

THE  
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PHOTO BOOTH

TORBJØRN RØDLAND  
TOUCHES THE  
ROMANTIC AND THE  
PROFANE

*In a new exhibit, the Norwegian photographer finds divergent ways to break through and touch an audience numbed by visual glut.*

By Chris Wiley

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"Another Bricolage," 2024-26. Photographs by Torbjørn Rødland / Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

There are certain hand-wavy ways in which one can dispel an image's strangeness. Confronted with something weird, you could call it "dreamlike," "surreal," or, if you're feeling lofty, "visionary." These designations are, first and foremost, vague. (Whose dream, exactly, is it like?) But the terms also function as thought-terminating clichés, short-circuiting the magic of the work itself. The oeuvre of the fifty-five-year-old Norwegian photographer Torbjørn Rødland has been described using all of the above words, but none of them capture his pictures' flummoxing, beguiling mélange of romanticism, humor, spirituality, sex, horror, glamour, and poignancy. In fact, Rødland would prefer that we don't attempt to pin down his work with explanations at all. "I think this is a big difference between artists and non-artists. Non-artists, they hate when they don't understand something. But for artists, if we see something and we don't fully understand it, it's a gift," he told me recently.



"In a Norwegian Landscape 17," 1995. Courtesy STANDARD (OSLO)



"Banana Black," 2005. Courtesy Nils Stærk

Rødland has spent most of his life bridling against expectations. He grew up in Stavanger, a city known for its oil industry, without much in the way of exposure to the arts. "I saw some Munchs and some Ernst collages, and I also remember listening on the radio to some sort of pathetic painters and having an ironic teen-age reaction to how they spoke about their work," he recalled. An avid draftsman from an early age, Rødland was able to parlay his sardonic streak into a career as an editorial cartoonist and illustrator, beginning at a local city paper when he was just sixteen. But his cartoons, and some early stabs at photography, were not enough to get him into a local art school. After his application was rejected, he told me, "I talked to the director, and he said I would never be an artist."

After a detour studying the humanities, he was admitted to the National College of Art and Design, in Bergen, which housed the country's pioneering institute for the study of photography. There, he was exposed to the vanguard practices of German and American photography in the late nineteen-eighties and early nineties, which took a hip, self-aware approach to image-making. A professor impressed upon him that embracing this contemporary mind-set was the only way to shake off the shackles of the stodgy, overly Romantic work that had made him sneer as a teen. "Poetic realism is completely dead," Rødland remembers being told.



"Church Rope," 2024-26. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery



"Forgetting Victoria," 2025. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery



"Tar and Feather No. 2," 2008-26. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

Ever the contrarian, Rødland decided to forge a middle path. His first mature photographs made during his university years revisited Scandinavian Romanticism—typified by the stormy, sublime landscapes of painters such as Johan Christian Dahl—with a sly spin. In the pictures, which were collectively titled "In a Norwegian Landscape," Rødland places himself in a series of preposterously beautiful scenes of pristine Nordic nature. A long-haired, black-clad figure, occasionally toting a plastic grocery-store bag, he appears less the lonely Romantic hero in the grip of awe and more a modern man in a possibly vain search for the sincere. Rødland told me that he views his work as a kind of "reëchantment project"; like some kind of media-savvy, post-modern Nietzsche, he hoped that his images could open up space for the mythological in a culture sorely lacking it, all while avoiding the perils of cheesiness, sentimentality, and cliché.



"Baby," 2007. Courtesy Nils Stærk



"We Have Sinned So Greatly," 2024-26. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery



"Awkward Seat," 2023-26. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

You would be right to think that this sounds like the delusional grandiosity of an undergraduate. Nevertheless, I'd argue that Rødland has achieved something not far from his initial goal. The works for which he has now become widely known are near-editorial pictures that roil beneath their glossy surfaces with archetypal feelings that have yet to find a name. Who could forget a picture, which graced the cover of *Artforum* more than a decade ago, of an uncannily adult baby staring sagaciously into the lens, its hand placed gingerly over its heart in a gesture that looks like reverence? Similarly seared into my brain is an image of a partially peeled banana with the phallic fruit painted glistening black; a blond-haired child stretching to take a bite of a hanging apple whose flesh has been penetrated all over with silver coins, and drips with a thick strand of honey; a person's hand seen in closeup, wrapped in an amorous embrace with an octopus tentacle that vanishes up the human's sleeve. I could go on. Maybe the photographs are not quite mythic, but they have a way of burrowing into your unconscious like few art works can these days, as visual culture seems in danger of collapsing under the weight of its own banal profusion. Maurizio Cattelan, who also wielded a banana with profound memetic effectiveness, is one of the few other artists whose work has this kind of stickiness, but his recent sculptures have leaned more on the public's appetite for stunts, whereas Rødland plumbs more mysterious depths.



"Imposter No. 1," 2024-26. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

Wiley, Chris, "Torbjørn Rødland Touches the Romantic and the Profane," *NewYorker.com*, March 28, 2026



"Tavener's The Lamb," 2024-26. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery



"Reflections Above Revelations Below," 2025. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

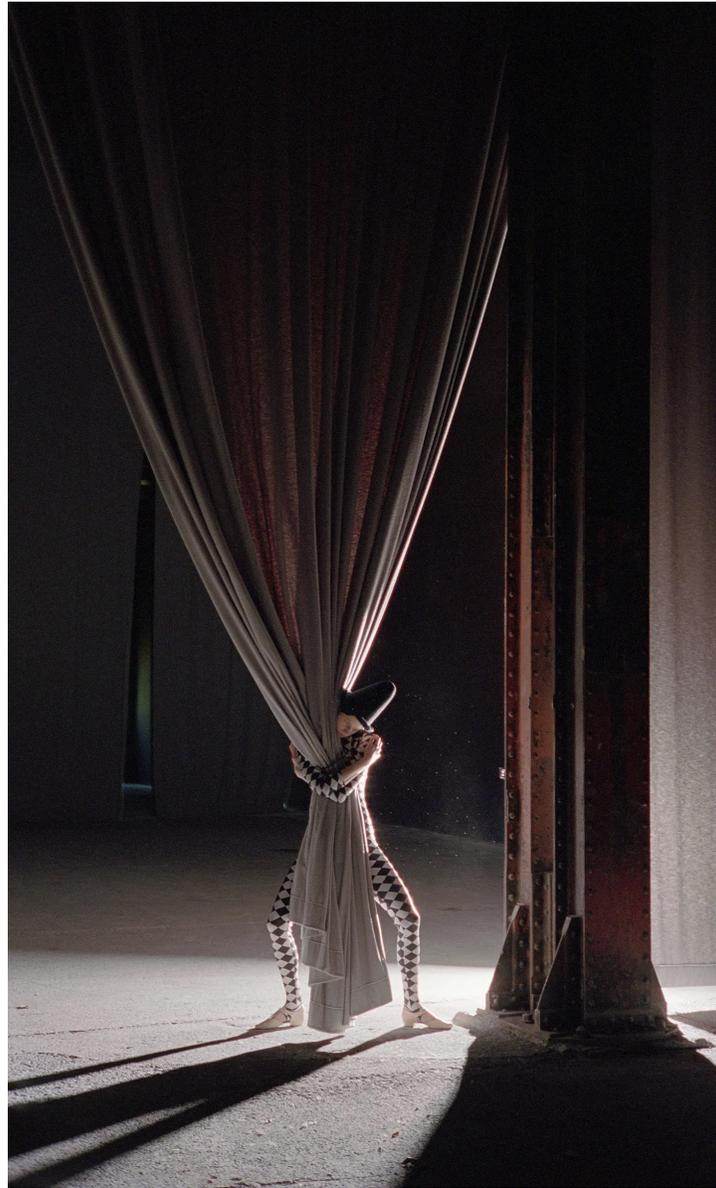
Rødland's new show, which is currently on view at the David Kordansky Gallery in Chelsea, finds him experimenting with a fresh set of tools and unearthing old, unseen work. A majority of the photographs on display are recent pictures shot with a vintage 35-mm. Rollei 35S, an uncharacteristically low-res format for the artist. Rødland told me that

he woke up one morning a few years ago and found himself "thirsty for grain," owing in part to the advent of A.I.-image-generation models, which Rødland noticed could mimic the kind of high-fidelity, goopy tactility that defined much of his older work.

But the tone of the new pictures also suggests a return to the Romanticism that rankled him in his youth, or at least a lighter, less conflicted touch. Here, Rødland shows us a sweeping French landscape featuring a gnarled tree perched atop a poppy-dotted hill or an image of a woman playing the viola by a placid pond, whose title, "Tavener's The Lamb," references a piece by the British composer John Tavener which is adapted from a poem by William Blake. This is not to say that Rødland has gone soft, exactly, though the show does include two tender shots of his own young children. Rather, he is responding to an ambient visual environment in which these kinds of quiet photographs are increasingly out of place. And he has not banished the strange entirely. Take, for instance, a scene featuring a woman in a kind of avant-garde milkmaid ensemble confronting a monstrously tall figure that, upon close examination, is actually a child perched atop a man's shoulders, wearing a long trench coat.



"Arms," 2008. Courtesy STANDARD (OSLO)



"The First Curtain," 2024-26. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

Tucked away in the back of the exhibition is a collection of older work, a series of larger, high-res images featuring people in various states of undress. In contrast to the 35-mm. pictures, these works are plainly confrontational: a woman wielding a gigantic, hyper-realistic dildo, with which she has apparently violated an apple pie; a muscly youth who has been tarred and feathered; a statue of one of the three wise men, hands outstretched, receiving a woman's naked bottom, which glows in the light. Taken alongside his other recent photography, this turn to the flesh might be seen as a complementary probing of the same impulse: When faced with a glut of A.I. slop, how do you break through and truly touch your audience? Whereas the intimate, snapshot-style images call us to bask in the anachronistic warmth of the analog, the profane photographs beckon toward the messy pleasures of the body.



"Apple," 2006. Courtesy Eva Presenhuber

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*Chris Wiley, an artist, has been writing for The New Yorker since 2016. He contributes frequently to the Photo Booth series.*

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