

THE DOUBLE PERSPECTIVE - GILLES MORA

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We are so used to the many forms of contemporary photography that give way to playfulness or superficiality that being introduced to the work of Finnish photographer Elina Brotherus seems purifying and leaves us, in a way, speechless. How is it still possible for one to go further, we wonder, with such determination and success, beyond the usual conventions of coloured prints, large formats, staging the self, devices that are nowadays used as excuses for fake egotist confidences or the most complacent visual stagnations, to focus on a double quest: discovering the self, mastering beauty. This mission would suffice to exhaust a lifetime of creation: 44-year-old Elina Brotherus has been carrying it out, until now, mixing — with incredible success — the self and its image, the image as an experience, the experience as an image.

Brotherus' photographs belong, without a doubt, to the galaxy of the ones made by photographers of her generation. At first sight, looking at them individually, or gathered without any leads other than their visual kinship to other photographs that on the surface bear some resemblance (such as the works of photographers known as the Helsinki School¹ or the work of German photographer Bastienne Schmidt), there is no difference from this group, or it is minimal, to the extent that many of these productions seem to be interchangeable². This contemporary photography — that fills galleries, institutional commissions, public and private collections — can easily be mapped: staging the self (following the now canonical model set by Cindy Sherman and a few others), mandatory references to painting and its history, scrutinising documentary recordings, owing to the highly descriptive resolution of large format, along with colour prints of a similar size, architectural or urban spaces of our times. The voyeuristic drive for unleashed autobiography regarding sexual marginality or intimate epics similar to literary autofiction, the commercialist tendencies of which have been illustrated by writers such as Christine Angot in France. There are, in the midst of these, a few conceptual novelties that place the photograph at the service of the installation or museums suspected of placing the visitors in a state of creative interactivity. Elina Brotherus regulates the drives of her work between two poles: highly autobiographical self-portraits and landscapes, in a successful reconfiguration of what she admires most in painterly tradition. In short, even if it does not seem new, between art and life, entwined through photography, in a way that is needed and convincing. There is an imperative without concession that she expresses this way: "I guess this is the essence of it all: light and beauty."³

The evolution of Elina Brotherus' photographic work, that started some 20 years ago, followed a simple trajectory. It was initially built around her personal life — failed marriage, divorce, an artist residency in France, in 1999 (at the invitation of the museum Nicéphore-Niépce in Chalon-sur-Saône, leading to her Suites françaises), changed direction, from the year 2000, going towards more formal preoccupations, on the relationships between landscape and painting (The New Painting series, 2000-2004). It was followed by a group of interrogations regarding the position of her person, at the same time subject and model, that pushed Brotherus towards photographs in which she puts herself in perspective using her own image, other models (especially professional dancers)⁴, and different environments. Without adopting a cold conceptual position, the creation of series on the theme of the figure allowed Brotherus to cover, as always with a great formal elegance, a group of photography problems on the changing points of view generated by the positions, whether they are the same person or not, of artist and model(s). Once more, self-portrait seems to impose

itself on Brotherus, through these serial practices, not as a simple narrative or introspective device any more, but more like an element of visual thinking following the presence of the artist's body in the photograph generated around her figure, now a reflecting form, or simply reflected.

Seemingly going back to what she had done before, but really going forwards in her process to understand herself, for the last few years Elina Brotherus' practice has been even more autobiographical. Following serious health issues (and her incurable infertility), that she narrates with sincerity, often indirectly, she began working on the series titled *Annonciation* (2009-2013). It led to a new photographic freedom, from which Elina Brotherus, while never betraying her visual idiolect, self-portrait⁵, is playing with the hedonistic *Carpe Fucking Diem* attitude. The book and the photographs that resulted from 2011 onwards⁶ are the result of the experience accumulated throughout Brotherus' whole work: beyond the artificial aspects of the project, its artistic conventions, photography is still celebrating daily life in every aspect (existential, aesthetic, narrative, oneiric...), beginning a return to the autobiographical documentary of her beginnings, as in the works *Love bites* (1999, p. 133) or *I hate sex.* (1998, p. 135). But it never refers to the "trash photography" movement that is so characteristic of American Nan Goldin, or Swedish artist JH Engström, although Brotherus admires his books. While they never clearly establish a hierarchy between good and bad photographs, as only intensity matters, Brotherus never loses sight of the rigorous composition of her photographs, treating them like paintings.

It seems Elina Brotherus is in the position described by Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz in his *Diary*: "I do not know where the work will lead me but wherever it leads me I have to express myself and satisfy myself [...]. As all of this is a game of compensation: the [...] more [...] inventive, unpredictable [...] you are, the more sober, controlled and responsible you must be⁷. A struggle between the inner logic of the work and [the] person. [...] Out of this wrestling is born a third thing, something indirect, [...] something that is neither pure form nor my direct expression, but a deformation born in an intermediary sphere"⁸ says Gombrowicz. The double perspective in which Brotherus' aesthetic is situated, internal focalisation (the introspective, intimate part of her work), and external focalisation (Brotherus as a figure in the midst of other figures, other shapes) brings tension and have to be balanced while carrying out her projects... The *Annonciation* series successfully went beyond those two approaches. Brotherus lets us see herself in the most intimate way, without revealing herself too much, as maternity was denied to her. And, at the same time, she is looking at herself (that is to say she stages herself, gives herself a visual structure) as a formal element of this story, studying not only the relationship of her body to the other elements of the picture, but also the archaeology of the image, its connections, references, discrete or direct allusions, to the history of painting. The *Annonciation*, an essential theme of religious visual art, with strong connotations, is thus turned into the thematic induction through which Elina Brotherus tells us of the hardest years of her life, as in a mourning diary. Beyond any religious references, that are not part of her preoccupations, the artist exposes her intimate self, while modestly distancing it, through special codes and poses.

Mediating reality or life through painterly reference is not something only Brotherus does. This became, in contemporary aesthetic practices, a conceptual device used to question the image, its perception, or even the image of perception. The work of Swedish artist Matts Leiderstam, in many ways, is similar to Elina Brotherus', especially in the way she puts Western painting in perspective in relation to landscapes. It is nonetheless distinct on one point. While the Swedish artist favours a very elaborate conceptuality through a complex play of installations, in which the reference to painting is always embodied in a way that is almost pedagogic, Brotherus is more elegant and only gives hints. She is not concerned with the device so much as its effect. More than the painterly process, she constantly refers to its impact on the photograph. If she considers it a "New Painting", it is because one medium is imbued with the other, the very way a child learning how to speak will adopt the language structures that surround him to finalise his own language. Elina Brotherus does not repeat the painting (an unforgivable fault for any pictorialist photography): she carries on into her photography some aspects of the painting that she has assimilated, when she is amazed with its beauty. The

pleasure she finds in this is generously carried on to the audience, when, faced with Brotherus' photographs, they decipher the allusions to the pictorial universe she refers to. Even with the few clues she has given (Caspar David Friedrich, of course, Claude Lorrain's classical landscapes, Paul Cézanne's bathers, Mark Rothko's colour fields, or the wonderful golden light she borrowed from Finnish paintings, by Ellen Thesleff or Magnus Enckell), the outsider's gaze can find its own references there. This elegant invitation, this light footed demonstration — barely a hint — of the relationship between Brotherus' photographs and painting, do not use a forced, demonstrative conceptuality. The echoes from an iconography that have deeply influenced her through various paintings and artists, are also carried out by questioning the perception: how can a photographer make the horizon theirs, as painters do, by raising or lowering its line (her series of Horizons, taken between 2000 and 2002, show that most rigorously), while using the versatility of lights, of ridges in the landscapes, of their positions? How are musical occurrences to be treated, when they are transposed in the domain of images (Large de vue, Hommage à Erik Satie, 2006, a true serial suite), by playing on synaesthesia, correspondences between colours and shapes, reminiscent of Baudelaire?

One of her most famous photographs ("Der Wanderer 2", 2004, p. 99) summarises by itself the way Brotherus can take ownership of the romantic images of painter Caspar David Friedrich, beginning with his famous painting Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1818) or his Woman at a Window (1822), a pose that has been repeated in many variations by the photographer, where the model only shows her back, which became a sort of new norm⁹ that many epigones of Elina Brotherus have now adopted. These hints at genres that belong to painting (the sublime, everyday life...), these compositional codes, the gesturing used by Brotherus when she stages herself, are not simply a crafty copy of iconography seen through art history. In addition to indicating, beyond their reference, that they inevitably are a part of the photographic medium (lack of texture, maximal definition, redistributing the perspectives and colours using analogue and digital techniques) they underline the attempt to condense meaning through images, which is very characteristic of contemporary photography. This protocol short-circuits the traditional immediacy, the famous "ripping out" of the real to which this medium has been confined to for a long time. Elina Brotherus pushes forward the reflection on the relationships of painting and photography from the point where an artist like Aaron Siskind had already pushed it. For the American artist, photography rivals painting in its observation of motionless, out of context shapes that are reconfigured, thanks to the two-dimensional specificities of the camera lens. Brotherus, as many artists of her generation, does not subscribe to that quite abstract approach. Photography or video, that she also practices, interpret, for her personal use, the open index of cultural codes (settings, characters, poses, lights), selected through the filter of histories of painting¹⁰. And, for Brotherus, the reconstitution effect, the slowness that it calls for and that she favours, in tune with her meditative nature, borrow as much from painting and from the great primitives of photography of the 19th Century, like Swedish artist Oscar Gustav Rejlander, Gustave Le Gray and many others.

From all of this emerges a coherent group of photographs, the portrait of the young woman, Elina Brotherus, who we have been following for almost 20 years through her transformations, from the naivety of her beginnings, to the melancholy and depressive states, along with some episodes of high spirits. Her face, her body that she presents us through the protocol of her staged photographs and self-portraits, allowing us, at our discretion, to observe the modifications, the subtle ageing, with an impressive and very contemporary good taste; she could have been, if her aesthetic ambitions had not been so demanding, an essential figure of design or fashion photography, her clothes, her gesturing, the architectural or natural settings she inhabits¹¹, manage to bind the spectator and the character that she presents, without narcissistic excess, in a state of happy complicity sharing the events of her life and her instinctive understanding of beauty. And suddenly, in one of the last self-portraits of the Carpe Fucking Diem series ("My Dog is Cuter Than Your Ugly Baby", 2013, p. 47), in which, with a finger, she mimes that unexpected rude gesture, exhibiting her dog Marcello in her other arm, instead of the child she cannot have, tearing apart with one painful provocation the euphoric pact that she had maintained with us, the spectators, who had become, over the years, her accomplices, her confidants. This provocation that is so far from what we imagined of Elina Brotherus, with just one

photograph gives gravity to her whole work, something that we could nonetheless sense behind all these photographs: beyond the lights, the obstinate pursuit of beauty met with uncommon success, there is a fissure that gives a deeper meaning to what could have been mistakenly seen simply as a controlled exercise in style carried out by this very gifted contemporary photographer.

1. The Helsinki School refers to a group of artists — photographers and videographers — who studied at the Aalto University, School of Arts, Design & Architecture, in Finland. They all share a model of visual creation that was born and taught in the '90s, aiming at training students to think the creative act in a new way, but also to teach them how to present, redact, order their aesthetic ideas through the most demanding professional standards that until then the Finnish art scene had been lacking. In photography, the teachings of internationally renowned Arno Rafael Minkkinen influenced three generations of students of the university. Elina Brotherus is part of the third generation. Many exhibitions and publications have put forward the Helsinki School, praising what is regarded as the most productive of the Finnish contemporary photography scene.
2. Especially, in Bastienne Schmidt's work (her Home Stills series, 2010) and Elina Brotherus', self portraits with their back turned, chromatic ranges (red dresses for each of them...), the way their bodies are set in interiors or natural landscapes, this same very acute understanding of design...
3. Elina Brotherus. *The New Painting*, London, Next Level & Creative Scape, 2005, p. 75, interview with Sheyi Antony Bankale.
4. This is the work she produced in 2007, collaborating with 6 dancers of the Opéra de Paris, published under the title: Elina Brotherus. *Études d'après modèle, danseurs*, Paris, Textuel, 2007.
5. "I wanted to see what happens to me, because the "me" is my tool, it's a sign in my visual vocabulary. So, if it changes, I want to be able to see that change." Interview with Ellyn Kail on the Annonciation series, of the 13 January 2016, available at the following address: <http://www.featureshoot.com/2016/01/carpe-fucking-diem-one-photographers-courageous-discussion-of-involuntary-childlessness>.
6. Elina Brotherus. *Carpe Fucking Diem*, Heidelberg and Berlin, Kehrer Verlag, 2015.
7. Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, Vol. 1: 1953-1958, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1988, p. 88.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
9. "I love the back. The back is calm, discrete, polite and distant. It doesn't challenge the spectator as the direct gaze would. [...] The situation invites to contemplation, not confrontation." Elina Brotherus. *The New Painting*, op. cit., p. 72.
10. "I went to look for help in painting. Other pictures that I saw in museums and books led to my pictures." *Ibid.*, p. 74.
11. See her recent series *Les Femmes de la Maison Carré*, shot in 2015, in the house designed by Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. Brotherus stages herself, in tune with the light, the lightness and the fluidity of the volumes and lines of the French building.