

BERGEN?

Many of Norway's best-known photographers were educated at the Bergen National Academy of the Arts, and artists of the so-called "Bergen School" – including Torbjørn Rodland, Vibeke Tandberg and Mikkel McAlinden – have been highly influential for many today. *Objektiv* asked curator Espen Johansen to interview three young Bergen-based artists about their practice.

KOBIE NEL

You grew up in South Africa, and lived in Australia before getting your degree in Bergen. You recently had a solo show at Bergen Kjøtt titled *Apple Puma*. What was that show about and what does the title mean?

The title is taken from a photograph I took in South Africa's diamond-mining areas. It was once at the heart of the industry and an economic miracle, but following decades of structural crisis and industrial diversification, the region today is a site both of poverty and of progress. *Apple Puma* explores the social, cultural and economic implications of history and change in a transitioning, post-industrial community and its landscape. The photograph shows a prickly pear cactus with the words 'Apple Puma' carved out on one of the leaves. In the prickly pear garden there were many of these carved out markings, mainly those of lovers. I thought the combination of the two popular brands was brilliant.

The exhibition also included 28 canaries. It was only after you entered the space that you became aware that the sound of them singing was not recordings, but the actual thing. I liked the idea of natural sound designing this industrial space like a theatre.

I was really struck by your neon-light works in the show, which also relate to mining. Against the backdrop of live birds, tumbleweed, seeds, fruit, bird shit and miscellaneous structures for the canaries to inhabit and occupy, I remember thinking that the light sculptures felt ominous. They resemble pictograms and ciphered symbols, and I was very drawn to them. Can you tell me about them?

The neon sculptures are indeed ciphered symbols. I designed them to be installed so that when all eight are aligned one can see a pendeloque-cut diamond:

the Star of Africa, which is part of the Crown Jewels of the United Kingdom. What I love about working with neon is that it feels alive and I use the cabling in the installation too, as well as the ropes used for mining the 'Big Hole', the largest hole excavated by hand in Kimberley, South Africa. I'm interested in the poetic idea of these narratives of mining: humans taking from the earth and the earth taking something back again in the form of human lives.

Your work usually evolves around narratives or myths that you uncover, develop and rewrite. What triggers your interest in these stories?

Growing up in South Africa has, for better and worse, presented me with ideas of otherness that I'm still working with in a contemporary art context. The need to translate and update on a regular basis is part of my responsibility. But there's always something lost and gained in translation. I've been living between different continents since I was 25. Narratives and myths are a way to find yourself in society. Everyone has a story, every town a myth. I work with a narrative that I find suspicious or unresolved. The narratives I work with are in a way a substitute for my own stories.

Leaving aside the great narratives of history and their polished protagonists, my investigations arise out of a fascination with micro stories of individuals and the uncertainties, myths, speculations and distorting representations surrounding them. I'm confronting the inherent challenges of the visual record as part of collective memory.

And of course, Bergen is no exception, and has its own particular tales. For your Masters degree, you researched the Isdalskvinnen (Isdal woman) at the centre of an unsolved mystery that received massive media coverage in the 1970s. A woman with multiple passports – all of which were fake – was found dead in Isdalen under mysterious circumstances. This extensive research became your MFA work, and resulted in exhibitions at Tag Team, at Gallery Fisk and most recently in an artist's book. Can you elaborate on your relationship to Isdalskvinnen? What fuelled your fascination with her and how did this research develop?

I heard about her right after I moved to Bergen, and happened to be frequently in the area where she was found. The only thing I know was that she was a traveller, like myself. I searched online for photographs. A photo is proof. I was disappointed by the lack of photographic evidence and that she was represented



Kobie Nel, *Apple Puma*, 2018

by comical portraits. I wished I could photograph the evidence left in her two suitcases, like Taryn Simon's projects, photographing something that ordinary people can't see. But the evidence had been discarded, and I was left with two images copied from newspapers that I found in the Bergen Library: one of a burned corpse, so badly copied that it is hard to see what it is, and another of landscape with some specs in the middle, also very hard to identify. It could be anything, anywhere. They're two beautiful framed images, but they're images of horror.

I created my own inventory of images by repeatedly rescanning the scanned newspaper copy. In all this repetition, marks that came up by mistake, which I could then work with. The differences that ensue through repetitive process are only evident to the person who carries out the action. I look at these images where the matter is displaced, where the origin or the archive is interrupted, I wonder where I came from and where I'm going; where I'll end up. If I lie down on the scanning bed, what will be transferred, exposed and illuminated? I don't believe her case will be solved. We now live in the image world, but this wasn't the case 46 years ago – archiving and traces was handled very differently. Maybe her wish was to disappear, and that's the possibility that scares us.

BJØRN-HENRIK LYBECK

In your early practice, straight out of the Academy, you focused on sculptural works in which time is the central element. Can you talk about the relations between these works and the photograph?

My work has always had a strong connection to photography. At the Academy, I used photographic processes (exposing, negatives etc) as a vantage point for my sculptures. In the piece *Copper Plates* (2014) I buried two copper plates in the ground and had them register all the activity within the soil for two months. The result was an object shaped by light conditions, moisture levels, acids and time. Another example is *4 months* (2013). This piece consists of six bags of cement, left over from a construction site. For four months (from October 2012 to January 2013) they were left outside and exposed to the natural weather conditions of snow and rain. The works say a lot about what it is to photograph something: to capture time, to capture light, to wait and to give in to the unexpected.

For a time you took very few photographs, and I remember you told me that you found it hard to take a really good image.

In school I struggled to find my voice because central to the discourse on photography at the time was its relevance in the digital age. Many of my projects revolved around the photograph's inability to meet this challenge as a medium, and instead I focused on my artistic development through deadpan photography and a fixation on the relevance of the archive. It wasn't for me, and my rebellion was to take up sculptural work instead.

Your images are rarely staged. On the contrary, they're a sober reenactment of buildings, objects and events. What are you looking for in an image?

Mostly, I want to create and mediate atmosphere, for the images to be as close to reality and the everyday as possible, but still with a feeling of an independent universe. I like to think that my images, and by extension my practice, don't need any written explanation, but instead trigger shared observations with the viewer and create a different set of associations, memories or emotions. I trust the unspoken between us. We've never been better equipped to read images than today.

I find your website interesting in this respect. It's made up entirely of images, and no text. Do you find it challenging to work on an exhibition, in a space where nothing can be random? In other words, what are your thoughts on the exhibition format vs documentation online?

I prefer the exhibition format. I find it important to work within a space and towards the public, to get people to invest time in my works. I don't really have a strategy online other than to make the viewer curious about my work. I do want to communicate, but I've distanced myself from written text, for now at least, because I find that titles and explanations works against the main point of visual art: to observe, to think and ponder when facing the work. I have one experience making art, the viewers must create their own through their imaginations.

KAMILLA LANGELAND

You have a bachelors degree from KHIO and a masters from KHIB and currently live in Bergen. What do you think of the art scene in Bergen? How does it differ from Oslo?



From his upcoming book-project *Elegi*. Bjørn-Henrik Lybeck, 2018.



Kamilla Langeland, *The garden we share*, 2018.

Bergen is a smaller city with a smaller art scene, but a lot of international artists live there. There are excellent artist-driven initiatives that give artists great opportunities to show their works and take an active part in the art community. And it's near the mountains. I often go on hikes and look at the stars.

I first saw your work at Hordaland Kunstsenter in 2015 with your exhibition *Another Set of Layers*. Large analogue silver-gelatin collages combined photograms, microscope images and snapshots. Your work with outdated photographic techniques has received much critical acclaim and has been shown in several exhibitions. Can you talk about your interest in the photographic medium?

The photograph can provide insight into objective reality, into actuality. I've used the photograph as a means to study my surroundings and to make connections between variables that at first glance don't seem to have any. I've used the camera's mechanics and the imprint of light to enlarge what we can't see with our bare eyes. But photography is, like everything else, highly subjective and restricted to material and expression. I've tried to challenge these restrictions and look beyond their boundaries. Photography can change perspectives and challenge the way we see reality, but I don't believe in any kind of innate truth in the photograph, even though I find it exciting that I now know what atoms look like.

During your time in Bergen, your works changed while you experimented with new media, expressions and formats. At the Masters exhibition at Bergen Kunsthall in 2017, you showed only one work, *Ob Sweet Liberty I Ate Thou All*, a triptych of found images centred around a vulva. The same year you had an exhibition with Sjur Eide Aas at Entrée, with both individual works and sculptural collaborative work. How would you describe these recent developments?

I think that my works develop as I develop over time. It's when I start pondering on things I can't describe that I start working. I use materials I'm drawn to in that particular process, even if it's not always clear in what manner or why I'm doing it. The collaboration with Sjur is very rewarding. We share a workspace and are currently working on a duo-exhibition at Projektrom C4 in Bergen.

You also started painting recently. How did you start, and have you had any epiphanies regarding this new medium yet?

In short, I started to see colours and patterns instead of images and it felt natural to create these in painting. Mostly, I try not to think a lot while painting; it's like meditation for me, like a distraction. My paintings are anything but controlled and processed; they're more like vehicles to another plane of consciousness. Now, my impressions are more colour-oriented than they once were.

You've talked about the relationship between photography and our objective reality, about meditation and different levels of consciousness. At Entrée, you and Sjur exhibited the sculpture *Mush*, an object made out of magic mushrooms. I think of both science and dream analysis when confronted with your works, and I'm curious about how you think about the relationship between objective reality and an expanded understanding of reality including hallucinations, delusions and thought-images. What questions do you ask yourself?

I think that all we agree on is a form of hallucination, and what we call reality is defined by many people agreeing on various notions. If I alone insist on the notion that apples can communicate with humans, it will generally be thought of as a delusion, but at the same time a whole society can agree that money made of paper is one of the most valuable objects we have. I think it's important to challenge what's defined as real, what truth is and who gets to write our history. Everything we know is essentially theories and storytelling conveyed by other people. We construct reality together, and we can change it together.