

Annelies Štrba
Interview

Figures Suspended in Time

An old amusement park, 1976. Barrel organ music in the background. Annelies Štrba photographs her three children posing in front of a carousel with little ponies. Sonja, the oldest, is in the middle, and is holding hands with Linda and Samuel. Her gaze is very serious, almost disquieting.

Annelies Štrba first made a name for herself at the beginning of the 90's – her first personal exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Zurich was in 1990 – and presented photographs of her children that she had taken without any awareness of their artistic value. Many of the shots were taken at night, portraits of the children while they slept. Her husband, the artist Bernhard Schobinger, was the director of a contemporary art gallery in Richterswil, on Lake Zurich, where they lived. When Annelies and Bernhard got back home in the evening, they found the children asleep all over the house. On those occasions Štrba felt the need to capture the magic and enigmatic moment of their sleep. The artist made portraits of the children covered by soft comforters, lying on precarious makeshift beds, and sometimes sleeping together.

A sense of suspended time permeates the images: Annelies Štrba's world is a familiar universe that she has fixed onto film. In one image, little Linda and Samuel are illuminated by suffused light while standing next to a small bed, looking straight at the lens. However, their mother always preserves the children's individuality: she captures their sometimes-impenetrable gazes, but never reveals the mysteries that lie therein. And it is Štrba who works in the darkroom during the night, enlarging the images into photographic canvases.

The artist has collected 240 images, in black and white and in colour, in the book "Shades of Time" (1997).

Valentina Bucco Your childhood must not have been easy. Your father was from Vojvodina (presently in Serbia) and you have recounted how you felt excluded from the group in your class at school. Your encounter with photography was quite precocious: you have been taking pictures since you were 14 years old. Would you tell me about how you got started?

Annelies Štrba My father always took photographs and he gave me an old camera of his. I started at home, mostly taking photographs outside, of trees. At the age of sixteen I needed to find a job. For three years I worked in an office, but I didn't like it. One day, when I was reading a book, I figured out that taking pictures meant being able to work in the dark and I was fascinated by the idea of an image appearing on this white paper in the darkroom. From white photographic paper to an image: I found it magical. So I decided to become a photographer. I started working in a small photographer's store in my town just taking photographs of weddings and for passports. But, what I liked about that job was spending so many hours in the darkroom. After I had been in London, I came back and I was hired to photograph the turbines of a factory for a year. Then Bernhard and I got married in 1969, and Sonja was born. I started working with Bernhard, and I helped him as much as I could. But I always had a darkroom.

VB You have photographed your sleeping children, during the night, while immersed in the realm of dreams. These images represent the intimate and private circumstances of sleep, in which one is defenceless, in a moment of unawareness. What drove you to fix this particular moment on film, and when did you realise that your images might be of artistic importance?

AŠ I was always with my husband. We were always working. I had three children and not much time to dedicate to them, so I began to take photographs. It was necessary for me. For my life. I felt that I had to do it! I always photographed them during the night, while they slept. I would take a hundred or even two hundred photos, even though I didn't know exactly why. My husband had a gallery and lots of people passed through it, some of the critics were from Zurich, and that was how we met Max Bill. But I never showed anyone my photos because I thought they wouldn't interest anyone. But one day a friend said that they were special and that I was an artist and had to exhibit them, not keep them in a box. My husband urged me to take part in a Federal Scholarship for artists. Within just two or three months I was exhibiting at the Kunsthalle in Zurich. For that event a book of my photographs was published. To photograph children while they sleep... As you saw at my exhibition in Rapperswil, I'm still doing it... It all originates from inside of me. I draw from outside elements that I then elaborate on. I am motivated by the conviction that anyone can look at my work and personalise it.

VB As soon as your children were a bit grown up you began to travel, with Bernhard. These travels had a profound impact on your work, determining your passage from photography to video. From 1997 on you used only the video camera, later elaborating stills into single photograms. Explain how the dynamism that led you to travel to many different places seemed to correspond to your choice of an equally dynamic medium. What was the precise moment that marked this crucial passage of using the video camera?

AŠ The passage came very suddenly. At the beginning I didn't travel, life with three children was very demanding. I photographed the children while they slept or while they were looking directly at me, staring at the lens, stiffly in position. When they were older I distanced myself a bit from my husband, and I began to create personal work. I went to Poland, and then several times to Berlin. I showed my work in Tokyo. I felt the necessity to bring the video camera with me and to look through the viewfinder. To tell the truth, the first time I decided to use the video camera was on the occasion of my exhibition at the Whitechapel in London. A video of each artist was to be made, including me. But, I didn't like the idea of being filmed by someone else, so I made my own portrait. I went to a small video shop, here in Richterswil, and I purchased my first video camera, with which I filmed "Max" (1997), which was my portrait for London. I filmed my daughters in the kitchen they had lived in for twenty years. I chose the clothing that they would wear. I made my own portrait by using my daughters. That is how I got started with the video camera.

VB You said that you have always been attracted to what you define as "places that have been shaped by history". You visited the concentration camps Auschwitz and Birkenau, revealing the spectral architecture of the buildings where Jews were massacred; you've been to Japan twice, and entered right into the dark drama of Hiroshima, representing architecture once again. The photographs of Tokyo, Kyoto and Hiroshima are specifically dedicated to architecture from the 50's, 60's and 70's. You went to Kobe, just three months after the earthquake, and brought back images of desolation, in which people are seen wandering around the city with masks over their mouths because of the particulate matter in the air, looking almost like aliens. The images that derive from this trip are faded and slightly out of focus. With what spirit did you photograph the architecture?

AŠ A Polish friend came to stay with us for a while: he couldn't go back to Poland and he told us that some of his relatives could host us there. Auschwitz was nearby; his father had been in the camp. So, we went there. On another occasion, on television, some images of Chernobyl were being shown, ten years after the tragedy: I felt an impulse to take my video camera and freeze some of the scenes. I have filmed these places that have been marked by history because life, after the tragedies that happened there, never returns to what it was before. These events provoke a change. I photographed Hiroshima as it is today. "Hiroshima mon amour" is something else. In that moment I photographed the children who now live there... but first there was the bomb. As you know, I was in Kobe just after the earthquake. With what kind of spirit did I photograph the architecture? My work is never based on a preconceived idea. All of it is based on emotions, even the photographs of architecture.

VB In the mid-90's you went to England and Scotland moved by the effect that "Wuthering Heights", the novel by Emily Brontë had had on you. The novel, first published in 1847 is still considered a cult book, especially by women in America and in Japan, and was illustrated by an artist who, given the choice of some of his subjects, is close to you: Balthus, an artist some of whose works, as I can see, you have. Due to your choice of making them unfocussed, the pictorial effect of these photograms seems to anticipate some of the effects that came to characterise the later video of Annelies Štrba. What inspired you to shoot the green moors of Brontë, and what fascination did the novel hold for you?

AŠ It all began by chance. I have a friend who was born in the town that "Lady Chatterley's Lover" was set in. I love D.H. Lawrence's books. I went to England with him and then returned many times with Bernhard. They are places I really love, I feel close to the culture. This is where my love of Emily Brontë originates. I visited one of the churches that she knew. I travelled around on a bicycle. On the occasion of my exhibition at the Frist Street Gallery in London, I said I would have preferred showing at the Brontë Museum instead of at the Tate Modern! A little later on I met the director of the museum, who really liked my work and who organised one of my exhibitions there. I remember when I entered the exhibition space I saw the image of *Sonja/as Cathy*.

VB It is striking to me that you simultaneously deal with themes having to do with your travels, while continuing to follow and to document your children as they grow up within your artistic research. When you began considering Brontë, Linda and Sonja were already adults. You imagine them interpreting Cathy and Isabella, dressed romantically, with their hair tumbling down loosely. I remember the image that you just mentioned in which you shoot *Sonja/as Cathy*, as she holds a black pillow in her hands, most likely picked up from the worn green velvet sofa behind her. Her long blonde hair falls on a white blouse with lace sleeves; she is also wearing a red velvet skirt and laced-up boots. Linda and Sonja have been transformed from being daughters into models. They have also started to move. In your first video, "Max", you film them while they are moving around in the kitchen in a blurry way, and the images are characterised by a lot of chromatic intensity. From this moment on you would only use the video camera, later singling out some of the video images and enlarging them. So, from a certain point on you considered your daughters as models... what was this change of perspective like for you?

AŠ At a certain point my daughters said they were too old to be photographed by me in the usual way. So I proposed that they work for me: I would pay them to be my models. Now almost all my works are made with Shereen and Linda. My daughter Sonja, on the other hand, has also become a photographer.

VB You had imagined creating a video trilogy: New York, Paris, and Berlin. But then you limited the work to a series that you have defined as “videos of cities”. To shoot New York you boarded a tourist boat in order to circle around Manhattan. I found it extraordinary that you decided to shoot “everything”, including the boat’s passage under a bridge. The photographs are blurry and overexposed. Why did you choose to shoot non-stop?

AŠ I have never stopped the video camera. Never. I have always used a single, sequence shot. Above that bridge, on the boat tour, during the night, I filmed the light. This image reminded me of what they say about the moment of one’s death: it is said that one enters into a tunnel of light.

VB You have photographed Samuel Maria, Sonja’s son who was born in 1994. You dedicated an intense series of photographs to Sonja as the mother with her child, a kind of modern Nativity scene. Sonja, often photographed seated, holds the baby in her arms and turns him towards the camera. It seems that you experience your daughter’s maternity with mixed feelings. Afterwards, you made the video “Dava” (2001), in which Sonja and her son are shown with Linda and her baby girl Shereen as well.

In “Shades of Time” you present images taken over a period of more than 20 years. You start out presenting old photos of your mother as a child (obviously these were taken from an old album and re-photographed), and you finish with the two little ones. All of the images were taken in practically the same domestic interiors. What does it mean for you to have made portraits of your family over a 20-year period, and what criteria did you use in the sequence of images in “Shades of Time”?

AŠ I did it just for myself. For my life. I can’t say why. I felt that I *had* to do it. The sequence of images in “Shades of time” was very difficult: Linda and I worked on it for two months. My choice was extremely precise. “Shades of time” has nothing to do with a family album.

VB In “Dava” you worked with extreme colours, the shapes appear blurry and the video can be defined as “pictorial”. It seems important to observe that the protagonists, who appear as dreamlike figures, are your daughters once again.

What is the significance of these large images that are characterised by strong and truly extreme, unreal colours?

AŠ It happened simply because I was in love with a man much younger than me. I think it was just this. I met him in 1997. He made the music for one of my videos. This was just one episode in my life. I put some distance between my husband and myself, and still we live in separate houses. This man came here and stayed at my house for quite a while, and we worked together a lot. Now, he too is a well-known artist, living in Berlin. The period of “Shades of time” was over. This is why the colours appeared.