



Grasp at smoke

Photographer Thomas Bak on fetishism, mysticism and the perfect picture

by Andreas Schmidl



Polish photographer Thomas Bak weaves history and symbolism together with his multi-layered works enriched by metaphors and citations, following and developing an antique aesthetic that is at once artificial and ancient, ambivalently torn between authenticity and surrealism. From September 5th to November 7th, Bak's work will be shown at Gallery Hilaneh von Kories, Hamburg.

Andreas Schmidl: Your upcoming exhibition *The Photographic Capriccio* is not only a retrospective of your own oeuvre, but it is also a reference to the 'silver' era of photography.

Thomas Bak: Exactly. The title refers to an art form, which was developed between the 16th and 18th century as a battle for artistic freedom. Capriccio artists defied the academic norms of their time. They depicted their daydreams and nightmares of the abyss and went far beyond what was then considered to be realistic. My photographs refer to the very beginnings of this genre. I am chiefly dealing with vintage aesthetics, saturated with contemporary content and perspectives.

AS: When looking back at this series, what was the driving force?

TB: It's the 'play with authenticity.' People believe in what they seem to be witnessing on photographs. We shall consider that photography may be plausibly permitted for minor audiences, as its credibility sprinkles upon people's minds: A sculpture or any form of graphic aspect still keeps its realistic cause hidden beneath obvious abstraction.



AS: What fascinates you about myth, mysticism and Mannerism?

TB: Mysticism implicates humility. In spite of all scientific attempts, one cannot decode existence. Rationalism or psychology is a man-made value. It won't tell us about any source or destination. There have always been keen approaches to improve one's state of mind. 19th and 20th century magicians achieved in Hermetism what Wilhelm Reich achieved for psychology, and ascribed mystery to a vague, conventional bio-chemical basis. Regarding 'Mannerism,' I feel very attracted to its inventions in literature or the fine arts. It's that fabulous arrangement between the mastery of craftsmanship and the ability to construct sovereign realities that I find impressive. I think every serious artist has a spiritual drive, otherwise one could recognize a painting as an accumulation of pigments.

AS: There is this disposed-ness to fetish in your work. Especially the portraits seem to center around sexual abstraction and distraction.

TB: In Japan, my photography was considered as being 'eccentric.' The characteristic subject of 'fetish' is a western one. Though implicating its outer European derivation, it's nowadays fully charged with strictly western associations. Indeed, my pictures are fetishes, and there's no composition without such an aim, so it doesn't collaborate with common sexuality, but with the visualization of ideas. An image should try to capture invisible, transient or atavistic subjects, to allow their analysis. Of course every attempt of self-dissection includes some

sort of self-destruction, though its conclusions boost man's awareness and evolution.

AS: How is the vulnerable and selfdestructive as a core theme continued with your still lifes?

TB: You may categorize two kinds of stills: One is an act of virtuosity that serves the 'style,' dealing with arrangements that are rather communicating among themselves. The other is, and that's how this genre was basically found and purified, an attempt to visualize transcendence. The image derives from a symbol and becomes more and more scenic. In return my still lifes mainly operate with metaphors instead of symbolic treats. Regarding my work, a still life issues the paradox: A self-cutting pair of scissors, a spoon with a keyhole in its scoop, a fork with spikes on both ends. Due to such a manner, those instruments become liberated from their genuine purpose and serve the illustration of invisible structures. Their effigy becomes a fetish in turn.

AS: One of your pictures reminds of Madonna's 'Frozen' video by Chris Cunningham. Have you ever considered filming or directing?

TB: Actually this image was taken two years before Madonna's 'Frozen.' Somehow it's a classic motive, and this image became an evergreen. Anyway, I used to direct a few short movies, though at that time the technical circumstances were quite challenging. To be honest, it is by far not the same as photography, even though both disciplines are closely related. A movie isn't structured that precisely and implies fluctuation by nature. You have to follow a certain story or impression, but you won't be able to reap the benefits of a static image. But my main object on filmmaking is that there are too many people involved into one film set.

AS: Do you feel attracted to other fields of arts?

TB: Sure, I am involved into different fields of art including the most inexpensive one, literature. Cardinaly, it's drawing that takes almost the same intense level as photography, though their basics are diametric: A photograph has to be handled by eraser, while a sketch is built up line by line. In both cases it's 'the straight moment to stop' that determines the result.

AS: How do you value analogue and digital photography?

TB: I do not care about how a picture is taken. Technology is faceless. It's methodical, not significant. One may compose a photograph by shooting through a shoe box or his teeth if it serves the author's aim. Nowadays, we are allowed to produce hastily. Actually, the

technical development forces us to gain anything hastily. That's the contemporary drama: People do not spend enough time on reflecting their deeds. Looking back onto former cultural effusions, one may consider us contemporaries as regressed.

AS: What is your definition of the perfect picture?

TB: The perfect picture stands for itself, related to a Perpetuum Mobile: No title, no subtitle, and no translation possible or needed. An image has to pulse on while you have closed your eyes already.

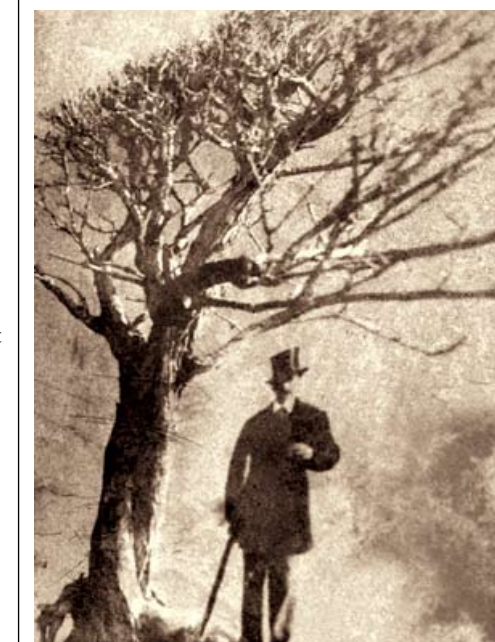
AS: And what do the images tell about you?

TB: A good image implicates the author's privacy. Everyone uses the language he was introduced to and learned eagerly. As long as there is only one artist responsible for an image, it will tell enough about its provenance.

Thomas Bak
The Photographic Capriccio, Sheets from 1998 to 2008

September 5 to November 7, 2008
Tue–Fri 14:00–19:00h and by appointment

Galerie Hilaneh von Kories
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THOMAS BAK

DAS PHOTOGRAPHISCHE CAPRICCIO



Die nostalgisch anmutende Bildwelt von Thomas Bak ist außerordentlich irritierend. Die abgebildeten Figuren, Objekte, Landschaften und Räume konfrontieren den Betrachter mit manieristischen, exzentrischen, erotischen, oftmals alptraumhaften Bildern. Man glaubt zunächst alte Daguerreotypien zu sehen, um dann zu erkennen, dass man sich in einem surrealen Kosmos befindet, der mit historisierenden visuellen Versatzstücken spielt. Mit dem Titel »Das Photographische Capriccio« bezieht sich der Fotograf auf die Kunstform des Capriccio, die sich vom 16. bis ins späte 18. Jahrhundert als Kampf um künstlerische Freiheit entwickelte und in der Kunsttheorie als vielschichtiger Wegbereiter der Moderne gilt: Capriccio-Maler und -Grafiker setzten sich über die geltenden akademischen Regeln hinweg. Sie stellten jenseits jeder Wirklichkeitsnähe die Ausgeburten ihrer abgründigen Träume und Phantasien dar und verwendeten dafür unterschiedlichste Bildgegenstände. Viele Künstler nutzten diesen postulierten künstlerischen Freiraum auch für gesellschaftskritische und politische Aussagen. So heißt eine von Baks Bildserien »Arche=Nada«: sie ist ein bizarrer Gegenentwurf zu der tröstlichen Vorstellung der Arche Noah.









Der Fotograf Bak, der auch Literat, Musiker und Zeichner ist, entwirft seine Bilder zunächst in Zeichnungen, die er dann für das Fotografieren aufwändig inszeniert. Urbilder werden auf neue Bilder projiziert. Bak spricht von der »Wiederbelebung atavistischer oder vorerst verloschener Bilder«. Seine Bildsprache ist mit metaphorischen Erfindungen, Symbolen und Zitaten aus Kunst und Literatur aufgeladen und voller faszinierender Rätsel.

Noch bis 7. November zeigt die Galerie Hilaneh von Kories* Arbeiten des jungen Fotografen. Ein begleitender, in Buchform gestalteter Text, für den Bak eine eigene altertümliche Kunstsprache benutzt hat, ist Teil der Ausstellung.

Thomas Bak wurde im polnischen Szczecin (Stettin) geboren. Er studierte in Bremen an der Hochschule für Künste Design, Fotografie und Buchkunst und machte seinen Abschluss bei Professor Fritz Haase. 2004 wurde Bak mit den renommiertesten deutschen Nachwuchspreisen für Fotografie ausgezeichnet: dem BFF- und dem Reinhard-Wolf- Preis. Seine Arbeiten wurden bereits international ausgestellt.

* Galerie Hilaneh von Kories, Stresemannstr. 384a im Hof, Hamburg-Altona, www.galeriehilanehvonkories.de, Di. - Fr. 14:00 - 19:00 u.n.V.