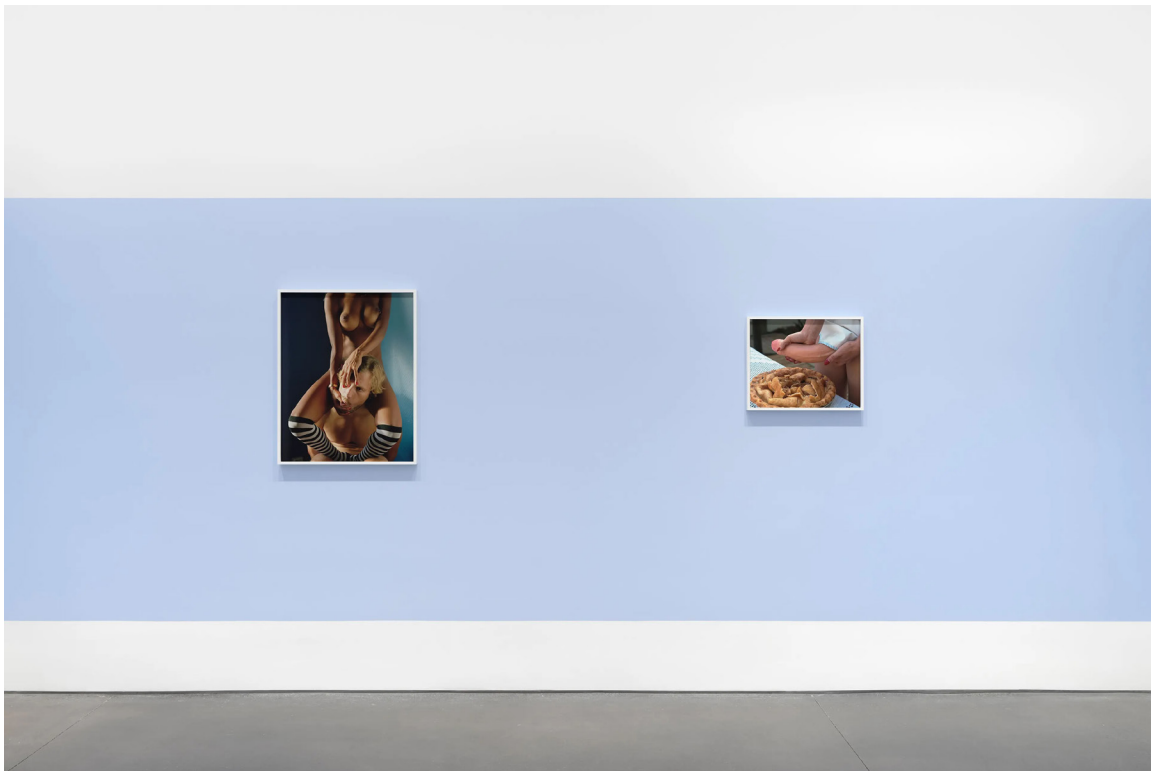


THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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Torbjørn Rødland: *Bones in the Canal and Other Photographs*

By Zach Ritter



Installation view: *Torbjørn Rødland: Bones in the Canal and Other Photographs*, David Kordansky Gallery, New York, 2026. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

A Torbjørn Rødland photograph has often entailed the collision of seemingly antithetical objects, effects, or states of being which, through their juxtaposition, present us with new arrangements of the sensible. Such is the element of humorous surprise and baffled wonderment that so often accompanies a viewing of his work—an assurance that *surely we have never seen this before*, perhaps because it had never existed until its conception and subsequent con-

*Bones in the Canal
and Other
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struction by Rødland. Working where the aesthetic conventions of commercial photography intersect with the formal and conceptual rigor of fine art photography, he has managed to carve out a space entirely his own, one defined not by detachment or overbearing (and exhausted) critique, but rather by a belief in the possibility of using the signs and symbols of our time to create images that might still mystify or compel us by way of their strange and unexpected beauty. Though we might think this grouping of recurrent motifs, concepts, and hallmarks of style (backlighting, visceral textures, expressive yet controlled color) amounts to a model for production, what Rødland reminds us of in *Bones in the Canal and Other Photographs*, his latest exhibition at David Kordansky, is that it is more of a language than a system, one open to endless invention rather than mere repetition.

Anyone who has even a slight familiarity with Rødland's work—whether in books or printed for the wall—will have expectations about what awaits them in the gallery: medium- to large-scale color photographs, framed without any margin or border, that speak clearly and convincingly across space, legible at a distance, and gripping, if also unnerving, from up close. Such expectations will be quickly dashed in *Bones in the Canal and Other Photographs*, which is largely defined by the 8 by 12 inch photographs that Rødland made using a 35mm viewfinder camera, marking a new development in his art. The intimate scale of these photographs rewards slow and patient viewing—all the better



Torbjørn Rødland, *We Have Sinned So Greatly*, 2024–26. Chromogenic print, 7 7/8 × 12 inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

to appreciate their precise framing, careful construction, and quality of their exposures. While his larger and more graphically assertive works tend to isolate objects, bodies, and figures, placing them right up against the surface of a picture in ways that invoke the genres of product photography and professional portraiture, Rødland's new pictures mostly situate his subjects farther away, off in the middle distance and surrounded by what feels like enough space to swallow them up.

Where this space often comes from, or rather where it situates us, is the landscape, whether that be a placid expanse of field and valley, as in *We Have Sinned So Greatly* and *Reenactment* (both 2024–2026), or a river bank enfolded by trees and foliage caught in a pale golden light, as in *Tavener's The Lamb* (2024–2026). Even though Rødland uses his trademark backlighting in many of the pictures—which has the effect of animating them from within, of giving them some secret purpose—it ultimately stops short of transforming nature into a stage or dramatic prop. In so many of these pictures, Rødland allows the landscape to be seen as both setting and character, as in *Sitting Pierrot* (2025), which shows a mime sitting on a tree branch set within a field of yellow wildflowers. Though the scene has surely been constructed, its psychological effect remains undiminished, its emotional core rings true. By pulling back from the ostensible subject of the picture and allowing him to exist in a state of self-absorption, one contingent upon the isolation he seems to have found, Rødland suggests that the landscape remains a site where self-understanding can be pursued. Rather than approach it with cynicism, or even estrange us from it altogether, these pictures affirm the landscape with all its familiar beauty, taking it to be a place that can frame the human experience without also being defined by it.

One of Rødland's longstanding preoccupations has been to challenge the commonplace assumption (one surely intensified by the ascendancy of the screen as the primary theater for encountering images) that while a photograph can represent objects in the world with fidelity, it will fall short of conveying their feel and tangibility. Put differently, the photograph is one image among a sea of other (mostly digital) images—it is real and immaterial at the same time, something that can move us before being forgotten a moment later. Rødland has pushed back against this position in the most immediate sense by remaining steadfast in his use of analog technology and darkroom techniques, both of which create some useful friction with the polish and sharpness of his images that often suggest digital processes of manipulation. His insistence that photography retain its objecthood has always been more than a pat demonstration of an idea. In *Bones in the Canal and Other Photographs* he has used conventional methods to further emphasize the materiality of his photographs: the grain of 35mm film remains visible on the surface of each print while the latticed cotton matting and dark wood frames all add up to a sensuous group of objects, ones that feel texturally alive even before we look through them into the discrete worlds they describe.

Rødland has consistently maintained that his pictures, in spite of their distinctive and oftentimes provocative scenic drama, are more like vehicles of symbolic association than conveyors of narrative detail; this rings true throughout most of the exhibition, even if at times he seems intent upon pushing such a distinction to its breaking point. In a picture like *Church Rope* (2024–2026), for example, Rødland presents what can be read as an allegory of the burden of personal responsibility for maintaining one's faith (and for defending the institutions that propagate it). A man in his Sunday-best strains against an



Torbjørn Rødland, *Church Rope*, 2024–26. Chromogenic print, 12 x 7 7/8 inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery.

immovable mass of white marble to which the rope he pulls over each shoulder is affixed. The pews behind him and the religious fresco above signal the setting well enough, while the light beaming in from behind the marble adds a touch of the divine. His task is pointless, impossible, nearly Sisyphian. And yet, he seems resigned to his fate while the scene, in the way it characterizes his movement and its meaning, does not allow us to doubt his responsibility. In other pictures, Rødland almost tempts us to create a narrative structure, as in *Street Scene* and *The Cat Came Back* (both 2024–2026). The former depicts a romantic encounter on the verge of interruption by a crossed lover, and the latter shows the reunion of a beloved pet with its owners. Both pictures are intelligible as if they were dramatic acts in some larger play; and yet all is conjecture in the end because Rødland encourages us to describe these relationships—to make them literal rather than speculative—as I just have.

The possibility of narrative connection is pursued with the most force by a group of works situated at the back of the exhibition, which are given enough separation from the 35mm pictures to invite interpretation on their own terms. Seven medium- and large-format photographs stretch across three adjacent walls, five of which are intentionally linked by a wide blue strip painted behind them. As a group, they seem to explore a religious iconography and spiritual lexicon, with nativity figures, naked bodies, bare skin, and prosthetic genitalia used and arranged to suggest an uneasy, absurd, yet somehow also earnest, relationship between the scared and the profane. I confess that these pictures, made and framed in what we might call Rødland's house style, felt elusive while the smaller ones felt intuitively clear, akin to words in a sentence, bound by syntax rather than their own descriptive reality or formal law. What their contrast provides, it seems to me, is a reminder of just how malleable and surprising an established method of image-making can still be, whether that be Rødland's or the industries he references and retools. His work makes this realization edifying: it sharpens our nerves as we brace for the next regime of images and the claims on truth they promise to make.

Zach Ritter is a writer based in Brooklyn, New York. His writing has appeared in *American Suburb X*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Dear Dave*, *Hyperallergic*, and *Photograph* magazine, among other publications.