

Objektiv



Torbjørn Rødland, *The Ring*, 2017.

TORBJØRN RØDLAND'S FIFTH HONEYMOON

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The artist wore stripes - Morten Andenæs on Torbjørn Rødland's *Fifth Honeymoon* at Bergen Kunsthall

I have always found the work of Torbjørn Rødland approachable. It is impressive in its consistency and unflinching urgency, and can be grasped by anyone. Making use of the breadth of imagery that incessantly surrounds us, imagery with which we've grown up, and that will most likely outlive us, Rødland sings it in his own voice, tweaking it so that what might at first be recognised as familiar, an image on the tip of our tongue, becomes in the next instant entirely strange, and forever out of reach.

Despite my immediate attraction to this work, my relation to it has always been marked by a very deep-seated ambivalence. Because the work can be apprehended on many levels, is so ambiguous and at the same time so thoroughly contrived, it leaves me in a state of uncertainty and insecurity, confronting things about myself to which I would rather not admit. The result is more often than not a desperate attempt to find an exit, to eradicate all these conflicting emotions and be done with it. Wouldn't it be a relief if there were a solution to the works on display, something we could easily interpret and identify? But Rødland's photographs are not in the business of palliative care. There is no relief, no consolation.



Torbjørn Rødland, *First Altarpiece*, 2018

At first *Fifth Honeymoon* appears to be a kind of exercise akin to the machinations of the Marquis de Sade, a body of work of that leaves me stranded because of its insisting on a kind of radical anti-humanist stance that scoffs at my immediate wish to identify with the work. In his book *For a new novel*, French writer Alain Robbe-Grillet renounces the use of metaphoric language because it creates a false identification. By calling a mountain majestic and thus imbuing it with qualities it does not possess, rather than simply describing its characteristics, an illusion of complicity is generated between the creator/reader/viewer, and the surrounding world. By using

metaphor, Robbe-Grillet argues, we suture the chasm that separates us from the world. The result is an illusion that there is some deep connection between us and our surroundings, a blanky we can hold up to our chin when we can not bear to face the fact that this world, like ourselves, is nothing but disinterested matter, an endless row of shapeshifting molecules and symbols with no intrinsic meaning.

Fifth Honeymoon is instantly recognisable as a Rødland exhibition, complete with his never-ending power-struggles, his seemingly unstudied studies of everyday objects made infinitely strange. One of the first photographs I notice is that of hands throwing a very basic form, in clay, on a potter's wheel (*An Old Form*). I then note that a pitcher decorated with yellow and white stripes appears in at least two photographs, as well as the video *Between Fork and Ladder*. It reminds me of something that Gertrude Stein wrote about objects and pictures: 'does a pitcher look like the one we use or like the one we would use', she asks (without a question mark).



Torbjørn Rødland, *Vertical Pillow*, 2017

The exhibition features photographs of several women, a few of them old, some not, and a young boy setting off the typical Rødlandesque coordinates of light and dark, of wrinkled old age against the young pale skin of a child. Freckles abound and become yet another textured layer, like the stripes and dots, the salt and the sand. There are the double-exposures in black and white, Bambi's front legs in the desert, covered in flies sitting in wait for a point of entry to the meat; there is the number five, as per the title, a cardboard cutout of the same

number left out on a table at night and another one partly covered chocolate, as in *Anchor* and *Two Rings*; and there are, of course, the hands, this extremity that figures so prominently in Rødland's work, both as a point of contention and a reference to beauty-photography. In one photograph, the head of a young woman lies on a tabletop as if she's weighted down, her hair covered in brightly coloured pompons, the same ones as those surrounding the

propped-up cushion in *Vertical Pillow*, their colours mimicking those of the sweets in *Candy Skewers*.

Rødland's universe is one in which reality and fantasy cannot be easily separated from each other because they are mutually dependent. Aside from providing this mirror to the myths of our time, Rødland shows us the precondition for any sort of 'making sense' of the world. Walking round *Fifth Honeymoon*, it occurs to me that the density of stripes and dots on fabric and materials, the shift between light and dark, opaque and translucence, the freckles on the women's faces or their wrinkles, all combine to speak of a very fundamental way of navigating the world. The ability to distinguish figure from ground, to be able to make out the stripes of a tiger lying in wait behind the dense foliage of the forest, was once a very real survival skill, and even though we do not have to worry much about tigers anymore, this same ability to distinguish figure from ground is used in designating higher-order perception, and is a fundamental prerequisite when it comes to translating the two dimensions of a photograph into the illusion of a three-dimensional space. Despite the din of the world, we recognise an affect such as tenderness on a freckled lover's face, a look of pity in a stranger's eyes, no matter his filthy countenance, and respond with sympathy – or loathing – to the tone of a child's voice. It dawns on me that Rødland's body of work accounts for how we end up making sense out of the undifferentiated matter of the world. For all intents and purposes, his work is a kind of grammar, even a fully fledged poetics.

Fifth Honeymoon is yet another exhibition that turns around the same axis as many of those that preceded it. The focus is not so much on locating something *new*, as on this incessant repetition of the wedlock of incongruous elements in the hope that this time around, one will come closer to fulfilling the dream of some perfect union. Julie Kristeva writes in her book *This incredible need to believe* that belief in the object relation is a mark of adolescence, and it becomes apparent that I have a difficult time getting past my adolescent need to identify with the work at hand. I think again of Robbe-Grillet, how in his view, metaphor and identification serve to comfort us because we have a difficult time accepting reality, and I see this vis a vis the conglomeration of stripes, dots and freckles in Rødland's works, and how they are to be apprehended on the same sliding scale as a very heartfelt affect such as love.

Confronting Rødland's photographic universe also reminds me of something

Zygmunt Baumann wrote: that the mark of divinity is to need nothing. The believer, on the other hand, reaches out and has needs; the believer cannot be an island. The photographs of Torbjørn Rødland most definitely do not reach out, which is perhaps why I find myself wrestling with them. Even though a part of me knows that what appears in his work as a radical acceptance or a kind of atheism pursued with intensity and perseverance is the only sane response to the futile project of unity, I find myself clinging to my agnosticism.



Torbjørn Rødland, *Silent Scream*, 2017

In the title of the video-piece *Between Fork and Ladder*, we find another wedlock. As in Robbe-Grillet's use of *Jalousie* (in French the title means both 'Jealousy' and 'Blinds'), the fork is both an instrument of culture – an appendage-like tool that penetrates the flesh of the meat or plant we are about to consume – and, when held sideways, a kind of fantastic ladder. Such doubling reminds me of a child's need to re-present the world through play, transforming ordinary household objects into tools capable of magic. A Japanese-anime-style voiceover tells us, 'This self ought to be smiling, but more often than not it is not smiling. Nothing is worth pursuing anymore. All desires have become thin and anemic. This is a soul for whom the personal has gone flat.' The 'self' referred to is presumably the pretty young boy who features prominently in the video, sitting in a tree, singing what in effect becomes his own theme song. As he does so, he cuts out Pepe the frog heads from a novelty beach towel. Surprisingly, it is not this meme, this symbol of the alt-right, that holds my attention, but its relation to the quintessential give-away of social climbing, of wannabe waspness: the Ralph Lauren polo-player embossed on the boy's shirt.



Torbjørn Rødland, *Between Fork and Ladder*, 2018, installation photo from Bergen Kunsthall.

I heard the video *Between Fork and Ladder*, before I actually saw it. A song sung intermittently by what sounds like a young boy reaches every corner of the exhibition space, and to this moment, its hook, has taken up residence in my mind. Before I saw the images, the boy's voice conveyed tenderness, as if the song originated with him. I felt the onset of a kind of wistful identification when he sang, *what are you supposed to do? When the world turns its back on you? When everything is up to you?* However silly I feel about admitting it, I too *have a pain inside my heart, that's tearing me apart* as his song goes. At least I did when for example hearing *Foreigner* sing about *wanting to know what love is* when I was young, and I felt the familiar knot in my stomach as the boy's voice rises and falls. A hope that here, there, in that room I would find what I've been looking for; work that breaks my heart or at any rate shatters the endless hall of mirrors Rødland seems to offer up to us. An insulated world where the best we can hope for is to see ourselves infinitely reflected, never truly encountering an other in all their richness and complexity.

I look at the boy in the video as he sings 'The fear that I can't win is suffocatin' I'm back where I started again, my paltry needs thwarted. The video cuts to images of the dawn and the sunset, of ladders strewn here and there, and to logs burning in what at first seems to be an open fire, complete with a crackling sound on steroids (was there really a crackling sound or did I just



Torbjørn Rødland, *Wampus Springs*,
2011-2018

imagine it?), the burning logs remind me of the video fireplace that once served many a household with the 'feel' of warmth, if not actual measurable heat. I think of 'truthiness', Stephen Colbert's joke word conveying the fact that it doesn't matter if something *is* true as long as it *feels* true, and I think of Roland Barthes' observation apropos of wrestling, that what we crave is not actual suffering – the image of suffering will do just fine.

It is in this powerful, sinister video-piece that Rødland is at his most layered. Like the logs burning in the televised fireplace, the boy 'feels' warm but elicits no sympathy. Steeped in symbols, he seems to be a construct, acting out certain duties with conviction whilst being – most likely unbeknownst to himself – a symbolic character. Even though my sympathy is not evoked in relation to the boy in the striped Ralph Lauren shirt, even though the piece itself feels like a machination, it nonetheless elicits a kind of sympathy for us all, conceived and trapped as we are in all these layers of symbols and images.

And with this in mind, I find a reminder of a line that Terry Eagleton wrote in his book tellingly titled *The Trouble with Strangers* – a line that would do well to lurk in the back of one's mind as one encounters the works of Torbjørn Rødland both past, present and future – 'compassion unaccompanied by a warm glow does not cease to be compassion'.