

# frieze

## Elina Brotherus

& gb agency, Paris

A Japanese tale describes a woman waiting anxiously for the arrival of her lover at a train station. However, when he finally arrives she violently rejects him, accusing him of being an imposter, as if, during his lengthy absence, her mental image of him has become so distorted it has rendered her incapable of recognizing him in the flesh.

A similar sense of alienation lies at the heart of this exhibition of photographs by Elina Brotherus. For her

series of self-portraits, 'Suite Française 2' (French Suite 2, 1999), the Helsinki-born artist explored her experience during a fellowship at an artists' colony in Chalon-sur-Saône in the French countryside. In one of the most moving photographs, *Desolée* (Sorry), she stands awkwardly in the corner of her room, speechless and unmoving, her arms dangling limply at her sides. The walls are a faded institutional white, the carpet a dirty hospital grey. On the peeling, mustard-coloured door, beneath a pair of poorly framed *memento mori*, a small yellow Post-It note reads 'la porte' (the door). The lock, a light switch, her shoes, a thermometer, are also labelled 'desolée'. Her breast bears a note that reads

*désir* (desire).

Throughout the series, Post-It notes label the humdrum objects in Brotherus' sparsely furnished room – a barren, monastic cell that seems to reflect her internal void. You can almost feel her disappointment in the gap between what she might have fantasized about in coming to France and her actual experience once there. It is also as if her environment has metamorphosed into a summer camp or kindergarten where everything is identified with tags or stickers. The sameness in colour and format of the notes reflect the struggle to adjust to a foreign city where linguistic ability is lost, language becomes clumsy and enigmatic, and where even the most



Elina Brotherus  
*Le Reflet*  
(The Reflection)  
(detail)  
1999  
Chromogenic colour  
print on aluminium  
70 × 56 cm

elementary phrases can be ambiguous or misleading.

Large in scale, Classical in composition, often symmetrical, and infused

and 19th-century Scandinavian artists as Albert Edelfelt or Akseli Gallen-Kallela. But at the same time, they remain connected to contemporary culture and are

Brotherus exposes her intimacy and weaknesses, while also keeping a distance that invites the viewer to participate in the photographs.

If Brotherus' images appear effortless, they are, in fact, highly wrought. While studying photography the artist also received a Masters degree in analytic chemistry, and her methodical approach reflects this. Such tidiness and intricacy appear in *Le Reflet* (The Reflection, 1999), which, paradoxically, reveals everything except the reflection designated by its title. In the image Brotherus

can be seen standing against a bathroom wall. Yellow Post-It notes are stuck to the mirror, the toothbrush, the soap dish, the sink and taps, the hand cream and makeup remover, but the artist's face is obscured by the label stuck to the mirror, so that only her forehead and short blonde hair are visible. By eliminating her face, she reveals how disembodied and stripped of her adult identity she feels, and in so doing skilfully glides the focus towards the spectator's own vulnerabilities.

In these images, Post-It notes label not only the humdrum objects in the artist's monastic room, but also her own body.

with a luminous, austere palette, Brotherus' photographs recall the unflinchingly honest and unsentimental portraits and landscapes by such 18th-

reminiscent of the autobiographical works by Richard Billingham and Tracey Emin. Combining documentary photography with personal experience,