

**Elina Brotherus by Camilla Brown**  
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Elina Brotherus (born 1972) is known for her intimate and highly personal work which has been exhibited around Europe since 1998. In 2005 Susanna Pettersson commented “In early works, [she] drew the viewer into her own personal history, shared her feelings of loneliness and happiness, and showed her tears. The object of the pictures, the artist, was there, open and vulnerable for all to see.” [1] Since 2000 Brotherus’ work has tended to focus more on landscape, particularly the Nordic land around her native Finland. Her study has centered on the elements, both light and weather, and how they transform the natural habitat.

Two of the new film commissions, *The Black Bay Sequence* and *Bright, Bright Day* feature the landscape and have been made over this past summer. The former work is the large projection hanging in the centre of the space. It evolves from an earlier series of works called *Baigneurs (I, II and III)*. In these Brotherus showed unclothed swimmers in the Northern Arctic lakes and the sea. In this piece we also see a swimmer go into the water, a woman. The title is a translation of the name of the Finnish lake where the work is filmed – Mustalahti. The film is shown on a loop, although it is not imperative to watch it from beginning to end, as there is no unfolding narrative. Instead it is a study, with the camera placed at a consistent vantage point, of the water and sky, with the horizon as constant back drop. Due to the consistent framing of the image we notice how the weather impacts on the scene. At times the water is tranquil, a flat and reflective surface like a mirror, whilst at other points it is turbulent and becomes unwelcoming and wild.

Brotherus has made the work over a period of time, at different times of the day and night. She has stated: “I often work in the early morning, in the evening or at night when the scarcity of light means long exposure times are necessary. In a sense this means that my photographs are about capturing a period of time, rather than being about the decisive instant.” In some ways this film also operates like this, more like a series of expanded still photographs, rather than a moving image work.

The work *Bright, Bright Day* also has a simple composition with the camera remaining in one place throughout. The scene is of a grassy hill slope in an olive grove, shot in the golden light of the late afternoon. In the middle distance stands a female figure in a grey dress. She slowly starts to walk towards the camera, and in the end is standing close to it, at which point we clearly see it is Brotherus. The work has a sound track – which at first is ambient noises of birds and a distant dog bark – but which blends into a piece of accordion music by the Finnish composer Maria Kalaniemi. A poem appears in subtitles, by Arseniy Tarkovsky, the father of the film-maker Andrej, written in 1942. It is a poem eulogising about a remembered memory of idyllic harmony with nature. Yet, as so often with Brotherus’ work, it is tinged with melancholy. It speaks of loss more generally, such as the grief when loved ones pass away, and how over time memories of them can start to fade. They, as this remembered moment of idyllic happiness, are in the past – never to be recaptured.

In both works the human figure that appears perhaps has a secondary role to the piece, yet they are key to it. It is as though she is there so that we can gauge the scale of the scene before us. It is due to this placing of a person in nature, as well as her interest in the Romantic and sublime beauty of landscape, that has led her work to be compared to Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings. He too would strategically place a figure looking out

to the scene before them – as a way of commenting on the futility of man’s attempts to shape and control the wilderness. In Friedrich’s work the person would always seem tiny and insignificant, dwarfed and engulfed by the land around them. However in Brotherus’ work there seems more of an equal, symbiotic relationship between woman and nature. It speaks of a fearlessness, and a determination to not only coexist with our natural surroundings but to thrive in it.

The final work in the show is a series of 100 photographs *Time Series IV*. The simplicity of the composition of the film works is repeated in these photographs. We always see the same face and crop of the person. This minimal approach is the great strength of these new pieces, and suggests a growing maturity to the work. As the artist states: “The artist’s job is to frame the meaningful fragments, to show just the essential things. And for me the key is to keep the visual language modest, not to yell, but to whisper.”

However despite this aim to whisper, there is a gut wrenching rawness to this final series, which is very emotive and perhaps more of a shout. One looks straight into the person’s eyes and is drawn into the story that unfolds. This is the artist herself and is a series of self-portraits in which her appearance significantly changes, sometimes from day to day. At times we see bits of clothing, other times not, her hair changes and her mood alters. There is a rigour to this approach that makes one think of scientific photographs with the artist making herself the subject of her own study. In the titles of the work the drug Prednisolon is mentioned and a dosage (varying from 40 to 5mg). The date the photograph is taken also appears in each title. We assume that she has taken these shots whilst undergoing some form of medical treatment. However the work is not about the illness itself, which is not revealed, but instead looks at how the treatment has affected her face.

It is not unusual for Brotherus to use her own body as a tool of expression for her work. She has mentioned using her face in particular almost as vocabulary in her own visual language. Her face becomes the gateway between the internal and external worlds. Formally there is a strong resemblance between Brotherus’ work and an ongoing series by the Polish artist Roman Opalka. Since 1965 Opalka has been taking a black and white portrait of himself every day. Brought together we see the artist aging in front of our eyes. These changes would be almost imperceptible to us if we saw him every day. Although this, as Brotherus’ work, is an intensely private and personal work there is something universal about it. It speaks of the difference between the internal and external experience of events such as aging and illness. It also shows the power of photography that can hold up a mirror that reflects us to ourselves.

This work, as with the others in this show, is about the passage of time as well as the beauty of nature and our place within it. I mentioned a tinge of melancholy in the work *Bright, Bright Day* – yet overall the experience of these pieces is actually very life affirming. Many people speak of brushes with illness as being a catalyst to make them look in a new way at the world around them. It teaches them to cherish what they have, and to find beauty in the simple things in life. If there is one thing we can all take from this work, it is just how important it is to enjoy our surroundings and to be as happy as we can in the present.

Footnotes:

1 Susanna Pettersson: Close to the painting, in *Elin Brotherus: The New Painting, Next Level*, London 2005

Other extracts taken from interview with the artist and Sophie Howarth, published in *Elin Brotherus: Spring*, The Wapping Project, London 2001

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For images go to the artists website at: <http://www.elinabrotherus.com/>