



Christian Houge *Antenna Forest, Spitsbergen, Norway 2001* C-print on aluminium Courtesy of the artist

LIGHTS FROM THE NORTH

PHOTOGRAPHY is a relatively new medium on the Norwegian contemporary art scene. Fine art photography, while well established now, barely existed before the 1980's. There was no room for fine art photography at the Norwegian National Gallery or other institutions and art academies. WORDS | OLE ANDREAS BUENGET

THE SITUATION changed thanks to the foundation Forbundet Frie Fotografer (The Association of Fine Art Photographers) in 1974 and the Preus Museum, Norway's national museum of photography, established in 1995. Today photography is an integral part of the contemporary art scene in Norway. The use of photography as a fine art medium has increased dramatically during the 1990s and this has forced art museums to start collecting photography on a scale never thought possible before, and is gradually changing the character of art museums and galleries.

Today, as in the past, Norwegian photographers position themselves both nationally and internationally. They draw from their national heritage as well as the international language of contemporary photography. But the strong tradition of landscape photography remains for them an important aspect in the field.

In recent years, there has been an increasing globalisation trend within contemporary photography. Artists from across the world share similar

problems and there are similarities in content and form. Norwegian artists are a natural part of this trend, but I also believe they demonstrate characteristics which are specific to Norwegian contemporary art. With a population of only 12 people per square kilometer, Norwegian identity is closely linked to the natural landscape.

Christian Houge's (b. 1972) large-scale photographs document places of extreme isolation that seem to exist outside of time. The images were taken on the island of Svalbard near the North Pole. Due to Svalbard's location halfway between Norway and the North Pole, scientists have installed there extensive technical constructions for climate research and space observations. These uncanny, snowy landscapes form the series *Arctic Technology*. Houge's panoramic photographs capture antenna fields and satellite receivers which send and receive invisible information from space. Several were photographed in pure moonlight using very long exposure times, becoming almost religious monuments to man in the endless arctic landscape. Houge's works relate to a moment in history when technological imperatives trumped the impetus to preserve natural landscapes. As art historian Mari Aarre writes on Houge's *Arctic Technology* project: 'There is an almost intrusive silence in Christian Houge's images. The format of the photographs, their compositional calm and sublime nature, suggest an absence which at first seems threatening. Nevertheless, these images contain a strong presence.'



Rune Johansen *View from a jetty, Steigen, Norway 1996* C-print Courtesy Galleri K

'The strong tradition of landscape photography remains for them an important aspect in the field'

Rune Johansen was born in Bodø in Northern Norway in 1957. A self-taught photographer, for the last 15 years he has worked with North-Norwegian interiors, portraits and landscapes. Rune Johansen photographs the simple everyday surroundings of ordinary people without changing their interiors or identities. He does offer something specifically Norwegian, or at any rate, Scandinavian, in the distinctive quality of the light in northern latitudes and sub-Arctic areas. The locals in their small houses spend their days longing for air and dreaming of getting away. Everyday life and trivia are documented in an unmasked but respectful way. In his photographs of frosty houses, Johansen almost literally transmutes light into colour. Shot in winter conditions and stormy weather, these images seem to depict the edge of the world. The interaction of the colours, form and content lend an additional meaning to normal things or situations. These photographs are slow history, and indicate a great sharing between him and the subjects. In his books and on the gallery walls, Johansen has successfully created an authentic and compelling new photographic vision that fuses social documentary and fine art.

NORWAY



Tom Sandberg *Untitled* 2003 Silver bromide print Courtesy the artist

Tom Sandberg (b. 1953) is one of the most acknowledged Norwegian photographers today, exhibited internationally over the last three decades. His exhibition at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Centre/MoMA in 2007 was the first solo exhibition of work by a Norwegian artist in a New York museum for nearly twelve years. Working exclusively with large-format, black-and-white film, Sandberg has produced a remarkable body of work that is consistent in its vision and imbued with a sense of mystery and great depth of feeling. Whether he depicts sublime snow-covered mountains, a car parked in the street, the head of an infant, or a spectral house shrouded in fog, his pictures are about what it means to be alive. Many of Sandberg's pictures are aerial views — the earth seen from above, in a sense, in a state of suspension. One of his most hauntingly beautiful pictures is that of a plane seeming to hover just a few feet above a runway. Sandberg's work is about photography, about the act of seeing, and ultimately about being in the world. Focusing on a single object or person in each photograph, and steeping them in a murky, wintry light, Sandberg draws out soft tones and moody atmospheres from his subjects to create a pervasive complicity between them and the surrounding landscape. Sandberg is an artist who understands that life is in the balance. He captures the inner nature of photography with a sober technique.



Herdis Maria Siegert *Reflections 1, Vikten, Lofoten, Norway 2003*. Gelatin silver print
Courtesy Galleri Balder

Herdis Maria Siegert (b. 1955) is one of Norway's best-known photographers, highly appreciated for her combination of tradition and creativity within black and white photography. In nature, Herdis is seeing elements which others do not see. That is because she meets nature in a way few others do; hers being a genuine humility with a childlike feeling of wonderment. She has abstracted her images by removing large amounts of information.

'There are those who call my images objects of meditation. I am thankful for that and feel that I have succeeded in conveying something important,' says Siegert. In February, she made her seventeenth trip to the Lofoten Islands to both photograph and teach. 'This island

group, north of the polar circle, has a landscape that I never tire of,' she explains. As the art-historian Oivind Storm Bjerke writes in the catalogue from her latest exhibition, 'Siegert has chosen an esthetical expression which leads to images presented as beautiful. She chooses to do so in a time where one can get the impression that a majority of contemporary artists consider the term beauty as irrelevant to a discussion concerning contemporary art. One can get the impression that beauty can operate merely as a contrast, in order to visualise and to make aesthetical of that which is ugly or hideous.'

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