

Lisa Strömbeck interviewed by Ha-young Kim

You have focused on animals in your works. Why?

Animals have always been an important part of my life, and my dog is a constant source of inspiration. By studying animals, I get a much better picture of humans as well. When dogs play the hierarchies within the group are so easy to read, and dogs show their feelings so clearly. I've always studied behaviour and hierarchies among groups of people, but humans can intellectually work on changing their behaviour, on hiding their feelings. Something that dogs don't do.

It's also good to have an animal as the subject of an image. It's more neutral than a human being. If I use a human, I have to be very careful about clothing, language, skin colour, gender, etc, because if we see a person we immediately take all these codes into consideration and make assumptions.

What made you interested in hierarchies?

The fact that they exist! I guess I was very lucky to grow up in the seventies in Sweden in a very good Social Democratic society. Even though my parents didn't have money, it was natural for me to get an education. Universities are free, but what's even more important is that until the nineties we still had good government loans for studying. Our parents didn't have to support us economically at all while we studied. So a lot of people in Sweden made 'class journeys'. I think I was really naive to believe that everyone was free to become what they wanted, and that class had nothing to do with your possibilities in life. With the Neo-Liberalism of today, the class differences are growing stronger every year, and the school system has changed so much that segregation takes place when kids are just seven years old.

What inspired you to make the Uniform series?

A few years ago, we (Europeans), saw news about dog furs from China. People got very upset about animal cruelty in China. I thought of how culturally specific that is: which animals you treat like a child, and which animals you just kill for their fur. People here don't seem to scrutinize their own behaviour. I saw these terrifying films of how they skin dogs alive in China. An outrageous cruelty. But actually it's no worse than the way minks and foxes are treated on fur farms in Europe.

So I started to think about making a work reflecting on this issue ...

Around the same time I was living in the eastern part of Berlin, and saw an old man in a wolfskin coat walking his German shepherd. The dog and the coat had the same texture, and that picture stayed with me.

Have you found models that actually had a fur and an animal with the same texture?

No, I found all the furs and animals and staged them together.

Is it right that Uniform is mainly about animal protection?

It's not only about animal protection, but that is an important part of it. Fur farmers seem to have the worst standards for how animals are treated. It's horrifying to see the suffering of minks and foxes in films made by animal rights activists. The way these poor creatures are killed in the U.S. for example, is by having an electric prod inserted in their anus. And they die slowly, because the electricity is not strong enough to kill instantly. I mean, how cruel can it get? So I am definitely against fur farming. But I'm not as radical as most animal rights activists are. I think it's fine to use the fur of the animals that we eat. As long as people eat lamb, beef, rabbit, etc, of course they should also use the skin. The crucial thing is that the animals have a good life - and a painless death. I've seen horrible videos from factory farms, and I definitely believe that the problem is our absurd over-consumption of meat. If humans still ate like they did a century ago, everything would be ok. I have great respect for Peter Singer and his followers, or Buddhists who are strict vegans. But I think it would be a better world for both humans and animals if farms had stayed small. Animal cruelty today is a consequence of over-consumption - and an exploding human population. That's what has created factory farming.

I understand that you grew up with animals, right?

Yes, and all the farmers I knew as a kid loved their animals and treated them with respect. I grew up in a self-subsistent household. My parents earned money doing other jobs, but they also had a small farm. We produced all the vegetables, fruit and meat that we needed. We had one or two cows that had a calf every year, hens and chicken, goats and pigs. My sisters and I also had pets - dogs, cats, rabbits, etc. I didn't know until I was twelve that we actually ate our rabbits too. Sometimes when I went out to feed my rabbits there were only a few left, and my father told me that the fox had taken them. Later, I discovered that the hunter took them when there were too many, and that he and his family - as well as our family - ate them for dinner. It was a shock, but later I understood. My parents could have let the rabbits out in the forest, where they would probably have become food for the foxes. But they were not well off themselves, and they needed food for their family - just like the fox.

It looks like the models in fur coats are senior ladies. Why?

Not all of them are older women. There are also a few young women - and two men. For the first picture my best friend was the model, and she arrived wearing nail polish. I had to scrape it off to make it look worn. I was not interested in something that looked glamorous. So after that I focussed on older women to get beautiful used hands that don't signify glamour.

In your collage and video works, it seems as if 'communicating a message' is

the most important thing for you?

I actually shoot a lot of images that have no message - I just don't show them. I love to photograph out in nature, but I don't see how anyone could get anything out of those images. The photo is such a small experience compared to actually being out there. What I show is pictures that I think have the capacity to move people. I want to trigger empathy.

My works have many layers though.

In Uniform there is also a masquerade, a kind of 'dressing up' as your pet.

If I've lived other lives before this one, I must have been a dog in all of them.

That could explain why I feel so much at home with dogs. I always find friends in stray dogs wherever I travel.

The self-portrait here is from 1995 when I did a performance walking around Copenhagen dressed up in human hair.

So you would actually like to be an animal?

Well, I am an animal. I am a member of the human race.

Ha-young Kim is an editor of the Korean magazine PHOTO+