

# Torbjørn Rødland

INTERVIEW BY ALEX ISRAEL

AS A STUDENT IN THE MID-‘90S, THE OBVIOUS DIRECTION WOULD HAVE BEEN TO FOLLOW THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE PICTURES GENERATION. BUT IN CONVERSATION WITH FELLOW L.A. RESIDENT ALEX ISRAEL, THE NORWEGIAN ARTIST-PHOTOGRAPHER EXPLAINS HOW HE INFUSES HIS PREDECESSORS’ IRONIC CRITIQUE WITH SPIRITUAL LONGING AND SUSPENDED, SURREAL AMBIGUITY.

**Alex Israel: Tell me briefly about your youth. Where did you grow up? Were you raised in a religious home? A creative home?**

Torbjørn Rødland: I grew up in Stavanger, on the southwest coast of Norway, in a family of churchgoers and teetotalers. But it felt weirdly mundane, with all of the continence of religion but none of the juicy rewards. There is actually some artistic talent on both sides of my family, but very little vision, faith, guts or whatever you want to call it. For them, creativity belongs to the realm of hobby.

**What would you pinpoint as a most formative early experience with art?**

I wasn’t convincingly introduced to the traditional fine arts as a child. What comes to mind is European animation, like Osvaldo Cavandoli’s “La Linea” series or Ivo Caprino’s take on Norwegian fairytales—but also Zdeněk Miler’s shorts with that red-nosed mole, Krtek (in the original Czech).



**As a kid, could you draw well?**

Yeah, that was the only thing I was good at that didn't make me unpopular in school. I always had the best grades and I could draw better caricatures than anyone.

**You told me once that as a young person, you created an image archive—a collection of found image clippings. When did this begin? What kind of pictures were you collecting?**

It started as soon as I was allowed to operate scissors. I cut out pictures of actors and recording artists, smiling models in knitwear, children holding pets, naked people in shower cabinets advertising soap. Exciting stuff like that.

**Do you still have it?**

I think so. My family's good at not throwing things away.

**When did you first start taking your own photographs?**

At eleven maybe. That's roughly when I got my first camera, an Olympus Trip 35 in metallic and black. I photographed my surroundings: the Stavanger golf course, boys on bicycles, local and visiting sports celebrities, my redheaded sister, my smiling father.



**At what point did you consider these images to be art?**

Not until the series "In a Norwegian Landscape," which I worked on during my BFA years in Bergen, Norway. I had great respect for art, and I didn't think anything before

“In a Norwegian Landscape” was good enough to show in public. I was twenty-four when I first contributed to an art exhibition.

**When you began showing your work in the mid-‘90s, were you expected to define your practice in relationship to the Pictures Generation, to the Becher School, or to any other dominant forces in photographic discourse?**

My professor in photography wanted me to follow the example of the Pictures Generation and 1980s staged photography and critically reject the lyrical realism that still dominated Scandinavian art photography in the late 1980s. “You fully understand what is happening,” he said. “This is just what you have to do.” And he was right: I really understood why Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall were important. But I also longed for a photography that was more tactile, emotional, physiological or spiritual. My project has been to try to nudge art-as-photography towards these qualities without giving up on the lessons learned from ironic critique. Reportage was never an option for me. Remember, I came from drawing and caricature.



**Do you still see your work as caricature?**

No, but I'm still interested in unseen aspects of exaggerated worlds.

**I'd like to know a little bit about your process. Do you usually envision the final photograph before you take it?**

Most often I start with a very concrete or quite vague visual of something that I'm curious about, but it doesn't look like the final photograph. The finished photograph results from the silent choices I make while looking at and working with the material.

**Do you ever draw out an image, compositionally?**

Not compositionally, but when I try to make a lot of different images in one ambitious day, I will make very rough sketches that show bodies in relation to each other or to objects. This is mainl

y to help me plan and remember a series of experiments.

**How do you choose your subjects?**

I'm drawn to living archetypes, to persons who can be paradoxical characters in my play.

**Who would be the ideal subject?**

Robert Wagner—can you make it happen?

**He'd be great. If I ever meet him, I'll keep that in mind. I've noticed that you don't use the word "shoot." Why not?**

Oh, it's way too violent. My camera is on a tripod, I'm slowly setting up a picture... It feels nothing like shooting. It's more of a session. A lot of the photography lingo is insensitive and stupid. I see no reason to go along with it. I don't "capture" moments or "take" pictures.

**How do you handle accidents when they happen during a session?**

You mean when the model faints or the tripod blows over?

**Sure. Do you cancel the session? Do you allow for the possibility of something entirely unexpected to enter the work?**

I've only experienced very temporary fainting and minor accidents, but yes! I do depend on unexpected events. What I do is to set a stage. What can happen on it never ceases to amaze me. I often don't know exactly what I want until I see it. So much is about learning to love what you get.



**You use lots of tricks during your sessions—lighting, compositional devices, etc. But with the exception of minor retouches to remove dust spots, for example, you resist using post-production tricks. Why is that?**

I think I would cross the line if I started changing or adding to the image in Photoshop. I allow myself just a hint of fantasy art. If I could work with photography the way I once worked with pen and paper, I'm afraid the results would be just as ungrounded as my drawings were. I like to see how far I can push the reality that both reflects and blocks the light in front of my camera. It's a project of synthesis. It's everyday reality under the slight influence of the unconscious.

**Why did you make the move to Los Angeles seven years ago?**

I needed to end my nomadic wandering. In a world of imperfect cities, L.A. seemed to have flaws compatible with my own.

**How would you define the relationship between your work and Hollywood?**

The fascination is real, but after moving here, I see that it's healthy to keep a certain distance.

**How about fashion?**

I'm always interested in dressing my characters, but designer clothes should never be the reason to make a picture.

**And porn?**

I'm about ambiguity and interpretation, which tends to fade quickly when people start actually having sex. The very beginning of a pornographic sequence is more interesting to me than the end.



**What makes a picture memorable?**

Formal clarity, repeated viewing and a connection to shared fantasies.

**What is the ideal context for your work?**

A sculpture exhibition in a sequence of evenly lit white cubes.

**Are you a perfectionist?**

I don't know. Sometimes I collaborate with magazines, which means accepting imperfect presentations. It does bother me, though. I wake up in the morning and all I see are yesterday's embarrassments.

**Have you ever made a perfect photograph?**

Ah, this question is such a trap, and I feel so tempted to walk right into it. So, yes: every year I make some perfect photographs. They're better than they have any right to be, and there's nothing I would ever change about them. They're a reason to keep going. I'm not a "fail again, fail better" type of artist.



Images in order of appearance: PEEL NO. 13, 2013–14; COASTAL SCENE, 1996; THE LONGEST DAY, 1997; DESERT HAT, 2016; TWIGS AND STRIPES, 2001; LAKE EVERGREEN TREES, 2007–2014; PARK STOP GO, 2016; NUDIST NO. 4, 1999.

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