

## Magnetic North

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Although painting seems to be in the midst of another revival, photography still dominates the covers of art magazines and sits at the centre of debate about contemporary artistic practice. Meanwhile, according to Pirkko Siitari, chief curator at the Finnish Museum of Photography, Finland has developed one of the best systems of photographic education in the world. With these two thoughts in mind, 'Magnetic North: Contemporary Installation Photography in Finland' at the New Gallery, Walsall, is a tantalising proposition. So what are five very well-educated photographers up to in Helsinki these days?

Andrei Lajunen (who died two years ago aged thirty) put together wall-mounted installations based on small photographs. One series emerges from a study of Wittgenstein's theory of colour, while another, with its images of police and institutional spaces, seems to be about control and power. While the ostensible content of his work suggests that Lajunen was the most intellectually ambitious of the artists exhibiting here, the images look dated and dull. The catalogue, moreover, completely misrepresents his material by showing his photographs as discrete images, whereas they gain complexity as components of an installation. By contrast, perhaps the least ambitious work in the show, by Ola Kolehmainen, achieves greater success through simpler terms. Kolehmainen's photographs are about looking and recording the experience of looking. Most of the images exhibited here depict Jean Nouvel's Institut du Monde Arab, in Paris. In one photo, out-of-focus beams fill the foreground, while windows and metal structures form a crooked grid in the background, where Kolehmainen's lens picks out the articulated patterns of the building's

surface. The artist has expressed an interest in Donald Judd and Dan Flavin, and the influence of these space traders comes through in his delight in repetition and the materiality of objects.

Marjaana Kella and Jyrki Parantainen teach photography at the Helsinki University of Art and Design and have played essential roles in Finland's surge in photographic output over the past few years. In 'Magnetic North', Marjaana Kella exhibits portraits of people under hypnosis. Though these photographs mimic conventional studio portraits, our knowledge that the people are hypnotised imparts a creepy mood. Intimate details – eyebrow hairs, follicles, blemishes, clothing – become the focus of the images. Kella treats her subjects as exoskeletons, converts their whole being to a surface structure, and thus plays with the idea of a portrait and hypnosis as revelatory of identity. But her camera doesn't capture something intangible as it purportedly does in a traditional portrait; it shows us a body.

If Kella explores the surface of things, Jyrki Parantainen presents a resolutely interior world in his work. Parantainen used to photograph nothing but rooms and objects that he had set alight, but has since moved to a subtler though no less fiery vocabulary. In a series called 'The Mystery of Satisfaction', he has created a group of lurid allegories that invoke the language of expressionist painting to hint at the violent urges we control in order to maintain a relationship or live in a community. *The Mystery of Satisfaction No.4* is a photo of a faded, brittle reproduction of a painting of Venice criss-crossed by jagged rips that glow with a light source from behind. Hot light burns through an image of the world's most romantic city, lending the photo an air of heart-wrenching fury, a dream of wealth and sensual delight shredded by rage and frustration. In another, a Siberian tiger leaps at the spindly legs of a deer, but the deer's body is concealed by a delicate sheer curtain that makes up the left panel of the diptych. Suspended in space, the tiger seems hesitant, as if it's decided mid-leap that the deer has a right to live free from the predator's hunger. The image enacts a condition of almost suicidal self-denial. Another diptych shows two zebras in a strange embrace beside

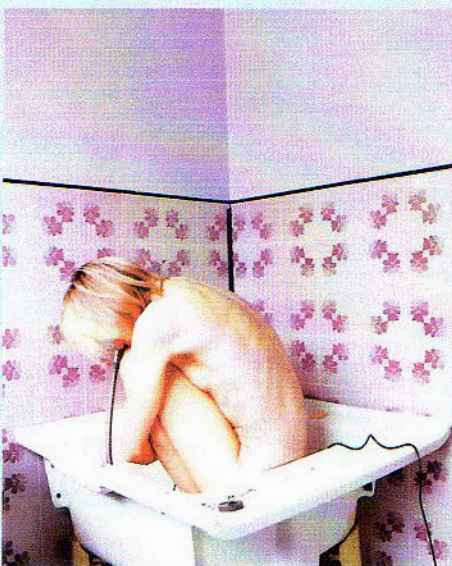
a panel of dense red. On the left of the diptych, a red plastic curtain creates a blood-red wall. On the right, the shoulders and heads of two zebras rear up as if posing for a dance portrait. One zebra seems to face the viewer, an outrageous, toothy grin across its face. We're used to the anthropomorphising of animals through cartoons and wildlife programmes, but these zebras look human in a ghastly and unreadable way.

The youngest artist in the show, Elina Brotherus, creates the most thought-provoking images in the exhibition, especially in 'The New Painting', a series of photographs that revel in a dialogue with European painting. *Horizon 6*, a slice of buckled icebergs in a blue-grey seascape bears an uncanny resemblance to Caspar David Friedrich's *Wreck of the Hope*. *Horizon 7*, a flat landscape of stones in Iceland, invokes an Yves Tanguy painting, the stones like molten blobs receding into a mist-occluded horizon. A whole tradition of woman as model is conjured in the self-portrait *Femme a Sa Toilette*, especially Bonnard's paintings of Marthe drifting weightlessly in her bath, or Degas's women preening themselves. In Brotherus's version, the artist pulls herself into a clenched ball and we see little but ribs and muscles, not to mention the edges of a cramped, chilly tub. Rather than presenting herself as a model, Brotherus steadfastly resists the voyeur's gaze, and instead rolls up into her own interior world. The shutter release cable, like an umbilical cord, trails over the side of the tub, attaching the subject/artist to the mechanism that makes the photograph.

Recently, painting and photography appear less out-and-out rivals than siblings with a confused and dysfunctional relationship, attacking each other's weaknesses and envying each other's strengths. Among other things, painting envies photography's coolness and notoriety while photography longs for painting's expressive power. Elina Brotherus and Jyrki Parantainen get their fingernails dirty in this anarchic playground and make images that use the history of painting and the ubiquity of photographs to help us re-imagine both.

'Magnetic North: Current Installation Photography in Finland', 28 September – 18 November, The New Art Gallery, Walsall. Catalogue by University of Art and Design Helsinki UKAH and The Finnish Museum of Photography, £25 hb.

Elina Brotherus, 'SPRING', 18 October – 13 January 2002, The Wapping Project, London. Elina Brotherus is short-listed for the Citigroup Photography Prize.



Elina Brotherus, *From the New Painting: Femme a Sa Toilette*, 2001, c-type print on aluminium, framed 80 x 60 cm