

# TORBJØRN RØDLAND *Corpus Dubium*

by Charles Schultz

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Torbjørn Rødland's exhibition, "Corpus Dubium," is a warmly felt look at body-oriented insecurity. It is a modest show, including only ten color photographs, but the impact of each image is undeniably potent, perhaps because Rødland's subject is such a universal aspect of the human condition. The Latin title translates as "dubious body," and most of the bodies pictured are being scrutinized to various degrees and for what seems a variety of purposes. Coming to terms with what aspect of the body is fraught with uncertainty, and from whose perspective, is the driving question of this work.

Rødland, a Norwegian artist who lives and works out of Los Angeles, has an eye for cropping: he gets his camera up close to his models, pushing all extraneous matter out past the frame. Body hair is a recurring motif, and it is pictured with great clarity. Hands, too, play a major role in these photographs. But the hands and the hair are typically isolated from the rest of the body; they attract one's focus as they slip into an archetypal realm. Rødland uses backlighting to further this effect, blowing out backgrounds so that his scenes are unmoored from any specific context.



Torbjørn Rødland, *The Mirror*, 2014–15. C-print, 44 3/8 × 56 1/4 in. Edition of 3. Courtesy Albus Greenspon.

The emotional timbre of Rødland's photographs is restrained and almost clinical save for two instances of possible trepidation and delight. *Drunken Man* (2014 – 15) depicts a large, bare-chested boozier from the belly up, flanked by a pair of women who hold his arms and shoulder as if helping the wobbly fellow steady himself. Red wine streaks his face and dribbles through the nest of dark hair on his chest and stomach. He grins sloppily, and the wide-angle lens Rødland uses foreshortens the drunkard's right hand such that it's as large as his bearded

head. This old sot could be Rødland's version of Silenus, the mythological companion and tutor of wine-loving Dionysus, which would make him among the happiest people in the world, as well as the wisest. If he has any doubts about his body, they've likely been assuaged by the assistance of his modern-day satyrs.

*This is my body* (2013 – 15) provokes stronger, if stranger, emotion. Here Rødland presents a young redheaded girl peering upwards while a pair of well-manicured man's hands hold her neck and touch her lips. The girl's gaze is submissive; she appears to be giving herself up to this suited figure for some kind of evaluation. There is a narrative implication that the girl wants this person's approval or reassurance, but it's impossible to ascertain why. The obscurity of intent pushes the image into shadowy territory. She could just as easily be a tragically young prostitute as the dentist's neighbor receiving an informal checkup in her back yard.

Other photographs seem to point toward the limitations of one's hands. In *The Photographer* (2015), we see two malformed hands holding a digital camera, ready to shoot. Either this photographer does not need fingers to work the camera's buttons, which would be remarkable, or Rødland is using the camera as a prop in what could be a cynical jibe or a bit of harmless role-play. Every option pivots on how one interprets the photographer's hands. In a related image, *The Geller Effect* (2014), bent spoons and forks, accompanied by a tuft of blonde hair, are arranged into an interesting still life. The title suggests that the utensils were warped by self-proclaimed psychic Uri Geller, who supposedly bends metal with the slightest touch of a finger. Again, if this were true, it would be astonishing.



Torbjørn Rødland, *The Photographer*, 2015. C-print, 30 5/8 × 24 in. Edition of 3. Courtesy Albus Greenspon.



Torbjørn Rødland, *This is My Body*, 2013–15. C-print, 24 × 30 5/8 in. Edition of 3. Courtesy Albus Greenspon.

Rødland's work is unquestionably sensual even if its primary concerns seem to be more cerebral.

Two pictures related to medication, *Tablets and Waves* (2014 – 15) and *This is Every Week* (2012 – 15), move Rødland's doubts about the body into territory deeper than the skin. These photographs depict a spread of unmarked pills and an empty pillbox. It doesn't matter what ailments or deficiencies the medication is meant to correct, the central point is that the implied body in question is hardly as vital as it could be.

Considering an area of the body that is not directly visible counterbalances one of the largest works in the show, *The Mirror* (2014 – 15). In this photograph another young redheaded girl stands naked, one leg up on a shelf, apparently taking a selfie with her phone. Is she pleased with how she looks? Her facial expression gives nothing away. All that is clear is that she is concentrated, focused on her screen, forming some type of judgment. Rødland's backlight appears to flare out of the girl's crotch, both obscuring and drawing attention to her sex. It may be the most interesting image in the exhibition insofar as it depicts a lone individual scrutinizing herself, and in that sense seems internal and complete, as if she only requires her own approval. However, the image broadens out when one considers that the girl's scrutiny is contingent on the social and cultural conditions that establish the standards of beauty she's working with. If she doubts herself, it is because she's been taught that she isn't what she could be.

The crosscurrents of self-doubt and vitality that run through Rødland's photography give his images a degree of psychological realism even as they depart from reality. Because there is so much exposed flesh on view, these motifs cut up against the canyon walls of sexuality. But it is not a question of voyeurism since so much of Rødland's subject matter is pushed towards archetypes; "Corpus Dubium" is more of a philosophical proposition—one perhaps as old as legend—that every living body is doubtful, and only ceases to be once its light has gone out.