

CONVERSATION

Some twenty-two years ago Bjørn Sterri embarked on a degree course in Photography and Film at Napier University in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was our first Norwegian student and from the outset it was apparent that unlike many of his peers, he was to follow his own route: one that was expressive, self referential and passionate. Almost from the beginning he adopted Polaroid as his medium of choice. Using the SX-70 camera, he began to make spontaneous and intuitive images, which, as he gradually identified a strategy, came to represent his condition.

Bjørn recognised, even at this early stage, that photography is the pre-eminent medium for reflecting on oneself; that while it is a document of external reality, it can also have a wider metaphorical significance. Throughout the following two decades, he has obsessively used photography and in particular Polaroid to reflect upon himself and his family. Particularly over the last ten years, hardly a day has gone by without him making a picture of someone in the family.

Since Bjørn left Napier, Bjørn and I have maintained a friendship — geographically distant but emotionally close — and I have felt intimately involved with his remarkable work throughout. For me, it is seductively beautiful: self-expressive, elegant and eloquent. His photographs are about the enduring themes of Love, Life and Death that return us to a consideration of values that are both life affirming and vital. And with the death of Polaroid, this seemed to Bjørn to be an appropriate time to draw a line and to reflect on what has been a rich period of production. When he announced that he was planning a retrospective of his Polaroid work I enthusiastically invited him to Edinburgh to discuss it. What follows are notes from conversations held over three days.

Sitting at the kitchen table by the window, the morning after he arrived on the plane from Oslo, we discussed why he wanted to produce this book at this time. Bjørn talked at length, honestly and intimately, about his love for his wife and family and the positive changes in his life and circumstances that had occurred over the last few months.

«The book is for Alejandra, Jens Linus and Pablo. For them to look at when I am gone — to bring back memories. Good ones and bad ones.»

This period coincided with the end of Polaroid production. And the notion of coincidence — or synchronicity — was frequently woven into our conversations...

Bjørn has always been reluctant to strictly define the meaning of his work — and certainly not to intellectualise it — at least in an academic way. From a long association with Bjørn

and his work, I had garnered a broad intuitive understanding of its basis and motivation, but in the course of our wide ranging conversations I was keen to pin him down further. In the first of his series, Breathe Keep Breathing, edited from work produced up to 1999, Bjørn reminded me that he drew on indistinct and troubling memories of his childhood before he was adopted, and related them to self-portraits and to portraits of his son, Jens Linus. He showed me early pictures of himself which demonstrated a remarkable similarity to Jens Linus. Coincidentally, in 1999 Jens Linus was the same age as Bjørn was when he was adopted. It was also the year that Bjørn divorced Jens Linus' mother.

«I started this when Jens Linus was born because with his birth I realised I was going to die and with that realisation I started to go back to my childhood and to the time before I was adopted at the age of three because I do have memories of that time. Based on these memories I used Jens Linus as a model, so he was a sort of stand-in to represent me as a child. And during that time I was going through the divorce of my first wife and all the fighting and accusations and emotional trauma. The work is also a homage to my adopted parents for giving me such a fantastic childhood.»

In one image from the series, Bjørn's shadow (a recurring symbol throughout his work) is to be seen falling beside Jens Linus. (work 9) This was at the time of the divorce when Bjørn was fraught with the threat of losing Jens Linus.

«If that had happened Jens Linus would have gone through the same as me when I was adopted and I would then have been a mere shadow in his life...»



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Throughout all of Bjørn's work, with an almost uncanny consistency, there are images that seem to relate to earlier images of him as a child or to vaguely remembered experiences. He maintained that the subconscious level can influence or 'make up' new tangible images. So the poignant image of Jens Linus on the boat (work 15) seems to reference, in retrospect, a similar picture of Bjørn taken 45 years earlier (fig. 2). Similarly with the image of Jens Linus with the toy boat (work 10): Bjørn had just bought it for him, thinking at the time that he had not had one as a child, to then discover from the early snapshot that he had (fig. 3).

«It's interesting how memory is constructed... that you remember what you want to remember sometimes...»

It seemed to me, that this work was simultaneously a celebration of love, an attempt to make sense of recent turbulent personal experiences and a reflection on a distant past, darkly remembered.

In conversation, Bjørn is always open and honest and often intense and passionate. We both needed a break for coffee, and more casual conversation. We sparred over the state of photography today, his disdain for digital cameras, who is producing interesting work and so on, before moving into the study where we could look at some of his series on the computer.

We talked about the shadow motif, which is a recurring theme throughout all of Bjørn's sequences but most so in Memory of Water. His shadow suggests that he is both within the family and regarding it at the same time. And he pointed out that there

is not one image where the whole family are together. While it is difficult to decode the symbolism in all these images (and Bjørn was reluctant to do so), what can be accessed here is the meaning of the title with its reference to water, symbolising life, regeneration and the womb. This sequence represents a time, after the divorce, when Alejandra became a stabilising and loving influence with Jens Linus and Bjørn. Jens Linus now had a new ‘mother-figure’ at the same age as Bjørn was when he was adopted — and there’s that coincidence again. Subsequently, a son is born to Bjørn and Alejandra: Pablo, a brother for Jens Linus.

«The title, ‘Memory of Water’ is about this romantic idea that I have that I want to live by the sea — I want to have the horizon and I want to sit in the chair and listen to the water. The day I’m going to die, I want to sit down by the sea and look at the horizon.»

Bjørn talked at length about memories of childhood and his attempt at coming to terms with these, as well as his longing for knowledge of his biological roots. Throughout this series there are references to this and the constant struggle for paternity of Jens Linus. And «I want my daddy» (work 23) is simultaneously about both.

We discussed the prevalence of references to mortality. Ever since the birth of Jens Linus, Bjørn realised that he was not immortal, and this was reinforced when his (adopted) mother was diagnosed with cancer and subsequently died in 2002.

It was tempting to press Bjørn into decoding the whole story and explaining the symbolism in all his images – certainly the

cerebral part of me almost needed it. Much better though, to let it stand; to allow the enigma and an area of doubt to be filled by our own imaginations and experiences. Even the explanations that Bjørn provided were prefaced with ‘maybe it means...’ or ‘I don’t know exactly...’. He was as unwilling to tie down the explicit meaning of his work for himself as he was to provide a glib explanation for me.

Before sunrise the following morning I found Bjørn already up, reading in the kitchen and brewing coffee on the stove. We had talked at length the previous day, but there still seemed to be a lot of gaps. We had concentrated on his earlier sequences, his adoption and the role of Jens Linus, and we agreed to move on to a discussion of the later sequences.

No Me Olvides (forget me not) is dedicated to his Spanish wife Alejandra, and is intended as a remembrance for her for some future time when he is dead.

«She is such a fantastic beautiful woman — I’m grateful beyond words to be married to her and that she has picked me... and that she has moved from warm Tenerife to cold Norway to be with me.»

These photographic acts of commemoration immortalise him – save him from oblivion. In particular, as in Memory of Water, the photographs of his shadow — the trace of himself — are to him a proof of his existence, like a preserved footprint, while simultaneously they function as a ‘memento mori’.

We talked about the picture of Rodi Bar where Alejandra and Bjørn spent time when they were in Buenos Aires. Barely legible

in his notebook is written ‘My death will come as no surprise.’ (work 50). The chair is another recurring symbol throughout these series and for Bjørn it represents the head of the house. The image at Santa Rosa de Tastil (work 48) was made at a time when his father was very ill and dying. Perhaps it represents his father’s chair and it is Bjørn’s turn to sit in it. And after he has also gone it will in turn be taken over by his sons. As with the previous day’s conversations, Bjørn was never dogmatic about what these pictures mean and he was content that an audience doesn’t completely understand the work. This led to a robust exchange about the role of the artist and the tension between making work purely for oneself as a form of catharsis and the need to exhibit and publish it to a wide audience. Convincingly he maintained that all his work was made — and this book would be produced — because...

«I have to do it — for myself for Jens Linus, Pablo and Alejandra because when they look at the photographs that brings back memories for them ... but I hope that people can relate to it — that’s the most important thing.»

That afternoon, we drove out to an art gallery on the outskirts of Edinburgh for lunch and to look at a Surrealist exhibit. As usual Bjørn had his SX-70 camera (loaded with already outdated film) in one pocket of his coat and a notebook in the other. A friendly security officer allowed him to make a picture of a model skull in the exhibition and I made a portrait of him outside before we explored the adjacent graveyard. Driving back to the flat, we stopped for coffee in an Italian bistro. Coffee houses, like kitchen tables, are conducive to close conversations. One may sit, elbows on table, in intimate proximity within a warm and relaxed ambience and talk of serious matters.

We mulled over, in general terms, all that we had discussed so far and in «Where I End And You Begin», Bjørn said that he is attempting to encapsulate what he had been focussed on all these years: the importance of his relationship with his adoptive father and with his sons, his family, his memories, his fears and his obsession with his own death. This last series includes several images that relate back to other images in previous series: the swan, (a symbol of the messenger between life and death), horizons, the boat and the chair. Here he introduced me to the Greek term 'Kairos'...

«For me it means that you accumulate experience and knowledge in your life and you come to a certain time or a specific point in your life when this knowledge leads on to something new and that specific point in time is 'Kairos'»

It could be a credo for photography itself.

After dinner that evening we returned to the problem of making work that requires a real commitment from the viewer in terms of 'reading' images, and how deeply we should interrogate and interpret them. The making of individual images may be intuitive or cerebral; work of the subconscious where symbolic meaning is only recognized at some later time, or a rational construct. The editing of the sequences however, seemed to be much more conscious and carefully deliberated over a long period – but subject to constant revision depending on variations of the 'story'.

Bjørn has several tattoos on his arms, which bear reference to his life and to photography which is so much a part of him and his life: TIME; MEMORY; FATHER SON; BOAT; and a skull motif.

The tattoos are permanent and enduring, like the Polaroid itself; mottos etched as much into his psyche as into his skin.

«Maybe one day I'll understand what this is all about and maybe I'll cry even more — or maybe I'll laugh — or be scared — I don't know. But this is how I live my life — through photography. The photograph is a proof that I, at a certain point in time, was alive.»

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