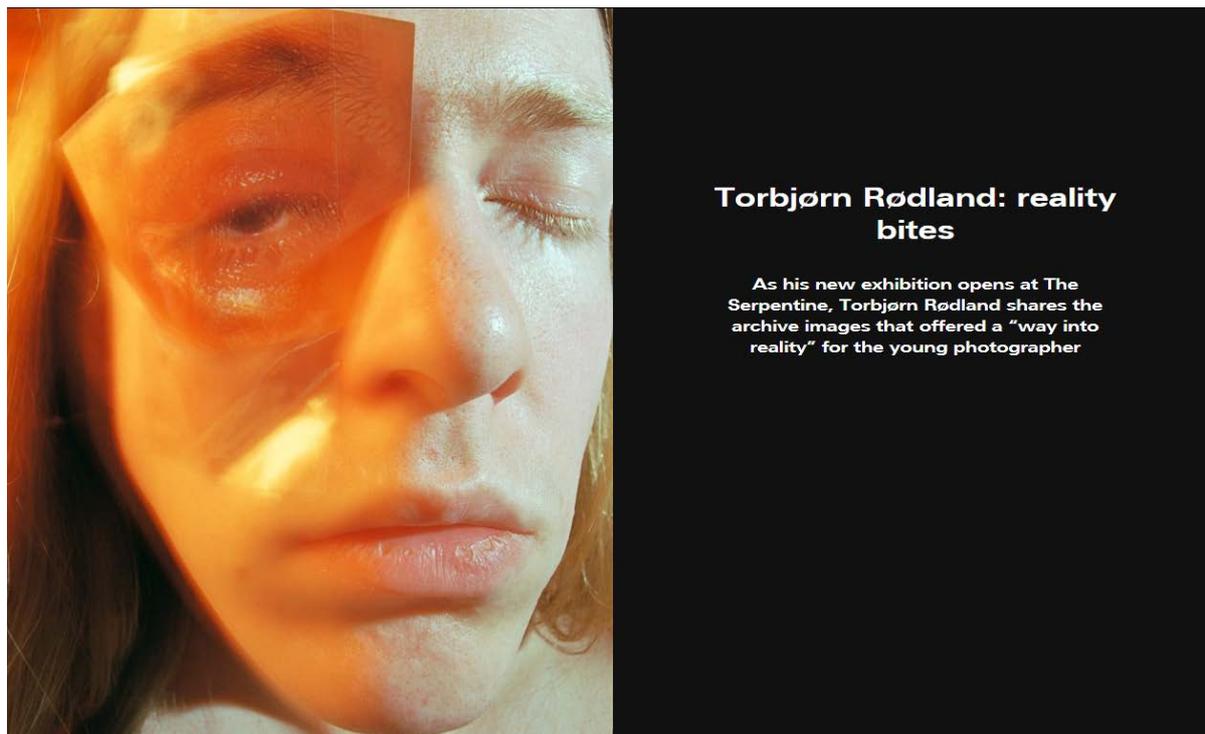


[Dazed](#)



Text

[Claire Marie Healy](#)

Photography

[Torbjørn Rødland](#)

Torbjørn Rødland is having car trouble. That's a cause for concern in Los Angeles, the city where nobody walks, and the photographer's home of seven years. For those familiar with Rødland's work, its surrealistic world seems inextricable from a certain brand of Hollyweird, with uncanny scenes backlit by the unmistakable sunshine of his adopted home. But as the early selection featured here reveals, Rødland's current locale is a far cry from the Norwegian landscape that he grew up in, where wandering by foot or hibernating indoors formed the basis of his first experiments with photography. It's an instinct to take pictures, says the artist, that's "very close to not knowing what to do with yourself".

"It was a way to make teenage boredom or melancholy into something productive," Rødland recalls in his reserved, softly Scandi voice. "To create something healing – something to look at and think about – by turning the camera on myself. A way to make the day tolerable, basically." Having also dabbled as a political cartoonist, Rødland's turn to photography produced these early portraits, which see everything from cereal boxes to eyeball-adorned mugs used as props for his curious lens. The work anticipates his current mode of still-life, which zooms in on surfaces that seduce and repel all at once.

It was during his time at art school in Bergen that Rødland began experimenting with long lenses, creating the voyeuristic effect of his breakthrough series *In a Norwegian Landscape* (an excerpt of which is shown for the first time here). Now better known for his portraits of an eclectic cast of characters – beautiful models, old men, cute animals and, memorably, Paris Hilton – in at once bizarre and banal settings, what these early works share in common is that Rødland himself is at their centre. "(I wanted) to make sure it didn't turn into reportage," he says of the decision to put himself in the frame. "(To show) how a photograph can come from a subjective place (and) show a psychological, emotional reality, rather than just a dry description of what's in front of the camera."

At first glance, these images of a lone, long-haired figure at home and in nature seem like direct forebears of Rødland's *Black* series (2001), the photographer's project focusing on Norway's

controversy-courting 90s black metal subculture. In fact, during his student days, the country was in the grip of a national panic sparked by a series of arson attacks by members of the scene on Christian churches. The photographer says it was only in retrospect that he saw the connection: “It was a true underground in that period that I didn’t have access to. It’s only in hindsight that I realised they did anything worth paying attention to. I do see (black metal) now as a parallel reaction to some of the limitations of the postmodern world and the ideas of the 1980s.”

Taken between applying to art school and his graduation, these are portraits of the artist as a young man, literally – a deliberate play on romance and realism that might easily be read as irony. But Rødland insists it was never as self-aware as all that – instead, he was mounting a resistance to figures like Cindy Sherman or Richard Prince, the so-called ‘Pictures Generation’. “These artists saw irony as a useful tool to free themselves from old structures,” he explains. “For me, it was already taking away more than adding to life. I had too much distance, too much of an outsider’s gaze on everything. The movement in my work is to acknowledge that it’s there as a problem and push towards the juicy centre of things – rather than stay on the outside with a critical attitude, laughing.”

Fast-forward to this month, and London’s Serpentine Galleries play host to Rødland’s first-ever UK show. There’s something supremely satisfying in the thought of unsuspecting tourists – perhaps put off by queues at the main Serpentine venue –stumbling across the Norwegian’s twisted tributes to the absurd at the nearby Sackler Gallery instead. The artist is excited at the prospect of shocking the uninitiated. “It feels great,” he says. “I like that process of seeing how the photographs find new neighbours and how their content starts to bleed into each other – how (works) that have been made many years apart can come together and influence one another.” In the age of the gallery selfie, Rødland’s own Instagram ([@rodland.jpg](#)) winks at a generation obsessed with self-promotion. There, grinning figures hold aloft the Rødland-lensed book and magazine spreads that they have starred in, creating a picture in a picture. It’s a uniquely framed approach that throws back to that eyeball mug shot, but which also speaks to his wider philosophy. “For me, photography has paradoxically become a way into reality. I’ve been able to find life through the making of photographs, rather than photography being in the way of life.”

*The Touch That Made You is at Serpentine Sackler Gallery September 29–November 19*