

Photographia Obscura # 1

## Christer Strömholm: A Swedish Goya

In 1997 Christer Strömholm was awarded the prestigious Hasselblad Prize, thus joining household names such as Richard Avedon, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, William Klein, Sebastiao Salgado...

He died on January 11, 2002, on the very day an exhibit of his at the VU gallery was closing in Paris. He was ill and had not been able to attend, but was very happy to have a show there, as Paris had been one of his favorite cities, where he studied painting as a young man and where in 1956, he started shooting a seminal essay on transvestites, *Place Blanche*, decades before such subjects were deemed fashionable.

Today however Strömholm's name is still not well-known beyond a circle of fans that pass his name on like a precious secret, and relatively few books have been dedicated to his work. It is as if history of photography was unable to find a category in which to place his photographs. Surrealist? Existentialist? Documentarian? Concerned? No formula and no school seem to fit. In fact Strömholm's photographs are not only remarkable by their originality, they seem to repel and defeat commentary; this difficulty that critics have had in writing about his art may well be one of the reasons that Strömholm did not yet get the recognition he deserves.

Another reason may well be Strömholm's own distaste for self-promotion:

"Most photographers are too interested in the money," he said in his last interview. Strömholm lived a frugal life and had little interest in financial rewards beyond what he needed to work and travel. He spent more time teaching other photographers and helping them to find their own way than he did polishing his own image. He avoided commercial work and when he was not working as a photo reporter took on a series of odd jobs such as ambulance driver, cook, tour guide. In Tangiers, he even made a living smuggling binoculars to the Canary Islands.

From 1962 to 1974, Strömholm ran, together with Tor-Ivan Odulf, the **Fotoskolan**, a Photography School he had founded in Stockholm where they trained almost 1,200 students. The rest of the year he was traveling: in the course of his career he went to Japan, India, Spain, the United States, Kenya, Russia, Algeria and Tunisia. Summers he could be found in the remote Provençal village of Fox-Amphoux, where

he had bought a ruin in 1958. Entirely built out of stone, the tiny cluster of houses perches on a hilltop, at the crossroad of two Roman roads. Stromholm spent his time there printing, photographing and writing: a gifted and vivid, often humorous writer, he published two books of aphorisms, 101 Wisewords and 102 Wisewords.

Strömholm had difficult beginnings and he was over thirty years old when he came to photography.

He was born in 1918 to a wealthy but rigid family. His father was in the armed forces and stationed in various parts of Sweden, and their constant moves prevented the boy from forming lasting friendships. His parents ended up divorcing and quickly remarried, so that Christer, shunted between two families where he did not completely belong, felt like an outsider in both. When he was sixteen, his father committed suicide after a serious riding accident that had left him with a permanent headache. The world as Stromholm knew it had ended, his main reference had disappeared. For a time, finding a father figure became his quest. He never did find one but, interestingly he became a father figure to the young photographers whom he nurtured later at the **Fotoskolan**. There he was available twenty-four hours a day, dispensing gruff commentaries on their pictures and always available to listen to their problems.

It was 1937 when Strömholm, who had decided to become an artist, moved to Dresden to study under professor Waldemar Winkler. But they soon clashed and he was thrown out of school for defending painters Emil Nolde and Paul Klee, then considered degenerate artists. He travelled to France, seeking out his old teacher, the painter Dick Beer, then returned to Stockholm to study painting under Otte Sköld and Isaac Grünewald.

Through friends of his, a family sympathetic to the Republicans, he became a messenger in the Spanish Civil War. During the Russian-Finnish war in 1940, he volunteered to fight the Russians then joined a Swedish volunteer corps to fight the Germans in Norway: " I believe it was a natural reaction. My father was an honorary officer, so it was natural for me to enlist." Because of his time in the army he was given a study grant and enrolled at the Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Strömholm had wanted to be a painter, and had already exhibited his work in 1937, but, possibly through an encounter with Brassai, he discovered the artistic possibilities of the large-format camera. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he met and befriended artists such as Calder,

Giacometti, Man Ray, Saura, Duchamp, Le Corbusier, Max Ernst, Bram van Velde, André Breton, Fernand Léger, Louis Pons. He made their portraits, occasionally selling some to newspapers and magazines. But his were not official portraits- they were personal, and his gift became apparent: his early photographs show that he was able to establish intimacy with the artists, and to partake of their world: a portrait of Duchamp, shirtless, both amused and contemptuous, and one of Giacometti huddling inside his coat behind his studio's dusty window, two plaster women figures floating behind him like ghosts, are especially poetic.

Around that time Strömholm met Otto Steinert, who led the **Fotoform** group, and exhibited with them in Europe and the United States under the name Christer Christian. Through Louis Stettner he had discovered a photographic paper that intensified black-and-white tonalities while forfeiting most grays, and, turning abruptly away from literal representation, he focused on texture, forms and geometric interactions and used that paper to print his abstracted studies that looked a lot like his early etchings and abstract black-and-white paintings: a crack on the pavement, blurred rows of trees that seem embody the wind, a barbed wire stretched in front of the waters of the Lago di Maggiore, its waters and the sky united by fog, a ragged scarecrow floating in a field in Morocco, thin black birches aligned on snow in Switzerland. Human presence is suggested only through shadows or anonymous, non-differentiated dark masses such as the group of women on a wharf in Italy, the shadows of children at play in l'Estaque or the hooded silhouette in front of a Tangiers wall. Photographs of debris, shells and driftwood on the Camargue sand or a dead fish brought to the beach by the waves at Saintes Maries de la Mer sometimes evoke Lucien Clergue's work of the same period.

Though Stromholm abandoned the purely abstract expression as too confining in 1954, this period remains essential because it gives a foundation to his subsequent approach: the precise framing and focusing on texture and the attention to interplays of light and shadow. Certain themes like death and solitude are already present in the **Fotoform** series; a series like **Golgotha**, for instance, started in the 1980s, where Stromholm discovered in the pitted Roman stones of his Provençal village walls the hidden presences of the Apostles and other prominent Christian figures owes a lot to his early experimentations. Of this series, Stromholm has said: "What you see is a stone, what you see if you take a closer look suddenly becomes a face."

And this may be one of the keys to his work, the ability to let an object, a

place, become a story, to let people shape themselves into pictures, to pay passionate attention until the real starts to morph, to reveal itself and to change in front of your eyes. When Strömholm went back to representation in 1955, it was armed with the subtle knowledge that he had gained while working on the **Fotoform** series.

The first photograph of Christer Strömholm I saw thirty years ago proved impossible to forget. Printed in a very large format, the 1962 photograph described a passionate kiss. The scene had none of the romance of, say, Doisneau's *Kiss at the Hotel de Ville*. Instead, it radiated a raw, disturbing power that seared it into my consciousness. In part it was because of the extreme closeness of the shot that cannot be matched in real life. Seen slightly from above, the tilted faces were mashed into each other. Every pore and blemish of the skin was visible, the face on the top with darker skin than the other. There was some hunger and desperation in that kiss: flesh collided into flesh, mouths molded into each other as if it was going to be their last kiss. The photograph provoked in me a mix of voyeuristic fascination, unease and a strange, acute and tender sense of longing. Some of the image's power may reside in its ambiguity: because the rest of the participants' face and body was framed out, it was impossible to know for sure if these were two men or a man and a woman, and I could project any of those scenarios. Sexually charged, the image also had an almost primal quality, like a child's first glimpse of what happens behind closed doors.

Though not included in the book, this photograph is in the same spirit as a series shot by Strömholm in Paris between 1956 and 1962, later collected in the 1983 *Friends of the Place Blanche* (Vännerna från Place Blanche).

When Strömholm first came in contact with the transvestites and transsexuals that haunted Paris's 18th arrondissement, he had no idea what they were about. They were from an unknown planet. He was attracted to them as a subject and realized that to successfully photograph them he would have to gain their trust. So the next few years were spent in their company, the camera used only with their approval.

Gina, Nana, Marie-France, Cobra, Suzannah, Mimosa, Cezanne... are talking to a client, embracing, dancing together. In a hotel room, a woman whose back is turned to us slowly unzips her shift while her companion waits on the bed. Marie-France in a hotel room half hides behind a flowery curtain. Suzannah, standing in front of a mirrored armoire, dressed only in stockings and a top, puts on lipstick.

Not sexually explicit, the photographs are a tender diary

where the scenes seem symbolic rather than anecdotal. There is a sense that Strömholm did not intrude, that he belonged and had found his space as a chronicler. One has the feeling that the pictures were not taken: they were received, a conscious gift from these "women imprisoned in men's bodies" as Strömholm called them.

However, a few images, like chapter headings in a book, carry an electric charge of attraction and fear, such as in two 1968 photographs: in one, a snake's head is slowly swallowed into a woman's mouth; in the second, a man leans, transfixed, over a glass case where the same long-haired woman lies, holding the snake against her body. The whole scene is illuminated only by the light of a single bulb and feels like those church displays of saints' remains that pilgrims come and touch in the hope that their prayers will be met.

Except for Brassai few photographers had until then chosen the night world as a subject matter. Maybe because of his difficult youth Strömholm felt a strong empathy for the marginal and the dispossessed. With his *Place Blanche* series Strömholm introduced, as early as the mid-1950s, the idea that the photographer is not an objective witness, but an involved participant: this stance was anathema to the reigning code of photo reportage, dictated by LIFE, which preached objectivity and neutrality. Photography for Stromholm is not a report but a poetic diary where the photographer projects himself. Many contemporary photographers, such as Nan Goldin (*Ballad of Sexual Dependency*) and Alberto Garcia-Alix (his studies of transvestites and prostitutes in Barcelona in the 1980s) are deeply in debt with Stromholm's vision. So is one of his students, Anders Petersen, who adopted his master's approach in his best-known series, *Cafe Lehmitz*. "When I think of my photographs and that I look at them carefully, I find that they are all, in a way, nothing more and nothing less than self-portraits, a part of my life," Stromholm declared.

In 1965 Stromholm exhibited some pictures of this series, along with others, at the NK store in Stockholm. He entitled the show "To my Own Memory." Instead of matting and framing them, he had simply printed them in 50 x 60 cm format and mounted them on plywood panels, suspended with twine. The show was taken down after three days: the 1960s public wanted a cheery vision of the world, and his was simply too dark.

Throughout his career children were among Stromholm's favorite subjects. He photographed them in France, Spain, Japan and Morocco, from the late 1950s into the 1980s. His vision of them is stark and unsentimental. In a sombre street of Tangiers, a glittering streak of water

runs down the pavement towards a sewer cover, leading our gaze to the tiny silhouette of a child in the background. Legs parted, the child seems to reign over his own kingdom. In the Jura, just after the war, a young boy has opened a wooden crate that reveals a multitude of crawling snails, strange and beautiful like jewels. His pensive smile, his gaze are self-contained, both shy and proud. He is like a magician caught into a personal ritual, showing us the key to another world. Other children seem to share in their discoveries: a boy stares at a woman in fishnet stockings, standing on an estrade, and is almost lost in a trance. Two Parisian kids from a poor suburb who each hold a woman's purse seem to clutch a treasure. The girl standing behind the iron balcony railings seems to be imprisoned, and the baby inside a wooden crate, his head just sticking out, evokes the sinister image of Goya's garroted prisoners.

Many of Strömholm's photographs that do not involve human presence nevertheless are alive with mystery. The oil painting near a step of stairs, defaced by a hole, the mannequin with the black muslin patches on its breasts, surrounded by heaps of torn paper, the basket crammed full of doll's dismembered limbs, the stone statue with iron screws grafting the legs and arms, the cemetery headstone that burst open like an eggshell, the dead dog, half its body missing: all show a world damaged. But it is as if an essential mystery was revealed through what is imperfect, fragile, broken. In things damaged, Strömholm found unlikely but striking beauty.

Strömholm's images seem the opposite of Henri Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment, almost as if each photograph was made of an accumulation of layers of time concentrated and frozen. They elicit both a feeling of utter strangeness and one of deep familiarity. It is almost as if we recognized, in the images he captured, a lasting imprint of our own dreams and nightmares. They are a lyrical transmutation— a transformation of things that could be ugly, sad or violent into something tender and even strangely uplifting. Like Goya's etchings, or Isaac Babel's writing, they contain at once an extraordinary ferocity and a vulnerable beauty. Strömholm's art, though dark and haunted, is not depressing. It suggests that the act of passionate attention, of looking without prejudice, may redeem and reweave for a moment our broken world, revealing its hidden poetry.

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