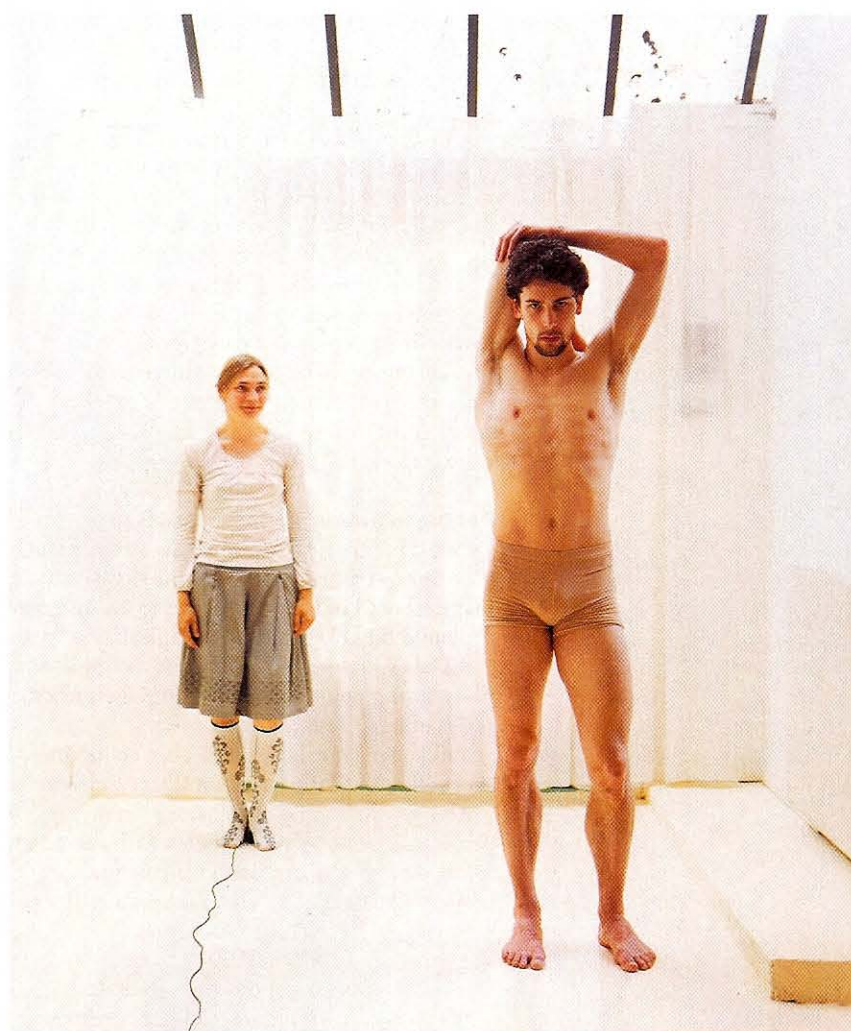


Elina Brotherus is currently one of Finland's most successful photographers, part of the wave of Finnish artists making commercially viable art. Her recent works delve into the worlds of dance and painting.

Sensual studies

BY SANNA LESKINEN PHOTOS ELINA BROTHERUS



From *Études d'après modèle, danseurs*: "Artiste admiratrice avec modèle," in which Elina Brotherus appears in the background.



**"Étude de danseur pour
Petite danseuse de Degas."**



"Étude de deux danseurs."

In an art market hungry for something new, it takes patience to work on the same series for many years.

Finnish photography has been making great strides in recent years. Many members of the younger generation of art photographers have gained international success over the past two decades. One of the best known is Elina Brotherus, whose works have been bought by private collectors in Europe, Australia and the US, as well as by many art museums and state collections.

Now 35, Brotherus has worked as a photographer and video artist for ten years. In recent years she has been working on her *Model Studies* series: works studying the human body in various environments, reflecting her work onto the long tradition of art.

In the past, she has often served as her own model in self-portraits. Now she has photographed dancers from the Opéra national de Paris for a book, *Études d'après modèle, danseurs*. The French publisher Les éditions textuel is putting out both French and English editions.

The project has taken years. The most time-consuming part of the process was obtaining photography permits and contacting the dancers, which had to be done through official channels. Brotherus waited a year, then two. Finally the director of the ballet Mme Lefèvre announced: "*Madame, vos modèles vous attendent.*" ("Your models are waiting for you.")

Brotherus shot the photos last spring, spent the summer in the darkroom making model prints, and began colour separation in the early autumn before the book went to press in October.

The project has proceeded in an unusual fashion. Typically, Brotherus's work is first shown in an exhibition and published in book form later on. However, Brotherus's new works will first be seen in the book and then exhibited next year.

THE BEAUTY OF THE HUMAN FORM

The idea of photographing dancers had long been developing in Brotherus's mind, inspired by a friend Patrick Scemama who worked in the Paris Opera's publishing department. After seeing earlier work in her *Model Studies* series, he suggested that Brotherus might be interested in working with dancers, which is not a new theme for Brotherus. While a student at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki, she took publicity photos of performances by dance students at the Theatre Academy of Finland. One of her closest friends is the Finnish dancer Vera Nevan-

linna, who has appeared as a model every now and then in Brotherus's stills and videos since the late 1990s. Brotherus has also made videos with her second cousin, choreographer Hanna Brotherus.

"Amazing, exciting people," is how Brotherus describes her first impressions of working with dancers. "I was attracted by the dancers' physicality."

In her newest pictures, she is again fascinated by the dancers' combination of corporality and sophistication, their simultaneous refinement and animalism.

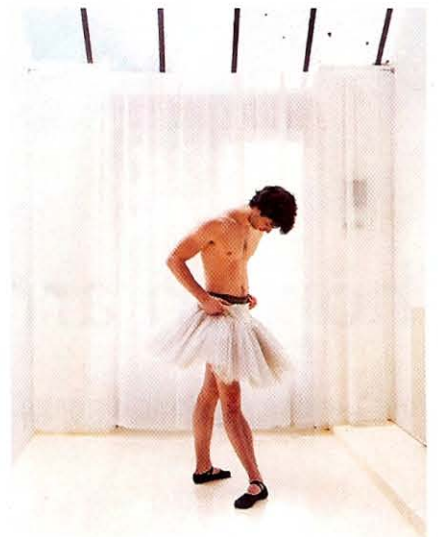
"Their relationships with their own bodies are unique," she says. Sensuality is built into these pictures, more than in any of her previous work.

THE PATIENT PHOTOGRAPHER

On a chilly early winter evening in the Finnish capital, people flow quietly into the elegant old Kunsthalle Helsinki, which was the showcase for the 2004 Carnegie Art Award's travelling exhibition. The highlight of the evening is a public event featuring the winner of the 2004 Young Artist's scholarship, Brotherus. Soon she arrives, dressed in vibrantly coloured attire and smiling broadly. She speaks enthusiastically about her work, and responds thoughtfully to questions from the moderator and the audience. She earned the prestigious award, given to young Nordic artists, for two of her video works *Miroir* ("Mirror") and *Baigneurs* ("Bathers"). These works were born alongside her previous photo series, *The New Painting*.

In this series, Brotherus carried out her first in-depth exploration of classical painting, its aesthetics and her own interpretations of it.

As a photographer, she is interested in the same basic issues that painters have been dealing with for centuries: light, colour, composition – and the human form in space. In an art market that is always hungry for something new, it takes patience to work on the same themes for several years. Yet Brotherus's series have taken time: she worked on *The New Painting* for about



Étude de danseur pour
Petite danseuse de Degas."



“Trois danseurs, les couronnes”

“Each series has one guiding thought that serves as an umbrella for all the works in it.”

four years. She has now been working on *Model Studies* for almost five years.

“Each series has one guiding thought, which serves as an umbrella for all the works in it,” Brotherus explains. She also spends a lot of time working on each image. For an amateur, a photograph may be the capturing of a passing moment, a snapshot. But Brotherus works with her pictures like a painter. She shoots slowly with a monorail camera and traditional film and then spends a lot of time in the darkroom, where the photos that she exhibits take their final shape.

“The picture’s final light and colour are born during the developing and printing process,” she explains. Brotherus also works on her pictures using words and pictures from her shooting diaries, which she has also shown as part of her exhibitions.

ENTERING THE FASHION WORLD

This year Brotherus completed her first commissioned work for a fashion label, designer Paola Suhonen’s IvanaHelsinki. Brotherus photographed Suhonen’s “Diamond, Stripes and Revolver” collection. The pictures were shot during the summer on a small island in Eastern Finland, and the collection was presented at IvanaHelsinki’s show during the Paris fashion weeks in October.

Brotherus says she constructed the photos using the same principles she uses in the rest of her work, adding that she has always been an IvanaHelsinki fan. As for future commissions, she has not yet made any decision in principle.

"I'm thinking about it very carefully and will decide on a case-by-case basis," she says.

There would certainly be demand if she decided to move into this kind of work.

Brotherus has quickly risen to international acclaim. Her first major one-person show was in 1998, and the next year her work was shown at an international biennale in Istanbul. In addition to the Carnegie Art Award's Young Artist's Scholarship, she also won the coveted Fotofinlandia Young Artist's Stipend in 2000 and the Prix Niépce in France two years ago.

What then does success mean to her?

"I don't really think about it," she answers. "There are always others who are a million times bigger stars." Brotherus prefers to focus on the work at hand, and stresses that her daily life is very average and keeps her busy: she hasn't really even had time to take holidays.

"Nothing has changed in my life over the past seven years," she says. And yet: "Each year is different."

THAT'S NOT ELINA

In her first, melancholy autobiographical photos such as *I hate sex* and *Divorce portrait*, Brotherus portrayed the angst of human relationships. She emphasises that she only did autobiographical work during the first couple of years of her career. Though since then, she has often posed as a model in her own pictures – complete with the camera's cable release visible in the image.

Brotherus has found it hard to break away from the autobiographical label. However she asserts that her self-

portraits in recent years depict people in general: "That's not me," she says. "It's a model."

Posing as a model herself is often a practical necessity, particularly when she travels alone. Yet when one is both in front of the camera and behind it, there is also a great risk of failure. For instance, when shooting with film, one can never be absolutely certain of how a composition will look in the final work.

That's another reason why this recent danc-

er project has been particularly pleasant for Brotherus. Six dancers appear in these new images shot in a studio by daylight. As the pictures play with the relationship between motion and motion-blurring, it was essential that the models were able to stay motionless for a long time. This was not uncomfortable for these dancers.

"Solid professionals, absolutely ideal," says Brotherus of her Parisian models. The question

ONE FOOT IN FRANCE

Many still remember Brotherus for her *Suites françaises 2* series – photos of a French apartment with its walls bedecked with yellow Post-it notes with French words written on them. They date back to 1999, when Brotherus had just moved to France. She was then staying at an artist's residence in Chalon-sur-Saône Musée Nicéphore in Niepce. When she arrived she barely knew enough French to buy a metro ticket.

The series tells the story of being an outsider in a country where speaking the language is essential to being able to feel at home. The Post-it notes had a practical use: Brotherus was using them to learn French. Her persistence has paid off.

"I've had one foot in France ever since," she says. Brotherus now spends roughly one third of the year in France, one third in Finland and the rest travelling. She has a country house in Avalon, Burgundy, where she has also shot many of her works.

"It's kind of a work camp," she says of life in the countryside.

Brotherus has fixed the house up, but there is still plenty of work to be done, starting with chopping firewood, which she doesn't hesitate to do. "For my own well-being, it's important that I get some exercise."

Besides the house, Brotherus has many other pillars of support in France: the gallery GB Agency, which opened its third show of her work, in October, also prints

and frames her work and is the base for a group of her friends. Brotherus says that France will remain her second home.

The photo monograph book *Études d'après modèle* is published in French and English on November 8, 2007 by Les éditions textuel (www.editionstextuel.com).



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of whether her work process is primarily analysis or aestheticism makes Brotherus think. "They must be two sides of my personality," she replies. "When I'm shooting, everything happens by eye, intuitively. The photo just needs to be taken. The analysis comes later."

The same goes for her choices of shooting locations. "My eye makes me stop, not some theoretical thing. I'm not generally very theoretical."