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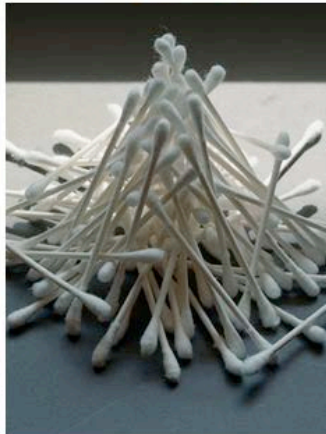
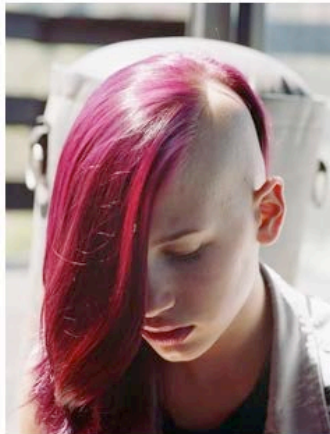
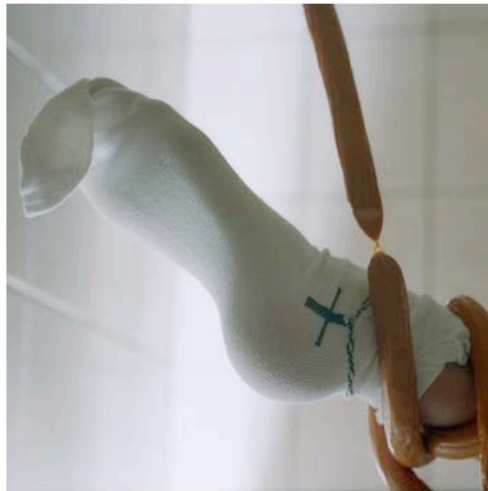
ART

# TORBJØRN RØDLAND'S UNEASY SURFACES

By COLLEEN KELSEY  
Photography TORBJØRN RØDLAND

Published 09/18/15

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The world of Torbjørn Rødland is one of uneasy dreams. The Norwegian-born, Los Angeles-based photographer deals primarily in constructing and contrasting surfaces within the 2-D space: meat layered on skin; sunlight on hair; flesh touching flesh, reminiscent of the feral sensory play of Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined *Object*. A recent show of his work, at Albus Greenspon in New York, inspected the bizarre, fractured landscape of the human body, but another arm of his practice is reconfiguring banal, everyday objects into surreal tableaux: ratty hair extensions in a metal basket; withered sausage links encasing a slim, socked ankle; the swooping, reflective curve of a girl's pink hair contrasted with a patch of sober, pale shorn scalp.

Six of his images will be exhibited in a new show, "Venetian Otaku," opening Sunday at Team Bungalow in Venice Beach. Rødland makes sense of narrative connections from already-made work and creates new ones fiddling with sequence and series, much like the shuffling of memes and photos floating in the ether of contemporary image culture. Team's intimate bungalow space sent Rødland searching for a way to convey the insularity of the home, or the bedroom—the incubator space for the fantasy of Japanese *otaku*, and its alternative realities, in an exhibition. We spoke with him earlier this summer.

COLLEEN KELSEY: I first want to ask about the title of this exhibition, "Venetian Otaku," otaku being an umbrella term in Japanese for anime or manga fandom. How does that come into conversation with "Venetian?" How does this title represent the group of images in the exhibition?

TORBJØRN RØDLAND: That's a big question to open with. I am fascinated by how images and motifs move between and adjust to different cultures. I'm a Norwegian living in Los Angeles showing a photograph inspired by Japanese image culture in an American beach town named after a sinking city in Italy. An otaku is more than a fanatic. An otaku straight-out rejects outer reality in favor of a shared fantasy world. This is my first exhibit in a garage or a bungalow, and the term otaku grew out of the word for someone's house, someone's home. The alternative otaku reality is typically constructed in the extended bedroom. The dream state is never far away.

KELSEY: How has living in Los Angeles affected your artistic practice?

RØDLAND: I moved five years ago. Los Angeles made me less interested in making my images move. This was unpredicted. But it's a difficult question. Everything is evolving and regressing. It can be hard to pinpoint which changes are linked to place. I believe California has made me more polite. I get a little surprised when I rediscover how direct and rude Norwegians can be. The photographs, on the other hand, are not more polite or indirect than they were five years ago.

KELSEY: I saw your show "Corpus Dubium" at Albus Greenston in New York earlier this summer, which I thought was very successful in pushing a viewer's perception of representations of the body. In the "Venetian Otaku" group of images, what strikes me is how the body is truncated, or conspicuously absent, especially in a work like "Hair." How integral is the human form to your work? How has your dealing with the body evolved throughout your career?

RØDLAND: An otaku knows that conventional attractiveness is out of reach, so he or she is not even trying to embody the physical ideal. I've found that photographs from different genres can be extraordinarily generous with each other, and I've slowly expanded my range. I started out photographing myself in a landscape, moved on to landscapes with and without other people, and then onto buildings, still lives, portraits, and body parts in rooms. If certain aspects of my production are getting more attention right now I think it is directly linked to a general absence of dreamed bodies in contemporary art. Viewers who mainly follow fashion have most likely not noticed this lack.

KELSEY: What is your typical process in conceptualizing a photograph? At the very basic level, where do these tableaux/scenarios come from? Are the narratives of your photographs stimulated more by existing visual culture, or your own personal dreams or imagination?

RØDLAND: It's a back-and-forth, a spiral, really. Initially I don't know why a certain combo or set-up is worth looking at. Making photographs can be a way for me to bring something up and into consciousness, something either shared or individual. I'd like the photographs to potentially be meaningful to a wide range of people. They do not grow out of the reportage mode, this was always clear to me. I think you're asking me to erect or see fences on an open field. Personal imaginations blend into each other and create our visual cultures. No one is a neutral observer of this field.

KELSEY: Do you think the descriptors often affixed to the imagery in your work, like "perverse" or "uncanny," accurately reflect it?

RØDLAND: Terms are often not as transparent as they may seem. Paradoxically, this makes them more accurate. Initially I borrowed the word "perverse" from Roland Barthes, meaning pleasure-driven and not geared to inform or promote a service or a product. An unproductive photograph designed to keep you in the process of looking is of course something larger than an expression of aberrant sexuality.

KELSEY: How much tweaking is involved in "dressing the set," if you will, before the elements you've arranged in the composition have gotten to the point you feel will reach your intention for the photograph?

RØDLAND: I'm experimenting and pushing as far as I can. I typically don't know what I was aiming for until I see what I ended up with. Then I can study and choose. It's less about clarified intention than about getting used to what ended up on film.

KELSEY: How do you determine what everyday objects are worthy to photograph?

RØDLAND: It's easy to play fun forms, surfaces, and languages against each other. Teenagers do this every day, producing winning memes from random patterns. I need the joke to hurt more; I want it to sink deeper than the postmodern grin. It's not an intellectual process. I often have to feel my way through the alternatives. The 99-cent store is attractive because it offers objects that aren't promoted in glossy magazines. The work then becomes a form of alchemy.

KELSEY: How do surface, texture, and tactility come into the equation?

RØDLAND: Tactility was rejected in conceptual photography. I embrace the possibilities of my medium. Surface, texture, and tactility is something analog photography can do well, or it is something I can do well in analog photography. It can be hard to know what or who is in control.

KELSEY: You've put together the six images in the exhibition from past work. When looking back at photographs you've made, how do you discern connections between them? Do narratives ultimately reveal themselves long after the work's been created?

RØDLAND: They do! It's the most satisfying thing, to suddenly see these connections. So I like to put a single photograph in different contexts, to see how it takes on other meanings, how being locked in a new dialogue exposes another potential. It's like dating other people in order to get to know yourself.

*"VENETIAN OTAKU" IS ON VIEW THROUGH NOVEMBER 8 AT [TEAM BUNGALOW](#), 306 WINDWARD AVENUE, VENICE, CALIFORNIA.*