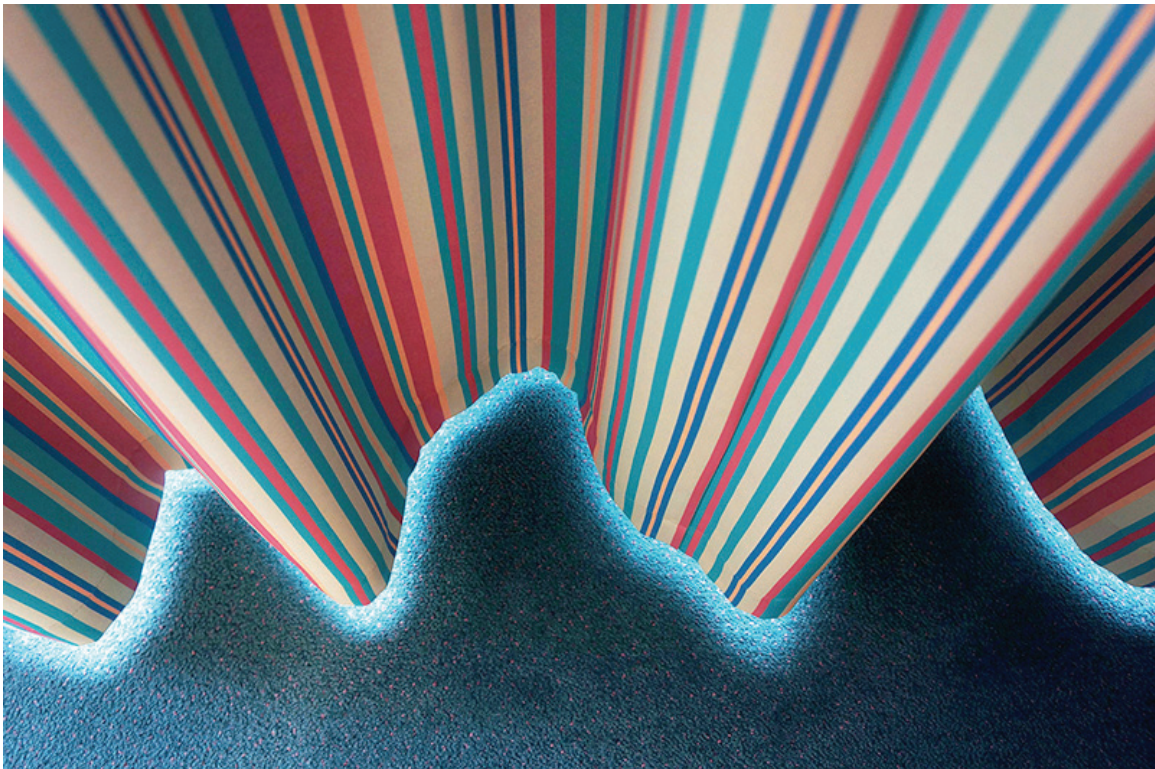


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PHOTOGRAPHY





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by CHIARA BARDELLI NONINO | FOLLOW CHIARA

Jessica Backhaus has been practicing the art of observing since she was very little: as a daughter of an actress and a theatre director she used to tour with them: you can imagine this little girl in the dark observing what was unfolding onstage, learning to see and falling in love with art.

One of the most regarded contemporary German photographer, Backhaus' creates images that have an effortless, sincere quality to them, a kind of quiet beauty that just *is*: she is indeed a master of transfiguring the banal and the overlooked into something deep and universal.

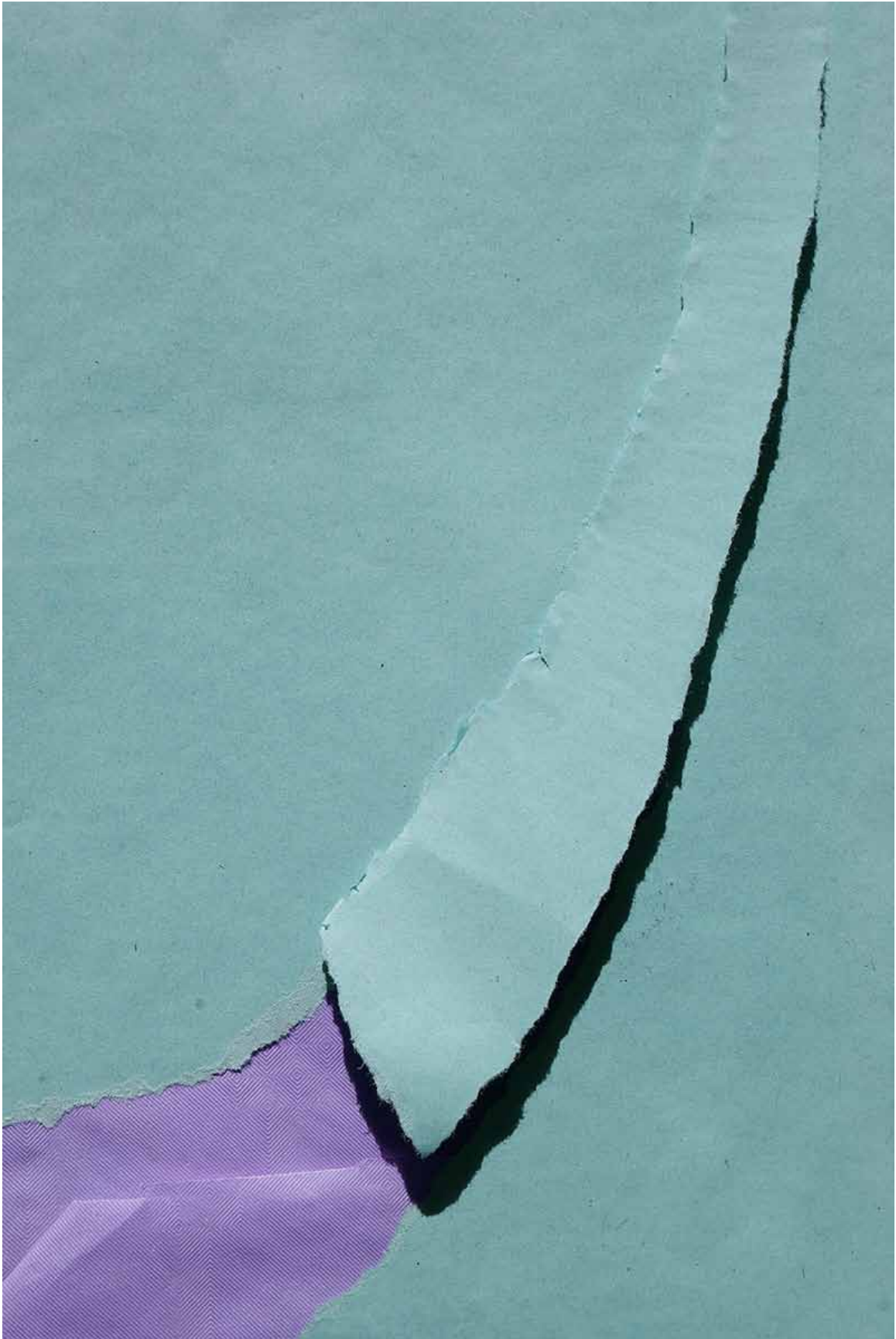
Her first long term project turned into a book, *Jesus and the Cherries*, it's an ode to a simpler lifestyle: shot over 3 years in small Polish villages, it read like poetry. Since that first work, Backhaus has gained growing recognitions but the core her work hasn't changed: a lyrical view of the mundane.

In her latest work, *Six Degrees of Freedom*, she explores the themes of memory, identity, roots and destiny: in an archetypal search for those small, specific, coincidental details that come together to make our unique self.

Here's our Q&A with the author on the occasion of her exhibition at Micamera:

What attracts you about photography?

My passion for it and the freedom that comes with it. Photography also paints new horizons and enables me to discover new worlds. I take pictures, among other things, because this medium offers me a field where I can express various emotions. This immersion into other worlds, to loose and find oneself, to follow uncertain paths, to dare, to try new attempts and to learn to see are some elements that are at the base for my longing to photograph.



Photographs allow you to remember and have the power to bring you back in time. Sometimes you even remember a certain smell or the music you were listening to during that time. Photographs capture a moment in time, but what is time? This is a question that haunts me. Photography, for me, has roots in the desire to preserve and hold on to something that has happened in the past. The passage of time and transience are issues that occupy me and play a significant role in my work. I am captivated with the experience of vanishing and slipping away.

How did your upbringing and the fact that both your parents work in theatre influence your work?

During my childhood and my youth we were always surrounded by various artists at home. It was a playful and very open minded environment. Later on I actually realized that I couldn't live without Art. Art has such a strong impact on my own work. During my childhood years I grew up in an artist household, basically in the theatre. My mother is an actress and my father is a theater director. I even remember being on tour with them. I guess somewhere during these moments I also developed my desire to travel and explore. Very young I had these "gypsy" genes inside me. Later on while I was a teenager, before I moved with 16 years to Paris, France, I spent many years in the movie and film archive that belonged to the partner of my mother. So in many ways I was always surrounded by art and artists. During all these years of my upbringing I developed my passion for photography and the visual arts. I believe it will only be a matter of time that I will also venture into the world of the moving images as I am fascinated by the impact of music and moving images. I would love to create videos.



Can you talk to me a little about your relationship with Gisèle Freund and her influence on your work?

The relationship I had with Gisèle Freund was very precious to me. It was a beautiful and inspirational friendship in many ways. She was 84 when I met her, but we did so many things together – we went to exhibitions and movies, I introduced her to my friends, I cooked for her... Our friendship was one of the most beautiful gifts I've got in my life. Even though we had such a huge age difference, there was a deep understanding, connection and love. We inspired each other. She not only influenced me within my work but also in my life. Another thing I learned from her was to have the courage to live your life and to follow your convictions, to do something without compromises. I created a book for her, "One day in November", published by Kehrer in 2008.

How did you develop your poetic of finding beauty in the banal, the everyday, the overlooked?

I believe it happened with time and was an organic evolution. I have always been attracted to details and simple things. And I love to find beauty in a place where I did not expect it. I think my work is very intuitive, it goes along with my own emotions and feelings. You express yourself because there is not another way you can do it. In order to create you also have to allow for a certain vulnerability and need to be open. I believe this open field of the unknown gives my work some lyrical and poetic elements. It's about the little things and details which I think tell a lot about a bigger picture. You can sometimes read so much more between the lines.

How do you decide if something is worthy of being captured?

I trust my intuition and follow my instincts.



What goes through your mind when you are framing a shot?

I am just lost in my own visual world and forget my surroundings... I am very much focused on the situation, the interior, the still-life... And all sorts of thoughts come up in my mind that I associate with what I am seeing.

What do you look for in an image?

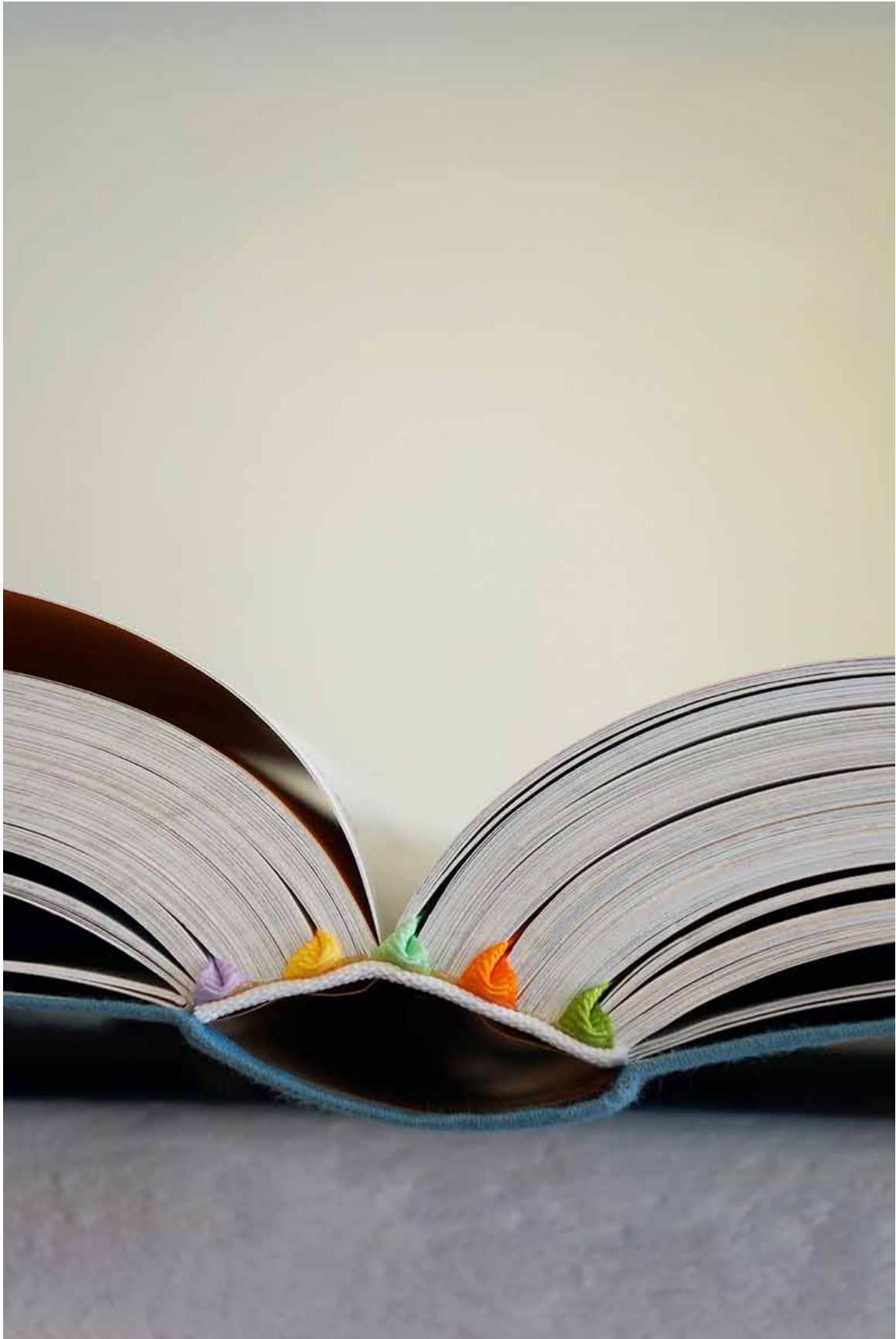
Here I would like to quote Jean-Christophe Ammann (somebody who was very dear to me and with whom I had vivid exchanges about Art):

“Sometimes it takes time to grasp the work of an artist. How often does the attention-grabbing motif stand at the foreground. For Jessica Backhaus, the motif provides an occasion for contemplating the “way of the world,” the “order of things” (which disorder makes necessary), for thinking about light and color as generators of life. And there is something else as well, a quiet melancholy that tells us that we cannot change the tides. In other words: that we should follow them instead.”

I really love what he wrote. He was such a unique person and had an incredible understanding of Art. Some of his thoughts were truly thought provoking, radical and wise. Color, light and composition are important components in my work. Some of my photographs are metaphors and are filled with symbolism.

Photography and memory are closely intertwined – With your project *Six degrees of Freedom* you investigate “to what extent it is possible to re-elaborate these- usually prescribed – roots”. How did you develop the re-elaboration part? How much do photographs play a role constructing your personal identity and history?

Six degrees of Freedom was partly inspired by my own biography and my desire to find out more about my roots. There is no specific message, the project holds various themes together like memory, background, yearning, identity and destiny. During the years of making this project I visited some places from my childhood and youth. With my photographs I tried symbolically to capture the essence of this search and of the different life stages. Nevertheless I want the photographs to be open for individual interpretations. I believe photographs can play a beautiful and important role in constructing elements of one’s identity and history. Sometimes you can also work with images from a family archive but I actually decided against it for this project.



How do you usually develop the concepts behind a long term project? You do a lot of research before and then start with a very clear idea in mind or is it more an organic development?

Actually it is quite an organic and natural development and it starts with some ideas. I also do some research during the project. And then with time I dive deeper into the subject matter. But I never know where the project will take me. Sometimes I am lost and I have to continue my search. Agnes Martin describes this process very well in her text *What We Do Not See If We Do Not See*: “*Life is an adventure and adventures are difficult. They are hard work and one does not know how they will go on or how they will end [...] we know that this step will be in the dark and will require courage [...]*”. I feel that it is necessary to go through this process and I long for this journey into the unknown.

Jessica Backhaus

Six Degrees of Freedom

20 January – 25 February 2017

Micamera, via Medardo Rosso 19, Milan