

The landscape of remembrance

Astrid Kruse Jensen's metaphysical photographs are balanced on the seesaw between disappearing and emerging. She is making use of memory as an image-generating factor

By LISBETH BONDE

The Danish photo-based artist Astrid Kruse Jensen (born in 1975), who lives and works in Copenhagen, was educated at both the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in the Netherlands and the Glasgow School of Art in the United Kingdom. She is one of Scandinavia's most prominent contemporary artists when it comes to photography, which she has managed to renew, both technically and in terms of motives, and she has, by now, already had a large number of noteworthy gallery and museum exhibitions. She usually works in series, where she generally examines a given, emotionally suggestive and often slightly underplayed ominous iconography with the aid of a photographic approach.

At her exhibition, *Beauty Will Always Be Disturbed*, at the Wetterling Gallery in Stockholm, she shows a selection of photographs from the two most recent series, *Disappearing Into The Past* and *Within The Landscape*, in addition to the film, *The House Inside Her*, which she made in 2011 together with the film director Pernille Rose Grønkjær. Here, Astrid Kruse Jensen allows powerful nature to rage, in what is both a poetic and a dramatically destabilizing manner, inside the house, while one can apparently, on the other hand, find protection and repose out in nature. In this film, the house is the unknown factor with which the woman interacts. The house becomes a "jeg hus" (cf. Ole Sarvig's collection of poems with the same title, which revolves around the self's emptiness.) The house stands as a symbol of the ego's sense of alienation in a modern world.

In the first of the aforementioned series, we experience a number of textural and painterly photographs, sometimes with a woman whose back is turned to us; she appears to be on her way into nature's wilderness, whether she happens to be

standing monumentally in the foreground or happens to be seated in a rowboat. In both cases, our gaze is guided right into the picture's depth. These women have an aura of *Anno dazumal*, with the hair piled high and the old-fashioned dresses. The series entitled *Within The Landscape*, from 2013, was created on the area of Filsø on Denmark's west coast. These photographs oscillate between real landscapes – often with sea scenarios and densely-packed rushes or in sparsely planted forests with slender and straight-grained beech trunks – and mappings of mental spaces that seem to be calling to us from a distant past. It is clear that Astrid Kruse Jensen wants to do something more with us than simply portray nature's beauty. There's something disquieting in the offing in these pictures, most of which have a greenish tone, as if the motives had been lying in a coffin at the bottom of a lake and had been fished up again and were now being restored to honor and dignity. In this series and in *Disappearing Into The Past*, from 2010-12, she is working with memory as the focal point. For one thing, these works call old photographs to mind; for another, they call to mind older paintings, especially the symbolism that prevailed during the previous change of the century. The symbolists were turning their gaze away from mercantilism, naturalism and realism, toward a musically suggestive, non-conventional idiom, which was more in tune with the Romantic era's sensitive reverie than with their own contemporary time's demands on putting society's problems up to debate. As one of symbolism's Danish champions, the poet Johannes Jørgensen (1866-1956), decreed in 1891, in the journal, *Taarnet*: "*The world is deep, which shallow spirits will ever fail to understand.*" In the Danish symbolist Harald Slott-Møller's painting, "Midsummer Night near at Vejle Fjord" (1904), we see a woman, clad in a red cloak, with her back turned to us. She is contemplating the sunset as she peers out over the inlet. This is the same compositional principle that Astrid Kruse Jensen uses in many of her photographs, which thus set up and carry on some kind of dialogue back in time and simultaneously emancipate the photograph from its obligations to serve as witness of the truth. These photographs, which are also tinged by a number of discolorations, stains and chemical sediments, are deliberately imperfect and the visual deficiencies

destabilize the representation of the motive and turn the photographic process itself into one more aspect of the expression. From this springs forth an enormously interesting, unpredictable aesthetics, characterized by randomness's vibrating textuality.

In her earlier series, she was making use of darkness as a co-interactive factor. Now, to a great degree, her work has to do with abandoning herself to reverie and the spirit of dejection. One of the secrets behind Astrid Kruse Jensen's textural and painterly photographs is that she has replaced the analogue and technically perfect camera with a Polaroid camera, which takes an instantaneous snapshot, occurring only in a single print, even if she does subsequently scan the motives digitally.

Whereas the pictorial-like photographers who were working around the time of the previous change of century were operating with soft-focus artistic effects during the phase of development in the darkroom for purposes of attaining a painterly effect that was in harmony with impressionism, especially, Astrid Kruse Jensen has gone about her work in another way in order to attain a similar kind of textuality: she has moved heaven and earth in order to buy up old and long expired Polaroid films, the production of which was discontinued back in 2008, in order to obtain, by this means, a most unpredictable gift handed to her on a plate: chemistry, as a present fellow player. The Polaroid photograph is otherwise known for providing a veracious – and unique – impression of reality's moment, but in Astrid Kruse Jensen's way of wielding things, there are new and – also to the artist herself – unknown painterly effects, which “destabilize” the motive and sometimes place one motive on top of another through an iconoclastic, chemical “onslaught”. The photograph accordingly loses its purity and its authority as a direct link to reality.

Sometimes the chemical membrane takes over completely and colors the motives hysterical yellow or almost entirely monochrome, blue-green, as if they had become submerged in water. With this stroke, Astrid Kruse Jensen sows the

seeds of doubt about photography's representation of reality: she is expressing that what we think we are seeing is not necessarily what we are seeing.

Old school photographer

Since making her debut with photography, Astrid Kruse Jensen has been operating with these kinds of destabilizations, especially in her many series with nocturnal shots, where the motive palpitates dangerously on the knife's edge between being and nothingness – often with the memory as an image-generating focal point. Her approach to photography is in the capacity of an *old school* photographer, who has always otherwise been working with analogue photography. But instead of pursuing reality, which is what most photographers do in order to capture the unique moment, she obtains ideas for situations or places that allure her. After doing so, she moves out into reality in order to find her motive. In this sense, she is both a conceptual artist and deeply dependent on reality for finding the right location *out there*.

For Astrid Kruse Jensen, it all has to do with creating something that points out across what we all can see, with something that points toward an otherness in the motive. In these photographs and in the film, which are charged with new and untold stories, this aspiration is fully consummated.

translated by DAN A. MARMORSTEIN

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