, 1999  
Elina Brotherus



**Le nez de Monsieur Cheval - 1999**  
aus/from: *Suites Françaises II*,  
6. Edition  
Farbfotografie, 80 x 102 cm  
Colour print



**Olivier parlant aux moutons - 1999**  
aus/from: *Suites Françaises II*, 6. Edition  
Farbfotografie, 80 x 102 cm  
Colour print



**Contente enfin - 1999**  
aus/from: *Suites Françaises II*, 6. Edition  
Farbfotografie, 70 x 88 cm  
Colour print



**Le vélo volé du curé - 1999**  
aus/from: *Suites Françaises II*, 6. Edition  
Farbfotografie, 80 x 102 cm  
Colour print