

## **Matthias Harder**

### **The Artist and Her Work, United in Her Own Image**

Experiments have become rare in contemporary photography, especially in what is considered “antiquated” photography created without a camera then developed in the dark room. But purists are not the only ones who enjoy exquisite handmade prints, especially large-scale, one-of-a-kind works, as is the case here. What is more, Ria Patricia Röder relies on a technique that few people in Germany have managed to master or use: color photograms. Similar to black and white photograms, the objects laid on the photography paper leave behind completely white shadows, while transparent or semitransparent objects create different grades of white that constitute a spatial effect and sometimes display an internal structure. When exposing the photographic paper in a dark room, the artist moves the sources of light to create interesting formal interactions, as can be seen in the works in this exhibition.

Röder creates pictures that stand on their own. Although they can also be grouped into series revolving around different approaches to certain themes, they are not designed with this in mind. Occasionally a series will expand until it reaches a point when the artist decides to limit the size of a project, when the founding idea behind the work can be visualized concisely and plainly. Editing (selecting pictures) is therefore an important aspect of her work. In her exhibition in the Orangerie of the Kunstsammlung Gera, she is presenting two series which she has already begun but are not entirely complete and which thematically complement each other: *Laboratorium* and *RAYDIATOR*. The title of the latter work is a fantasy word alluding to Man Ray’s rayographs, while the Latin-based word “laboratorium”, rarely used in photography today, refers etymologically to the original meaning of working – or experimenting – in the dark room. In both of these series, the process of creating each picture corresponds to its content. The *RAYDIATOR* series also demonstrates parallels with a scientific experiment concerning the way the work has been made: Initial black and white experiments were made and cast aside; then the artist began working with colored light, which leaves traces of complementary colors on the photographic paper after developing. Where too much colored light has hit the paper, the result is black. Occasionally, the jarringly bright color combinations, which allow Röder to create a subtle play with temporal loops and painterly effects, remind us of the psychedelic colors of 1970s, or of different colored inks bleeding into one another.

The photographer often puts her own body on the paper. Lying on the floor or a table, she holds small lamps, reaching out as far as she can to expose parts of her body.

Because she is lying directly on the surface, these are transformed into white silhouettes on the paper, like a contact copy. These pictures are always created in several stages of exposure, resulting in a complex layering of multiple colors. We can also discern materials from the artist's studio in the pictures, like bubble wrap, wire bands, and cut paper. Amorphous forms mingle with geometric shapes, while everything remains more or less abstract and removed from its functional context. This creates a world of objects that seem to be gravitating toward a center – the life-sized human figure. Sometimes it seems as if the figure is doubled, as if the artist were re-uniting herself with her alter ego on the photographic paper (for example in RAYDIATOR VIII). In other works in the series, we can see a male figure; and sometimes there are male-female combinations, or parallel body fragments. Sometimes, additional hands and feet seem to complete a simple human representation, suggesting a sequence, while the process of exposure is staged as somehow simultaneous, as if the person (or people) were interacting.

The cable release is a prominent piece of equipment in some cases (as in RAYDIATOR I and RAYDIATOR IV) although it is not used to take the picture (as in her series *Die Innenwelt der Außenwelt der Innenwelt* from 2007); after all neither camera nor cable release are needed to create a photogram. Instead, it serves both as a fundamental reference to the traditional analogue orientation of the medium of photography and as a pictorial element in the collage. In certain motifs, it also functions as a “line of contact” between the human figure and the surrounding world of objects. The presence of objects is just as important to Röder as the human figure, and together they sometimes form labyrinthical connections, as can be seen in this and other series. The lab pliers in RAYDIATOR I, to name another instance, prolong a finger, and thus the body, of the person represented, who is also the creator of the picture. In RAYDIATOR V, part of a man's head in profile seems to be colored blue; like in an X-ray, a light bulb can be seen in his cheek. In the lower left corner of RAYDIATOR XI, we can also see a creased glassine sleeve that seems three-dimensional in its materiality, as if it were photographed into the photogram. Everything is transformed into a large collage – one which has not been glued together, like the technique used a hundred years ago, but which creates itself as a form of a representation through a process of transfer.

In the context of presenting the works in an exhibition, the horizontality that was once decisive for the production of the picture is turned upright into verticality: The body and the objects are no longer lying down; they seem weightless. The tilting effect enhances our peculiar impression that the pictorial space does not seem to be oriented in any particular direction.

Although corporeality is an important factor, it is not decisive for a picture's effect and meaning. This is one of the key differences between Röder's work and that of Floris Neusüss, for example, who introduced life-sized black and white body photograms in the 1970s, so called nudograms, which in the history of photography could be seen as experimental variations pre-dating Helmut Newton's famous "Big Nudes" series, which he started in the 1980s. Neither these nor Yves Klein's anthropometries are models for Röder's work, according to the artist. Staging herself as a motif in her work seems also disconnected from the sometimes radical self-questioning of the gender studies of the 1970s and 80s.

In Röder's case, indirect self-representation seems to happen for a reason: When lying on the photographic paper, exposing the photogram and working with small lamps to more or less highlight certain aspects of her body, she is in control of the picture's development.

The photograms are formed according to a predefined pictorial strategy; they are deliberately constructed compositions, although they also allow for spontaneous reactions. When viewing her works, what part of this process was predetermined by her and what was possibly an element of chance remain undisclosed. The different sizes of picture formats and combinations create a formal tension in the exhibitions, especially the protagonists' gestures of turning away and towards each other. Ideally, these aspects create a dense installation through the hanging of the individual pictures.

The picture surfaces and frames differ from one group of works to the next. The one-of-a-kind photograms are mounted on aludibond sheets without glass or frame. This effect enhances the bright colors in the pictures without creating a reflection, while the absent frame around the pictures stresses the detail character of the motifs in bold way.

In the *Laboratorium* series from 2005–2007, on the other hand, which is based on pictures taken with a camera, a different conceptual aspect can be discerned. Here the artist is alone with her camera in the dark room; as in many of her works, she is the motif, this time together with her photo lab equipment. The etymological root of photography (Greek for "drawing with light") especially comes to mind in this context: The colored light of the dark room lamps and enlarger is refracted into geometric color planes that constitute the pictorial space while doubling as the source of light and the motif of the picture. Faint outlines of the photographer's face, emerging from the dark background, are also consistently visible; in *Laboratorium V* this is reduced to an eye, in other words the principle of seeing. This independent series, which displays elements of a self-portrait in multiple parts, is like several of the *RAYDIATOR* photograms in that it

unites the artist and her work in the each picture. The mutual reference between the author of the picture and its creation can be found in all of Röder's works.

In these two series, light is both the theme and the starting point of Röder's timeless, abstract exposures, which are always independent pictures and parts of a series.

There is a stringent line of development in her work: one which assigns light a decisive role in the production and motifs of the pictures, for example in her diptychs from 2009–2010 featuring nocturnal pictures with titles like Untertag, Inzersdorf and Basement. In these pictures, we encounter a person with a flash device in different spatial situations. While in one picture the person is shining light away from the camera, illuminating a basement or a street at night, in the next picture, this is turned around and the person blinds the photographer with the flash.

For these works, Röder uses a tripod and longer exposure times, paraphrasing the cinematic theme of the shot/reverse shot. She keeps the camera static, pointed in one direction, while the protagonist in the staged everyday setting acts according to her demands, radicalizing the light and its effect, which is somewhere between illumination and overexposure.

Such unusual staged pictures of reality and abstract color photograms comprise Röder's still young oeuvre. Her conceptual versatility and her creative and intelligent handling of the medium of photography are cause for fascination.

Matthias Harder (Helmut Newton Foundation Berlin) in

*Ria Patricia Röder – RAYDIATOR*

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