

To see and be seen – Una Hunderi`s photography

By Marit Strømmen (Translation by Hilde Lyng)

Photography can be flashy. Just like mass media, like fashion and interior design magazines, not to mention the audience of these phenomena, photography demands to see and be seen. To see with limited frame, and to be seen by consumers or viewers. Few other media manages to capture the moment with such authority as colour photography.

When Una Hunderi`s photography exhibits authority, it is not least due to the colours. Colours are omnipresent in each picture, and they also function as points of reference between pictures in series of twos or threes. Hues of brown and grey on outer garments worn by smiling, yet often apparently reluctant, models are picked up and related to the surrounding scenery.

Whether nature appears as controlled suburban shrubbery of the North European kind ("Domestic Landscapes", "Sun City") or as a wilder Pacific paradise with tropical flora ("Tonga 2000"), it is never used as a background or a stage set as in fashion photography. Nature rather plays the role of eye-catcher, much like in the more national romantic traditions; in calendar, poster and tourist photography. Una Hunderi comments upon and questions these traditions' belief in nature as something merely beautiful, or somehow attractive. She doesn't renounce the beautiful, but charges it with more of the sinister than is usual in genres with nature as their carrying element.

Charged genres, like girls' room animal posters and calendar photography, often importunately create atmosphere, sometimes sugary, sometimes even euphorically idyllic. This idyll is of course fictive, and it is this fiction Una Hunderi punctures and charges with new meanings.

In puncturing she uses different strategies. For instance, she exaggerates the sugary in her use of colours and floral splendour. A rhododendron, a flower often associated with spring in bloom, is in Hunderi`s palette contrasted with more sinister colours, like the grey of a rat. Another example is the combination of photographs taken in different European cities, Oslo, Brussels, Zurich, Lucerne and Basle, among others, in which the likeness of colour may lead the viewer to believe that all the photographs are taken in one place. Regardless of strategy, the goal of the puncturing is not to break entirely the fiction of nature or suburban idyll. The idyll is always brought back together into a new fiction, which through pauses, breaks and subtle exaggerations, creates room for the viewer's own imagination.

In the 1960- and 70-ties, when advertising was the primary medium for colour photography, the American Photographer William Eggleston succeeded in making colour photography artistically respectable. The colour documentarist Eggleston heightened the artistic integrity of colour photography and made it possible for predecessors like Jeff Wall and Philip-Lorca diCorca to further develop the connection between advertising, documentary photography and staged photography as part of their art practise.

DiCorca's work mixes documentary photography, advertising- and film photography in an idiosyncratic suburban fiction where TVs, lawnmowers and

cigarettes make significant aesthetic points. The photographs may look spontaneous, but are in fact staged. Una Line Ree Hunderi also started out with staged photography, but has then moved away from a pre-calculated method. Her pictures are still not entirely spontaneous. The staged aspect is carried on in the way motives are combined in series, motives Hunderi always pick with a thought for the bigger picture.

Her creation of fictive rooms may be compared to the technique of the American cartoonist F.C. Ware and his book "Jimmy Corrigan – The Smartest Kid on Earth". The American suburban life of absent fathers and hard working mothers is here often described down to the minutest detail, but there's still room for the drawing of small breaks. Such a break could for instance be a twig, just abandoned by a bird. Like Ware, Hunderi doesn't strip the fiction down to the barest dramaturgical minimum, but adds space, additional information in an open and far from seamless fiction. The viewer is invited to make her own contributions, and Hunderi's pictures become potentially narrative, if the viewer so wishes.

Although Hunderi's photography shows reference to an American art tradition, her project is hard to place geographically. As in Ware's case, colours are being used to give a first impression that the photographs are taken in the same place. Yet at second glance, the next picture represents a jump in time and space, masked by the colour likeness. The use of light may also fool the viewer. Similar light photographed in totally different places gives an impression of common ground. In Hunderi's work the Northern European light is sometimes dustier than the tropical, but the shadow of the light may be equally threatening. Hunderi also works with single photographs. Here too, colour plays a vital role and meets the viewer at close hand.

Hunderi's photographs give the impression of having been shot right before the breaking of the suburban idyll, the way it is always broken – despite of it's aura of smug success. Similarly, horror films usually start with a sweep over deserted streets and pictures of residential areas, giving an uneasy feeling that something is going on behind the scene of the apparently well-functioning neighbourhood. In her work, Hunderi makes use of different media's tradition of cutting and building of fictive universes. By adopting the cutting techniques of film, she creates a 'fake' place consisting of not one, but several pictures. The series "Suburbia" is precisely such a fake place, a place embracing both security and insecurity.

If the camera promises authoritative representation of the world, the medium is well suited for deception. Una Hunderi has in the tension between the seductive and the sinister found a mode of expression that matches the ambivalence of colour photography.