

# frieze

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## Another Green World

Torbjørn Rødland

In my local branch of Borders practical photography magazines sit right next to the 'serious' art, architecture and design section. It's a small step, but then again, this is the same chain of bookshops that classifies philosophy books as 'mind & body'. Amateur Photographer magazine is big on two things: sunsets and scantily clad women. Flicking furtively through its pages the other day (I say 'furtively' as these hobby magazines are to photography what car magazines are to driving: technical know-how illustrated by soft porn), I couldn't help noticing the endless horizon of dawns and dusks dramatizing the dry photographic jargon that comprised the text. Maybe the desire for sunny weather is an English thing, but checking out some of the other publications - Outdoor Photographer, Practical Photography, What Camera? - the sun was up and down like a yo-yo, enough to satisfy even the most ardent of lens flare aficionados. I guess beautiful, polluted sunsets are hard to resist if they show off the wife with a 1/30-second exposure at f3 using a Nikon SX-70 with Fuji Sensia ASA 200 film. I began to crave cloudy weather.

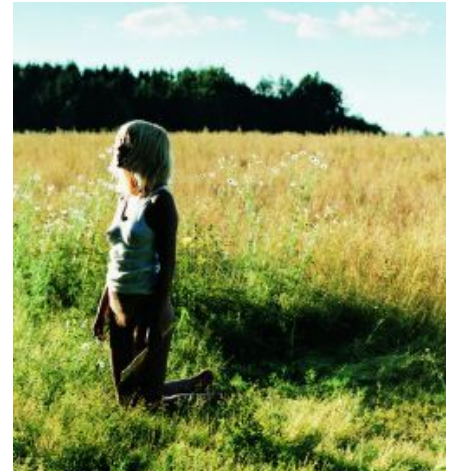
The Romantic critic William Hazlitt once wrote an entire tract about the sun and landscape, explaining 'Why Distant Objects Please'. Nowadays, being in the image-inured world that we are, it's easy to scoff at those awestruck by dusk and dawn, because, as Susan Sontag said, 'they now look, alas, too much like photographs'. <sup>1</sup> Torbjørn Rødland knows this, but he walks a thin Romantic line that keeps him just the right side of sentimental, just short of kitsch. He mimics the fashionista who maybe once saw a Caspar David Friedrich reproduction, with a kind of Romanticism-by-numbers, leaving only a wittily wispy, soft-focus gauze between the art section and Amateur Photographer.

In Rødland's tableaux the Norwegian landscape is rendered

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almost insincere in its beauty: the Romantic allegory of Man as unconfined natural force is reconfigured and, with a wry smile, disguised as a pious pastoral. In a similar manner to 19th-century Scandinavian academicians such as Nicolai Abraham Abildgaard, who slapped allegory thick upon their landscapes, Rødland has developed a prêt-à-porter iconography - the twilit wood or forest, attractive, hip young women, a musical instrument, perhaps an animal - ready to be imported at any moment. Fashion's self-regarding cool is mainlined into the Northern European landscape tradition, projecting urban sensibilities onto Nature's sense. These are Rødland's lifelines, guide ropes that keep his work out of the morass of blank-girl-looking-at-camera photography that clutters gallery walls and but a hair's breadth away from creepy voyeurism.

Maybe it's a Scandinavian thing. Take Bo Widerberg's 1967 film *Elvira Madigan*, a heartbreaker if ever there was one. Based on the true story of a Swedish aristocrat, Count Sixten Sporre, who escaped his military commission to elope with the beautiful, free-spirited, tightrope-walking heroine of the film's title, *Elvira Madigan* is drenched in a honey-coated summer glow. Soft-focusing principally on the fun and games the couple have as they are pursued to their star-crossed doom through the forests of Denmark, the film is almost unbearably beautiful to watch. Everything oozes idyllic perfection, from the sun-dappled glades to the just-so rusticity of their stolen picnics.

The characters glow with pathos, from the ruddy-cheeked peasantry up to the troubled aristocracy, who exude more angst than a brace of Russian novelists. Rødland's photographs are like Widerberg's poignant freeze-frames, slow-motion frolics in a perpetual Scandinavian summer afternoon. Yet Rødland's Nike-clad models remind us that for most urbanites Nature, like the disease-free, well-scrubbed period drama of *Elvira Madigan*, is a dream world evoked by organic food stores and TV shows. His art fakes a dream, and is a stand-in for our idea of a prelapsarian lifestyle where the sun always lingered on our GM-free smallholdings.

Lifestyle - we're back to magazines again. By turns funny and creepy, Rødland plays out the ultimate cliché of the predatory male photographer, a readers' wives amateur euphemistically labouring away at his 'glamour photos'. Take *The Flute*

Player (1997), in which a beautiful young Nordic woman kneels half-naked amid wild flowers in the late afternoon sun. In one hand she limply holds a recorder, but her expression - a vacant fashion-shoot pout - suggests she's not too interested in music lessons. The recorder seems to be a prop, the kind of legitimizing device certain photographers (and, once upon a time, painters) of the 'erotic' genre use to play up the 'art' and play down the Monty Python 'nudge-nudge, wink-wink' angle. In *Reconstruction* (1998), another model, this time fully clothed, is pictured building a bivouac of some kind. She's clean-cut, her jeans are freshly laundered and her trainers' go-faster stripes a luminous, brand-new white. She's not building a shelter, she's demonstrating the latest Scandinavian garden ornaments for Tyler Brûlé. Rødland is role-playing, and play, as Schiller noted, is a field of freedom for art, where the rules of natural cause and effect can be suspended. The trouble is, when you're playing at being David Hamilton, even ironic naturism becomes dangerous. The defence would plead irony, male fantasy subverted via controlled sentiment and back-lighting.

Rødland revels in the romance of Romanticism; look at all those woodland pipes and flutes, for example. Nineteenth-century Romantic aesthetics often used music as the paradigm, the model art, with all its incorporeality and supposed free-spiritedness. *This Is Always* (1998) gives the lie to Rødland's at times hilarious mawkishness. Another young woman, this time crouching in a clearing, sings into a microphone. Where's it plugged in? Apollo goes karaoke. It is hardly a state of pastoral oneness with Mother Nature. The girl in *The Wait* (1998) is clad in razor-pleated trousers (impractical for woodland gambolling) and looks more perplexed than entertained by the flute in her hands. Pan, in goat form, is fed carrots in *Sublimation* (1998). The scene seems like it just might be the absurdly wooden prelude to a Swedish porn film, or a pretentiously ill-conceived fashion spread. Consider the title: surely it's not the phallic carrots that are being sublimated in a corny but lecherous depiction of a priapic offering to the woodland gods? But you can see Rødland knows this is, and enjoys pushing it as far as he can. Maybe it's the chocolate-box backdrop or the girl's look of dotting serenity, but the dial is in the red.

It can become tiresome, all this ironic point and counterpoint. Linger on these images for too long and a cloud passes overhead. You begin to ask yourself whether you can

stroll through the forest without wondering to what degree your trainers interrupt the bucolic calm. This makes Rødland's 'Priest' series seem all the more sad and poignant. The figure in Priest No. 6 (2000) cradles a lamb, again, in absurdly wholesome surroundings. It's like the kitsch Catholic icons sold at pilgrimage sites the world over: depictions of Christ as a votive Dr Doolittle conversing with the animals. The lamb here looks a little uncomfortable, and the priest seems to be having some difficulty supporting the creature's weight. This awkward attempt to keep up the appearance of being at one with Nature seems, in a funny kind of way, almost touching. Nature, no matter how much we project our desires onto her, just isn't interested in us. It's as if the priest, redundant in a secular age, is desperate to make himself useful, but even the Lamb of God appears to be agnostic.

In Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759) the eponymous hero, Prince of Abyssinia, grows up in Happy Valley but leaves with his sister Princess Pekuah and his tutor, the poet Imlac, in search of a new life. They stop with some shepherds along the way: 'the life which has often been celebrated for its innocence and quiet: let us pass the heat of the day among the shepherds' tents, and know whether all our searches are not to terminate in pastoral simplicity.' Instead they find the shepherds bitching and moaning about their lot, wishing they could up sticks and live in the big smoke. *Rasselas* and his friends leave more disillusioned than when they arrived. The grass is always greener ...

1. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1977, p. 85.

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