

ELINA BROTHERUS

Persons
Projects

SEABOUND, 2018-2019

“The title of this series is a misunderstanding.

Or a mistranslation, to be exact.

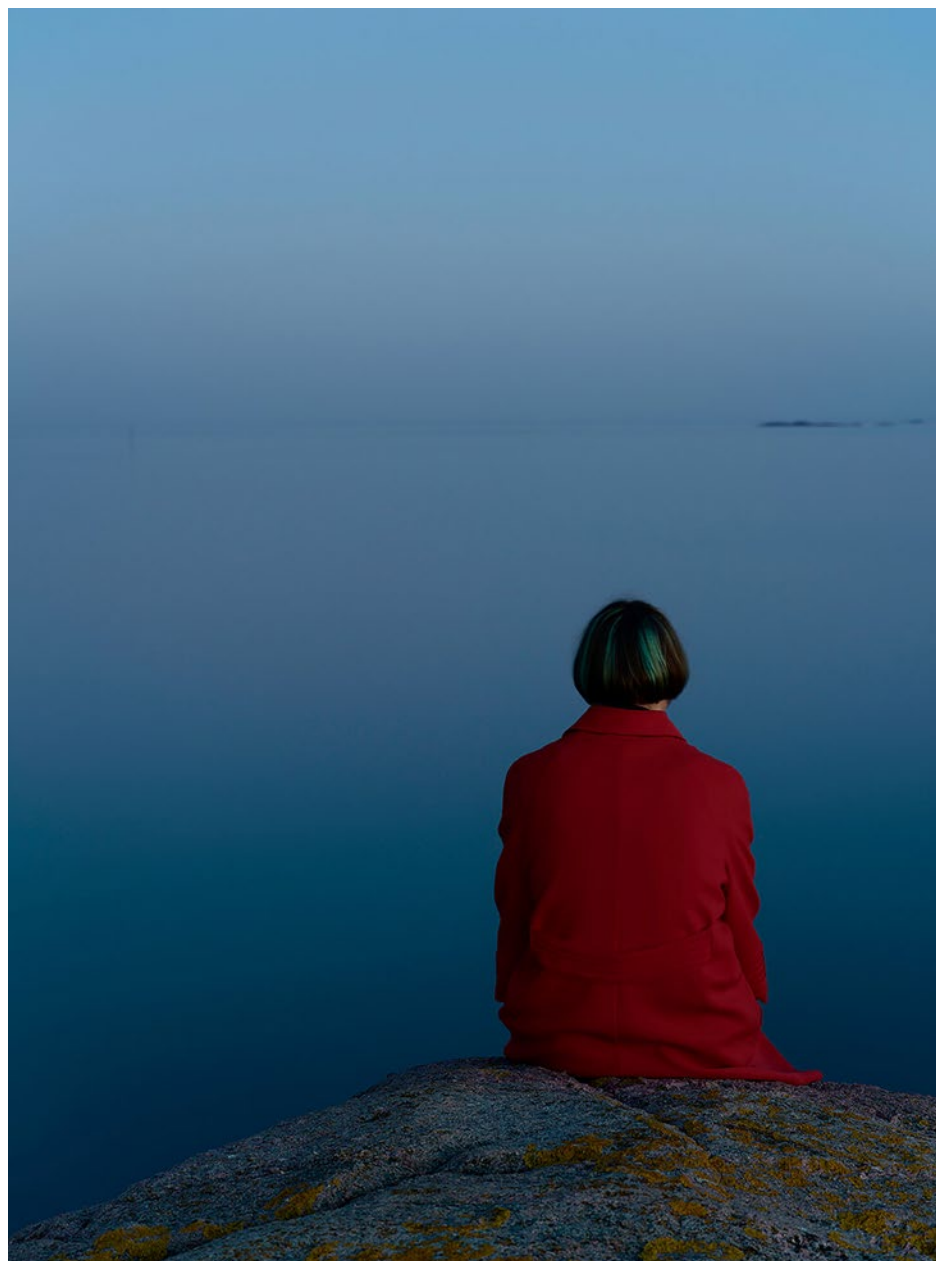
I navigate between languages. My mother tongue is Finnish. In my work I function mostly in English and French. I understand some German, and a bit of Spanish and Italian, too. I lived for years in a Swedish-speaking town in Finland so I believe I can manage all the Scandinavian languages, at least in the written form.

The Norwegian performance artist Kurt Johannessen, my self-appointed guide for a big part of this series, has written dozens of miniature books of something he calls *øvingar*, exercises. I carried them in my pockets and in my head while working in Norway. One instruction reads *Havbunnen to netter på rad*. Seabound, I thought, two nights in a row.

How beautiful. That’s me! I was in the outer archipelago and was drawn to the sea all the time, day and night. *Bunnen* sounds like the Swedish word *bunden*, which means bound. Only later I learned that in Norwegian it signifies bottom. It was too late: Kurt is talking about the seabed, but I already had my photograph in the red coat, the second night, sitting by the open sea.

But as John Cage says, nothing is a mistake. I got a title for the picture, for the series, and for the book, in a process that was guided by chance and filtered through lived life. I wanted to tell you this anecdote because this is how art often happens. You just accept the things that are catered for you.” (By the artist.)

Seabound was commissioned by the Tangen Collection, Kristiansand, Norway, 2018-2019. The book Seabound was published in May 2021 by Kehrer Verlag, supported by AKO Kunststiftelse.



Seabound Two Nights in a Row, 2018, 120 x 90 cm, Archival pigment print, After Kunst Johannesen, *Havbunnen to netter på rad*, 1988



Fly #2, 2018, 70 x 93 cm, Archival pigment print, After Yoko Ono, *Fly Piece: Fly*, 1963 summer



Lighthouse Diptych, 2019, 120 x 90 cm each, Archival pigment print



Yellow in Snow, 2019, 120 x 90 cm, Archival pigment print

SEBALDIANA.

MEMENTO MORI, 2019

“Before I first visited Corsica, I read a collection of text fragments by W. G. Sebald, building blocks for a book about Corsica that was left unfinished at his premature death. Sebald as a writer is highly unusual and difficult to classify: between essayist, novelist and historian, he is scholarly without being dry, poetic without sentimentality, touching on deeply humane topics of post-war Europe with a great sense of historicity. His use of photographs within his books has inspired many artists.

Sebald writes about a certain hotel on the steep red cliffs overlooking the village of Piana on the Western coast of Corsica. His narrator goes to swim from a close-by secluded beach and nearly doesn't make it back to shore. In the village cemetery he observes the small weeds that grow between the tomb-

stones, nature's modest ones, unplanted and unplanned, in stark contrast with the looked-after but austere cemetery plantations of Sebald's native Germany. He then talks about the relatively recent use of cemeteries in Corsica. The old habit was to bury the dead in a beautiful spot in their own land, perhaps under a particular tree, or on the slope behind the house where they could continue to contemplate the view on their ancestral territory. The poorest ones who had no land were simply put in a common grave or in ravine in the mountains.

Sebald became my guide to Corsica. I went to places he mentions: the forest of Aitone and the massif of Bavella, the hotel, the beach and the cemetery in Piana and its backcountry with sculptural rock formations. I was remembering my dead. I looked for places so beau-

tiful that I would like to bury them there, were I Corsican. I collected humble weeds at the cemetery of Piana to make a herbarium.

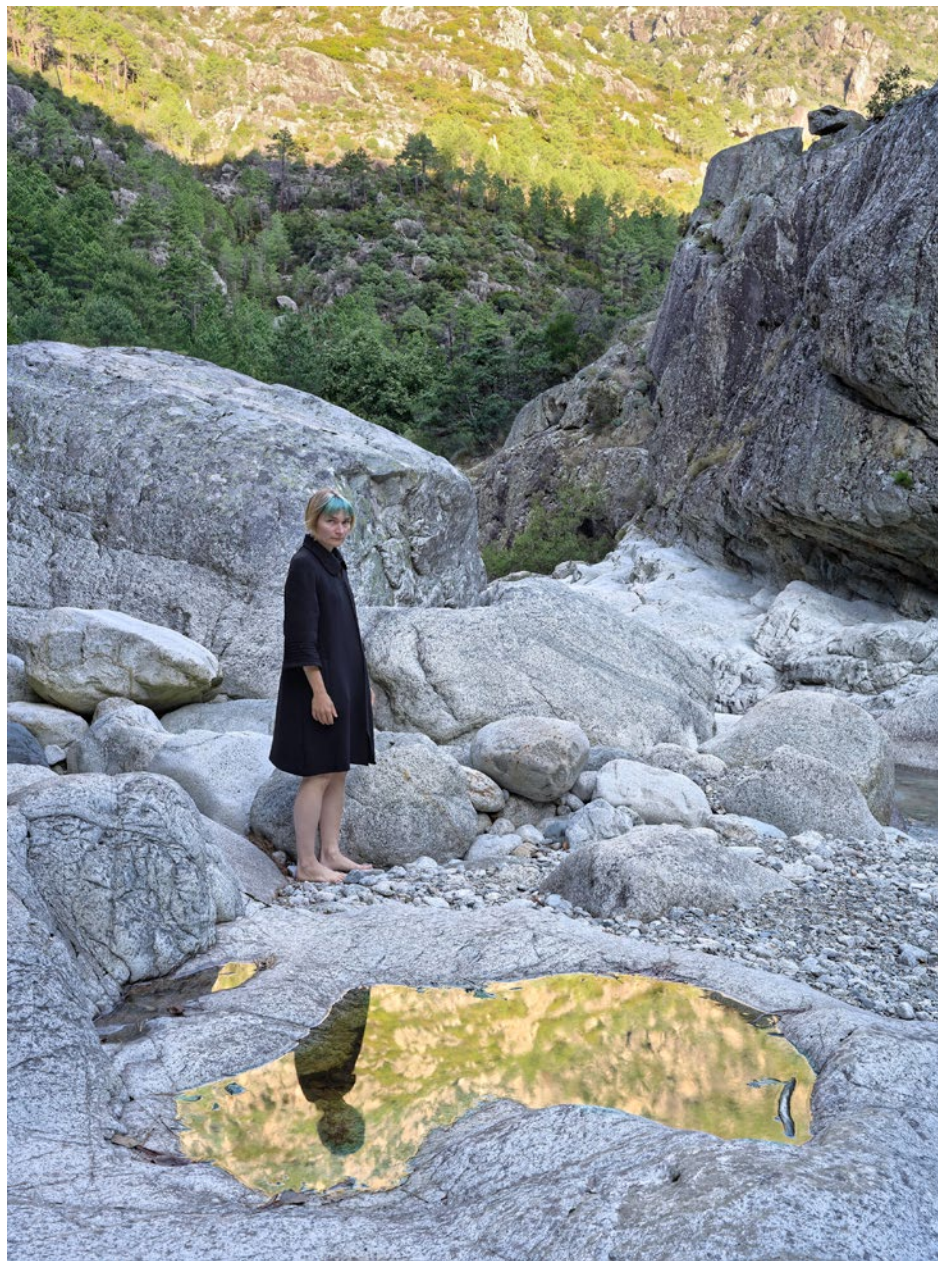
My father was a hobby photographer and gave me my first camera. When my mother was widowed at the age of 37, she went to art school and had four years of fulfillment. I'm a photographer because of my father, but because of my mother I'm an artist.

My mother died four years later at the age of 41. She was born the same year as Sebald but died 16 years before him. Recently I found some aquarelle paper that she hadn't had time to use. The sheets had suffered from humidity, were spotted, partly moldy. It is this paper that I used to create my Herbarium Pianaense, the cyanotype herbarium of the cemetery. Thus this work became an

homage not only to the Island of Beauty and to my favorite writer, but also to my mother, Ulla Brita Brotherus, née Sommar (1944-1985).” (By the artist.)



Why not?, Weserburg Museum für Moderne Kunst, 2020, Bremen



Tombeau imaginaire 18 / Imaginary Burial Place 18, 2019, 120 x 90 cm, Archival pigment print





Hôtel de Sebald 5 / Sebald's Hotel 5, 2019, 90 x 67 cm, Archival pigment print

THE BALDESSARI ASSIGNMENTS, 2016-

The American artist John Baldessari proposed a list of “art ideas” to his indecisive students at CalArts in the 1970s. Brotherus started to use these ideas as assignments in her own teaching: “I saw how much fun the students had doing the Baldessari assignments and thought that I want to do them too. In 2016 at my nomination for the Prix Elysée, I started to use different instructions like Fluxus event scores and Baldessari’s ideas as the basis of new work.” The Baldessari Assignments is a still on-going series.



Hot and Cold Showers on Stage (Jura), 2016, 105 x 70 cm, Archival pigment print

Hot and Cold Showers on Stage (Mäntyharju), 2016, 70 x 46 cm, Archival pigment print

After John Baldessari, Hot and cold showers (on stage) or other various stimuli to affect behavioral forms of performers, from *Fifteen Musical Projects*, 1973





Portrait Series (Gelbe Musik with Sunflowers), 2016, 70 x 96 cm / 80 x 110 cm, Archival pigment print, After John Baldessari, *Portrait Series*, 1974

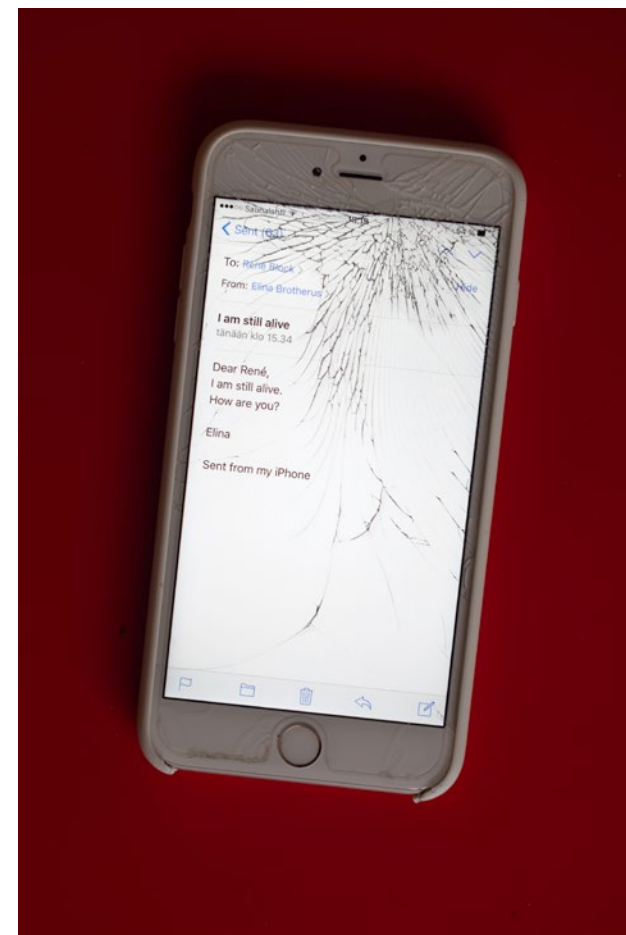


MEANINGLESS WORK, 2016 - RÈGLE DU JEU, 2016-2017

Meaningless Work: After 20 years of using herself as a model in her pictures, Brotherus felt that she had done all the poses someone could possibly do with their body. The way out of this dead end came through Fluxus. In 2016 at her nomination for the Prix Elysée, she started to use Fluxus event scores and other written instructions by artists as the basis of new work. Meaningless Work is a still on-going series. It keeps her curious and allows her to make new discoveries, all while continuing to do what she knows best: "It enables me to get back both in front and behind the camera. Citing Arthur Köpcke: "People ask: Why? I ask: Why not!"

Règle du Jeu: "Règle du jeu is the result of my Carte blanche PMU prize in

France 2017. The work was first exhibited at Centre Pompidou and simultaneously published as a monograph by Filigranes editions. I continue to use Fluxus event scores as a starting point, but I have expanded the idea of the score and allowed myself to be influenced by a range of artists including film makers, photographers, painters and poets. In these performative and somewhat absurd pictures I am accompanied by dancer and choreographer Vera Nevanlinna." (By the artist.)



Eating with, 2016, Archival pigment print, After George Brecht, *Eating with*, from *Five events*, 1962
I Am Still Alive, 2016, 22 x 14 cm, Archival pigment print, After On Kawara, *I am still alive*, 1970–2000



It's Not Me, It's a Photograph!, Kunst Haus Wien, 2018, Wien



About Being My Model, 2017, 90 x 120cm, Archival pigment print, After Francesca Woodman, *About Being My Model*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976



Elina Brotherus. PLAYGROUND, PHotoESPAÑA, 2019, Madrid



Elna Brotherus. PLAYGROUND, PHotoESPAÑA, 2019, Madrid



Falling Event, 2017, 80 x 56 cm, Archival pigment print, After Mieke Shiomu, *Falling Event*, 1963

Drip Music, 2017, 80 x 56 cm, Archival pigment print, After George Brecht, *Drip Music*, 1959



At Least One Egg (Avallon), 2016, 70 x 104 cm, Archival pigment print, After George Brecht, *Egg – At least one egg*, 1962



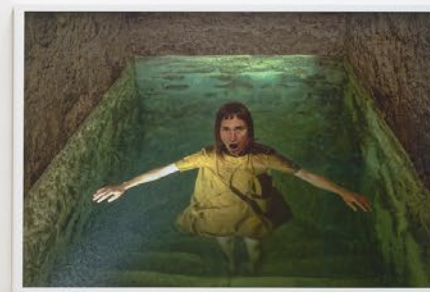
Elena Brotherus. PLAYGROUND, PHotoESPAÑA, 2019, Madrid



Why not?
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LES FEMMES DE LA MAISON CARRÉ, 2015 - 2018

The series Les Femmes de la Maison Carré is shot in the only building designed by Alvar Aalto in France, the Maison Louis Carré (1959) near Paris. Susanna Pettersson, Director of the Finnish National Gallery Ateneum writes about the series:

“The title, Les Femmes de la Maison Carré, spurs us to solve puzzles. The person in the photograph proposes a narrative that we as viewers instinctively begin to construct. Who are these women? Where have they come from? What era do they represent? - - - Although the language of Brotherus’ photographs is completely recognizable as hers, the starting point of the series is a new one, formed on the site. “I seek, do, find - and take pictures. I don’t interfere with the space, but the human presence awak-

ens it,” Brotherus says. - - - The photographs in Les Femmes de la Maison Carré are at once composed and natural. They are direct yet mysterious. They live in this moment and in the past. They effortlessly make use of the house and its surroundings. In practice, Brotherus walks into one of the most iconic buildings of modern architecture and makes the experience completely her own.”

(Susanna Pettersson: The blank page, Elina Brotherus and human-enlivened spaces, in Elina Brotherus: Les femmes de la Maison Carré, Maison Louis Carré, Bazoches-sur-Guyonne and Galleria Heino, Helsinki, 2015.)



Piscine, 2015, 70 x 104 cm, Archival pigment print



Why not?, Weserburg Museum für Moderne Kunst, 2020, Bremen



Vestiare 1, 2015, 70 x 46 cm, Archival pigment print

ANNONCIATION, 2009-2013

This is a series of false annunciations. It is about waiting for an angel who never shows up. First we do not know if it's there, because it could just be hiding behind the doorway. Gradually it becomes clear that it's not coming.

Of course the angel is a metaphor because I'm not religious and I'm on infertility treatment. Documentaries, interviews, articles and TV programs on infertility all have a happy ending. In reality, happy endings occur in only 25% of the cycles. So this repetitive pattern – of executing precise scientific experiments on the body, waiting, being disappointed, and repeating the whole thing over and over again, to the point of being sick of it, to the point of almost no longer caring – is something I share with a surprisingly large number of women.

The success stories are rare, but they are the ones we hear of. For the rest of us, this biased broadcasting is upsetting. It is as though the general public should not see the inconsolable reality but instead a cathartic 'per aspera ad astra' – a Hollywood story.

I am showing this series of photographs to give visibility to those whose IVF treatments lead nowhere. The hopeless story with an unhappy end is the story of the majority. My way of discussing the matter is through pictures, not interviews. I am not sure if I will ever be able to speak about it. I am too sad. This is the saddest thing that I have been through since my mother's death.

Yet, I am tired of lying and inventing excuses for not drinking, having to cancel trips etc. People these days

are not ashamed of talking about sex, psychological problems, alcohol and drugs, but for some reason involuntary childlessness is still very much a taboo topic. People are generally so ignorant. I would like to offer some advice; Please, avoid at least these two: 1) "Stop trying and relax and you will get pregnant" and 2) "Have you thought of adoption?"

I used to be ignorant myself. I thought one went into a clinic and got a child. I could not imagine there would be any problems. The clinics do not necessarily rectify this unfounded optimism, but rather let you understand that most people walk out with a baby if they continue the treatments long enough.

When in treatment, one's imagination is quick. One thinks of names and which school the child will go to. When the

treatment is unsuccessful, it is not exaggerated to say it feels like mourning someone who died. The loss is very concrete. Not only does one lose a child, one also loses a whole future life as a family. We are left with the picture of an aging lonely woman.



Annonciation 17, Chalon-sur-Saône 30.03.2012, 2012, 30 x 36 cm, Archival pigment print



Who? Elina Brotherus and SMITH (Dorothee Smith), Landskrona Konsthall in Fotofestival, 2016, Landskrona



Annonciation 28, Intravenous immunoglobulins, 2012, 20 x 14 cm, Archival pigment print





12 ANS APRÈS, 1999 / 2011 - 2013

In 1999 a European organization that promotes the emergence of young artists (Pépinières européennes pour jeunes artistes) selected Elina Brotherus as the artist-in-residence for the Musée Nicéphore Niépce located in Chalon-sur-Saône, France. During her stay there, Brotherus created her seminal series of photographs called *Suites françaises* (French Suites). The series consists of images in which she teaches herself French with the help of Post-it stickers. It deals with living in a foreign country and absorbing its culture and visual environment. The residency was a turning point in her life. It enabled Brotherus subsequently to live and work in France as well as in her native Finland.

In 2011 Brotherus was again invited to Chalon-sur-Saône, this time to teach at a workshop in a local high school. She stayed in the same monastery guest-

house as before. She photographed many of the same places that she had explored visually twelve years earlier. The result was a series called *12 ans après* (12 Years Later) in which her new images form a poignant dialogue with the older photos. It also shows the evolution, for instance, of her use of text in photos. The older photos have a Post-it with often just one word, whereas the new pictures may contain many stickers that form an extended narrative. In the series *12 ans après*, the artist finds herself in a mid-life point. What she is living now was to her younger self an unknown future. She looks back at her life at the age of 40. The passage of time is made concretely visible.



Le Reflet, 1999, 70 x 56 cm, Archival pigment print



Exercice d'équilibre, 2011, 90 x 120 cm, Archival pigment print

ARTIST AND HER MODEL, 2005 - 2011

MODEL STUDIES, 2002 - 2008

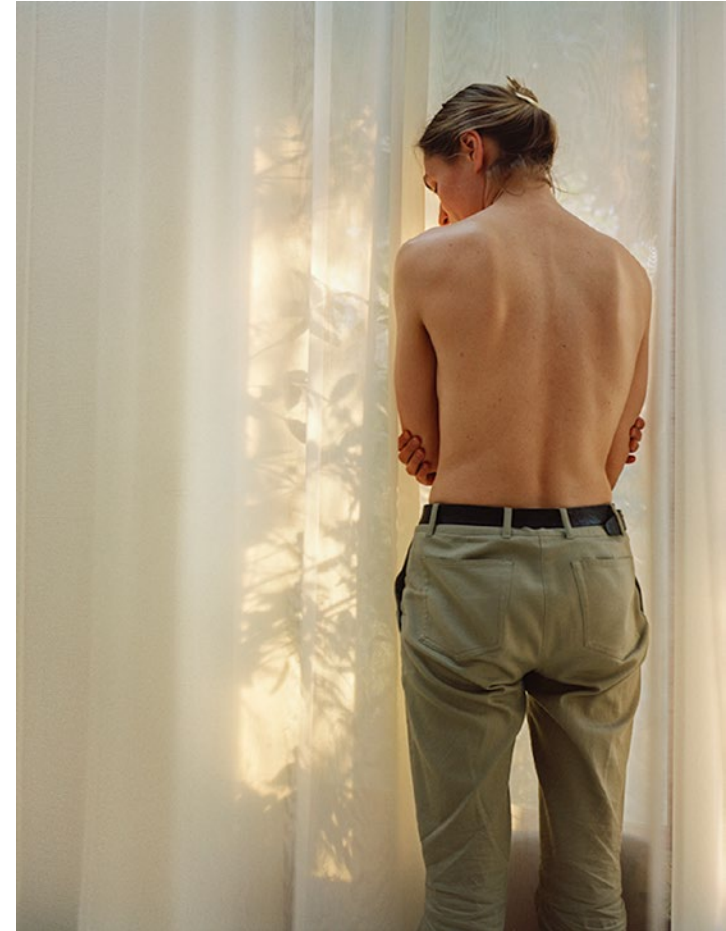
“I have been doing self-portraits for so many years that my own figure has become like a familiar sign, like a word in my vocabulary. After Model Studies and Études d’après modèle, danseurs, the series Artist and her model focuses on the fact that here the artist and the model are one and the same.” (By the artist.)

Susan Bright writes about the work:

Her deep understanding of art history has a paradoxical effect in that you consider her as a person but also a model. In her photographs there is a closeness you feel to her but also a cool conceptual distance. This complicates viewing the work in terms of self-portraiture, landscape or a diary, and so photo-

graphs that can often appear quiet and straightforward on first encounter become denser and laden with histories as you spend time with them. The ‘back-stories’ which lie behind the beautiful, lush compositions are exacerbated as she reaches that somewhat terrifying ‘mid career’ point and looks back on her life as an artist.

(Susan Bright: NOW AND THEN, published in Elina Brotherus: Artist and her Model, Le Caillou bleu, Brussels 2012.)



Model Study 17, 2005, 80 x 60 cm, Archival pigment print

Model Study 18, 2005, 80 x 61 cm, Archival pigment print



Frischer Wind aus dem Norden! Naturmotive in der Helsinki School, Kunsthalle St. Annen, 2020, Lübeck



Why not?, Weserburg Museum für Moderne Kunst, 2020, Bremen



Model Study 21, 2007, 40 x 50 cm, Archival pigment print





Artists at Work, Gallery Taik, 2012, Berlin



Miroir, 2007, 60 x 42 cm, Archival pigment print



Artists at Work, Gallery Taik, 2012, Berlin



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