

Torbjørn Rødland

NILS STÆRK, COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

About this review

Published on 09/02/13

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Napkins, 2011-12, framed c-type print, 1.4 x 1.1 m

The world of visual imagery associated with the United States of America can hardly be boiled down to a handful of photographs. The title of this show of new works by Torbjørn Rødland, ‘American Photography’, perhaps alludes to that possibility, but the unlikelihood of such a bold claim is immediately revealed. Rødland’s motifs have ranged from landscapes to nipples; humorous still-lives to shrewd portraits. Save for an occasional proximity to the exasperating – tired raunchy aesthetics cannot be defended simply by knowingly mobilizing said tropes – he has a knack for avoiding clichés or kitsch. In this small exhibition, Rødland groups together a collection of familiar visuals from American geography, history and culture (rather than quotidian life). The selection is ostensibly random: a rust-coloured canyon, paired election posters, the seal of the United States on the facade of an embassy.

Here Rødland’s camera falls back to a position of simply seeing what is there, in contrast to his sometimes unmistakably staged works. Yet there is also a sense of closeness or intimacy that overtly emphasizes textures and shapes. *Desert Tree* (2006–2012), a stark silhouette of the jagged edges of a Joshua tree against a blue sky, is almost like a cut-out, but it still lacks the associated flatness and emphasizes the tree as tangible. Similarly,

the third photograph in the black-and-white triptych addressing the assassination of John F. Kennedy, *Dallas no.3* (2011–12), depicts Lee Harvey Oswald's grave. Though the image is centred on the gunman's name engraved in stone, it also highlights the physicality of the grass and twigs surrounding it. Alongside the allusion to the superficiality of the tropes of visual culture, Rødland evokes a very literal meaning of surface – as something to touch and feel. Most puzzling is *Napkins* (2011–12), which depicts crumpled napkins reading 'Ronald Reagan' strewn in a sticky, half-mopped-up mess on the floor. The image serves almost like a riddle to be solved.

Rødland's method when it comes to representing persistent tropes is not that of blanket, poignant disruption, in the form of repetition or highlighting the overfamiliar as problematic. Rather, it emphasizes the singularity of the images. Even the most deadpan works, such as *Latter Day Towers* (2012), portraying the perfect symmetry of a white Mormon temple, resists categorization in terms of references to mass culture or the everyday. There is almost something otherworldly or painterly about it.

What makes 'American Photography' effective is that by focusing on the slightly unexpected – no cars, no people, no fast food – and isolating particular views, the end-result becomes something other than a comment on the ubiquity of images or an attempt at describing a totality. It is as if Rødland is staking out a side path, where the approach of usurping common tropes goes beyond the expected and shows the real, the fragmented and the puzzling embedded in the known.

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