

The Photographer Creating Scenes That'll Get Under Your Skin

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A new exhibition at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery highlights the tactile work of Torbjørn Rødland, and the human need for sensory connection

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What was the touch that made you? A kiss under streetlights at 2am? The squeeze of a friend's hand? The shivering collision of your parents? The jagged pain of blood being pulled from a vein? Our lives revolve around touch: who we touch; what we touch; how we touch; what touches us; who touches us. For Norwegian photographer Torbjørn Rødland it was this realisation that "everything has been touched", which thought formed the central preoccupation of his latest exhibition: *The Touch That Made You*.

In 2016 the *New Yorker* dubbed Rødland an image-maker capable of creating "tactile allure". It feels suitable then that he has now returned to focus on what he refers to as his silent stimulus. His debut UK show has provided him with the chance to look over his own body of work with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Serpentine curator Amira Gad: "I always enjoy activating new relationships and dialogues with pictures from slightly different time periods," he tells AnOther.



Such enjoyment began when Rødland originally studied the conceptual and staged photography of the 80s and early 90s, a time period which initiated his attraction towards another kind of imagery entirely. "I wanted to create photographic images that weren't only addressing an analytical intellect," he explains. His portfolio ambles from startling images to the downright

obscure, from a hand curled around the glistening tentacles of an octopus, to wisps of blonde hair resting gently on the tip of a sliced orange. They serve as emphatic proof that Rødland took the right direction. Although he used to photograph everything from at more of a distance, now his aim is to provoke tangible responses. "I'd like the viewer to react to my prints as self-conscious and slightly paranoid bodies, not just as a pair of eyes," he explains.

Yet eliciting sensation is only one part of Rødland's vision: "I like art that moves from concrete to abstract, from something recognisable to something imaginary," he says. He seldom aims for narratives that clearly communicate a message or an idea. but instead takes pleasure in the perforated: moments that remain "flawed and somewhat unproductive," in his own words. When it comes to the subjects of his pictures it's a case of patience. "Often I wait for the right cast. Models are from all sources: from high-end agencies to Model Mayhem; from Instagram to friends of friends or people I run into when out and about... You never know what actually works, and I depend on models and the material to come up with and turn into something rarer than what I could have foreseen."

Having left his native Norway for Los Angeles, a move he describes as "a decision to be less nomadic," Rødland found a permanent base in Laurel Canyon in 2010. Yet he's never been able to fully relinquish his hometown, and spends a quarter of every year in Oslo. This careful move is evidence of how Rødland approaches even life itself as an edit. "I say no and yes to objects, landscapes, people, clothes, moments, situations, compositions, exposures and exhibition spaces... In the end it's all a question of editing, isn't it?" he muses.

For Rødland everything is a case of touch, searching for those things that "help activate a vague idea and make it physical". This desire for physicality even roots itself in his choice of medium; analogue photography has and always will be a staple of his work. "Digital just wasn't a serious alternative when I started," he says. "I like the wetness of analogue photography; the lack of control, the accidents and surprises, the perceived depth." In a world increasingly overwhelmed by screens does he think the importance of touch and sensory experience is increasing? For Rødland the answer is simple: "As long as we have mammal bodies we'll need sensory experiences to feel connected, to feel okay."