



Contemporary Rodland

Torbjørn Rødland

My house sits on the edge of an English town ringed by countryside. If I walk five minutes westwards I arrive in a golden meadow, five minutes northeast and I can get a Frappuccino. This summer I've been getting up before dawn and heading west. I breakfast on wild blackberries and watch the sun's radials make dewy cobwebs shimmer. Then I go home, boot up my laptop and start work. I wonder how long it will take for me to bury my worries in that bright grassland, and, if the answer is as I suspect, why I keep going back there. On these fractured mornings I inhabit a world approximate to Torbjørn Rødland's photography.

In his early series *In a Norwegian Landscape* (1993), Rødland photographed himself facing away from the camera, standing atop snowy hillocks or entering rich forest glades. Unlike, say, one of Caspar David Friedrich's contemplative monks, he trailed the urban world with him (in the form of a carrier bag) and signalled that our distance from the Romantic era might not consist simply in a modified affinity to nature but in a greater honesty about our essentially schismatic relationship with it. Like most of the Norwegian artist's works since, these photographs privileged photography's indexical function. They recorded something that's extant (in this case the helplessly beautiful natural world, in subsequent photographs churches, priests, cassette tapes), even though we're not wholly convinced of its purpose anymore; even though – no, more likely *because* – considering it as a basis for art makes us feel awkward.

'I won't touch [the subject] unless I know or suspect there's something of importance that has been lost under layers of banality,' Rødland said recently. He isn't a nostalgic or reactionary so much as one who recognises that, however much we map metaphors of the digital age onto the human organism, we remain inundated with irrational longings for nature, for religious belief, even for the recent past. That these demand exploring, not ignoring. And that getting people to look at, and think about, what they've already consigned to irrelevance requires a certain subterfuge.

Rødland's most emblematic images of this type are the ones he made in 1997–2000 featuring young women, as clean and rosy-cheeked as Gap models, in unspoilt Norwegian landscapes. There is a vacancy in their faces which is double-edged. Either they're disaffected youths unable to connect with nature, or their faraway demeanour is a distant echo of the otherworldly beatitude of saints in religious iconography. Nature is here subject to urbanite invasion: in *Untitled* (1997) a girl sits on a forest track, resplendent in fuzzy grey angora, smiling at a dog which wears a plastic neck-cone to stop itself licking some injury; in the 1999 *Nudists* series, an uneasy homage to the neo-Edenic innocence of the Scandinavian naturist movement, the subjects inevitably keep their logo-splashed trainers on.

The extent to which such imagery has been co-opted, ironised and made textual by its persistence within popular and advertising photography is acknowledged in the double entendres of *The Flute Player* (1997), a study of female shaft-caressing, and *Sublimation* (1998), with its Pan-referencing goat about to bite down on a carrot. Yet Rødland employs such dusty commercial tropes not to wearily acknowledge the impossibility of rescuing the Romantic impulse from low-ambition photography's purview, but to create a complex of readings that inveigles the viewer into spending time with his images and asking what's so wrong with eroticism, beauty or nature all of a sudden. They court dismissal only to leave you, if you do throw them out, wondering where the bathwater went.

And because Rødland wants his traps to work, he keeps inventing new ones. His series featuring death-metal musicians, *Black* (2001), surprises via its confluence (similar poses, similar sense of duality) with an earlier cycle, *Priest* (2000). Images of the ministers distorted in concave mirrors and, elsewhere, of them being hugged by children, recall the recent discreditable history of the priesthood; meanwhile, the photographs of metallers – romping in the forest, wrapping their studded arms around trees – suggest that these musicians' espousal of a pre-Christian theism makes them more significant as symbolic religious revenants than as soundtrackers of vodka binges among Nordic youth. In *Goodnight Moon, Goodnight Room, Goodnight Breasts* (2002, the title part-referencing a cosy 1930s children's book), Rødland came indoors, photographing pyjama-wearing women in dark rooms and men dragging ropes. The sequence is inflected by a gothic mood, yet one so stage-managed that it's possible to read light-heartedness, a child's sketch of discomfort, into it. Again, dualism predominates.

In 2003's *More Songs, Buildings and Girls* (an archaic echoing of an early Talking Heads album title) he again resuscitates overdetermined imagery. Working in black and white avowedly to challenge himself, Rødland trains a taxonomic eye on churches, the defunct technology of analogue audiocassettes and a bespectacled girl who awkwardly attempts to look glamorous in ugly outdoor locations, sometimes accompanied by a strewn cassette. What these images share is an inference, while we're looking at them, that we're looking at the wrong picture, the wrong subject. The questions they ask: Why wrong? What assumptions bankroll that opinion? What price progress? Where did our love go?

If you want to talk it over, I'll be down in the meadow.

Martin Herbert