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VICE

The Perverted Photography of Torbjørn Rødland

By Bob Nickas, Torbjørn Rødland

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Although Torbjørn Rødland recalls having a camera from the age of 11, as a teenager his passion was drawing. "After doing caricatures and political cartoons for local newspapers," he says, "I got fed up with communicating easily decodable ideas through images."* One look at his photographs and it's clear to see that this reluctance to "deliver as expected" fully informed his subsequent return to the camera, and defines an intentionally varied body of photographic work that ranges from highly stylized to naturalistic pictures. In fact, despite the directness of the medium and the clean immediacy of his style, his picture-making, like the man himself, can be elusive in ways that are fascinating, confounding, and yet ultimately rewarding. The 39-year-old Rødland, based in Oslo, Norway, but itinerate, taking pictures everywhere, is both engaging and marked by a Nordic reserve. In his work, which encompasses every genre—portrait, landscape, and still life—as well as video, he reveals everything and is withholding at the same time. His most beguiling pictures, like a well-crafted pop song with an insidious hook, grab you and don't let go. *Arms* (2008), in which the tentacle of an octopus emerges from the sleeve of a woman's sweater and gently coils around her fingers, is a near

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perfect example of how Rødland creates images that somehow lay claim to strangeness and normalcy at the same time. It's their matter-of-fact quality that allows a level of acceptance to slip almost unnoticed through the side door. At first glance, there is of course an unreality to the picture, but Rødland isn't so interested in the first take, and he understands, even if we don't, that photography, no matter how false a mirror, always reflects a world we can recognize or meet halfway. Imagine that very same image, the woman's hand and the tentacle, equally graceful, was drawn or a composite rather than a photo. Suddenly, the same picture is transformed into a surrealist rendering—a dream image by Jim Shaw or a collage by Max Ernst.

Let's consider two of the most ubiquitous pictures in vernacular photography: the bride on her wedding day and the baby, one usually preceding the other. Living in an all-pervasive image world, you can't help but wonder, with the most frequently repeated types of pictures, how is it possible to make a photo that is distinct from the millions that have come before? Rødland's *Arch Back Bride* (2007) manages just that. This is a portrait of a bride unlike any we've previously seen. She smiles as she would for the photographer, her lovely face framed by a fluffy veil—the heavenly cloud—and the strapless gown emphasizes the soft bare skin of her shoulder. The idealized image of the bride all dressed in white, untouched, about to give herself to marriage and its consummation, is posed on the floor, with her back arched high in an exaggerated manner. What's going on here? This is the first and only unanswered question. Look again at her face. She's not really smiling, and her lips are pressed together. She knows something that we don't: the bride's secret on her wedding day.



Baby (2007) is even more of a mystery. An infant girl sits upright on a soft peachy carpet, holding her hand over her breast, which is unusual since babies rarely display any modesty in their nakedness. This is not an intervention on Rødland's part; the baby, he says, sat like this. Now look at the expression on her face. She calmly but intently returns the gaze of the photographer, as she will for anyone who looks at the picture. She is in full control of her image in an uncanny way. What would seem like the most natural thing in the world—a portrait of a baby girl—becomes preternatural, not of this world. With her big baby head, and the resolve with which she occupies the space of the picture, she appears to be some sort of higher life form in the body of an innocent child. But then, maybe every baby is an alien.

Language in Rødland's work serves to complicate our reading of a picture or drive its humor. He's used a Sharpie to mark a penis with the letters WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?), and dressed a beautiful, blond twenty-something in a

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t-shirt that proudly claims: "It took me 50 years to look this good." *In Four Words* (2006), a well-groomed boy wearing a shirt and tie is peacefully passed out on the floor, the words "WE NEED TO TALK" written on his face. Rødland often employs liquids to disrupt an otherwise uninflected image and heighten our engagement with a subject and its emotional resonance, as in *Goldene Tränen* (2002), which substitutes glistening honey for tears streaming down a girl's face. In *La fin de Satan* (2009), a young black girl's hair is wet and drenched with chocolate syrup. She appears beatific, as if in a trance or blessed state. For Rødland, the title, which translates as *The End of Satan*, represents the end of duality, of good and evil, of what is revered and what is demonized.

The visual sleight of hand in Rødland's work can be present either overtly, as we see in *Five of Clubs* (2007), or with a more subtle touch, as with *School Play* (2006), and are two sides of the same coin—or card, as the case may be. The fresh-faced, strawberry blond boy in *Five of Clubs* has this card affixed to his forehead. He seems lost in thought or concentration, as if playing a parlor game: Guess which card I'm holding? Take it away from his head and you have a gentle but otherwise unremarkable portrait of a pensive young man. This is an example of how Rødland interrupts the flow, or, as he says, inserts "a swear word in a love poem."** (One can't help but think of a picture-perfect Norwegian landscape by Rødland as the backdrop for the Will Oldham song, "The Mountain Low," in which he sings, "If I could fuck a mountain.") The large group of elementary school students assembled on stage for a Christmas program in *School Play*, exhibiting all the boredom, concentration, anxiety, and distraction displayed by kids in this situation, are upstaged by one boy who is barely within the frame but ends up as the picture's anarchic star. Look to the far left and you'll see, as clear as day, a boy mimic the figure in Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, one of the world's most iconic images, by Norway's most famous artist. Until you see the boy, the picture could be interchangeable with almost any other taken by a proud parent in the audience, but in its unexpected perversity it is pure Rødland, asking us not simply to look at a picture, but to look inside and see what else is there. And how does Rødland see his work in relation to the perverse? In his own words: "A photograph or a collection of photographs that ignores its usual objective is... perverted. Perverted photography doesn't sell a product or communicate a message. It's not meant to be decoded, but to keep you in the process of looking. It's layered and complex. It mirrors and triggers you without end and for no good reason..."



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