

The New Image: Torbjørn Rødland at Albus Greenspon

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Torbjørn Rødland, *Bathroom Tiles*, 2011-2013, 55 1/8 x 43 5/16 inches. Courtesy of Albus Greenspon, New York.

The tendency among contemporary artists to move toward an interdisciplinary practice has never been greater. There appears to be an anxiety around the idea of executing works in a singular mode for fear of displaying a one-dimensional identity. Today, young artists, perhaps too primed by a business model of success, aspire to diversify their portfolios, become well-rounded innovators, and disseminate their developed and “branded” personal languages as far and wide as possible. However, there are of course, several strong exceptions to this rule, embodied in the work of individual artists, maintaining a steady focus within the general dialogue of specific media. For example, there is currently a movement in photography that advances the conversation around the medium, partially through a combination of conventional concern for formal and technical expertise with an unconventional approach to the conceptual aspect of image-making. Often cited members of this group include Michele Abeles, Anne Collier, Roe Ethridge, Annette Kelm, Elad Lassry, and Eileen Quinlan, each of whom have been featured in the past five iterations of the Museum of Modern Art’s “New Photography” exhibition series. These photographers each skew their chosen subject matter through an ostensibly “objective” lens.

Another photographer who seemingly fits into this widely expansive and now well-established niche is the Los Angeles-based Norwegian Torbjørn Rødland. Yet despite initial superficial signifiers, Rødland’s cryptic pictures are at once more direct and more off-kilter than many of his contemporaries. Specifically, in his coyly refined debut exhibition at Albus Greenspon, the artist displays an amalgamated aptitude for color and composition, but his uncanny awareness of narrative implications via stunted social associations is what gives these photographs their true allure and authority.

The first photograph one encounters is *Narrative Stasis (Studio Kabuki)* (2008-13), a deadpan shot of an unidentified person dressed in traditional kabuki accoutrement, their gender and ethnicity not quite clear. The work’s title serves as an ironically fitting introduction to this individual exhibition, as well as the artist’s overarching practice—the stylized story is stabilized through disparate chapters, each given their own peculiar swagger. This is also the first of many works reminiscent of film without being bound to film’s narrative powers. A smiling child in a brightly lit cage, a cropped body wrapped in sausage links like a mummy—absurd, juvenile ideas on paper, yet haunting as the stills of an imaginary movie. These cinematic images are evocative of Chris Marker and William Eggleston, whose work similarly begs the viewer to ask “who” and “why?” However, the surreal displacement of Rødland’s photographs keeps them at a distance from his forebears’ more documentary style of image-making.

In Rødland’s work, conception and perception of imagery is often manipulated with equal parts illusion and allusion, offering an unusual dramatic sense and blurring the line between prescription and coincidence, rarely seen in photography or art in general. This is aptly demonstrated in such conceivably unrelated works as *Partner*, *Bathroom Tiles*, *The Corner*, and *Thorns*. *Partner* (2008-13) contains two figures—a young Japanese girl awkwardly hugging a cheap Greek bust, their heads together, her biting her lip and looking



Torbjørn Rødland, *Twintailed Siren*, 2011-13, 22 7/16 x 17 3/4 inches.

Courtesy of Albus Greenspon, New York.

away, acting the part of a cute stereotype as if she is endorsing something, except without much charisma or a slogan. *Bathroom Tiles* (2011-13), at first glance, appears to be an uncomfortably sexy photograph—red toe nail polish, wet feet, sterile environment—though upon closer inspection, the feet are not wet from water and soap lather, but rather some unspecified congealed substance, forcing the woman's left foot's toes to spread like Dr. Spock's fingers, invoking a mood that is less seductive than perplexing. *The Corner* (2008-13) and *Thorns* (2011-13) are ghostly, black and white composite interior/exterior photos, giving new meaning to the phrase "mirror image." These paused and poised moments speak to many of the placid yet unnerving 1970s images taken of forced entries, vandalized homes, or wrecked movie lots by the Los Angeles photographer John Divola. Like Divola's investigations, Rødland here too attempts to hybridize painting, photography, and sculpture with a performative slant, as well as include still-life, landscape, and arguably portraiture all into one flat picture—a gesture one would think to be ridiculously futile and mildly pretentious, but as is the case with Divola it is jarring in its instinctive, no frills poetics.



Torbjørn Rødland, *The Corner*, 2008-13, 55 1/8 x 43 5/16 inches. Courtesy of Albus Greenspon, New York.

Throughout the exhibition, there is a proven consistency in both the lighting and staging of the subjects and the slick production (and post-production) of each of the images, mimicking both current art documentation and high-end advertising, namely fashion campaigns and product placement. This approach suggests a serious conceptual tone with a hint of satire. A work such as *Twintailed Siren* (2011-13), which depicts an empty Starbucks iced beverage cup precariously placed between a young woman's smooth, clenched butt cheeks certainly would not look out of place in a *DIS* Magazine spread, but the surrounding works re-contextualize the starkness and cleverness of this gesture and supplement poignancy to the implicit erotic humor.

The final image of the exhibition, *Black Ducati* (2011-13) brims with subdued stimulation. Two models are centered in the frame, sitting on a black Ducati motorcycle—one is scantily clad, the other is nude; one is staring at the

camera, the other is helmeted and looking down. Both seem to be unsure whether to be enticing, intimidating, or dejected—a savvy counterpoint to the stoic Kabuki portrait which prefaces the exhibition. As an artist, Rødland appears to take pleasure in the covert discomfort derived from slight alterations or deviations from recognizable information, and minor nuances and idiosyncrasies within the photographic presentation of said information. By maintaining a constant and restrained manner of working in contrast to the unfettered range of subject matter he presents, Rødland creates a surprising lag between recognition and cognition. In this way, he proves to not only be interested in the advancement of photography as a medium, but one could also argue, the advocating of a relationship shift in viewing and experiencing. Perhaps this notion alone doesn't set him apart, but the resulting images do.