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Jesus and the Cherries

Jessica Backhaus



The village of Netno in Pomerania is where the Backhaus family purchased an old farmhouse in 1993, a few years after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Though this rural region of Poland still appears quite traditional in Jessica Backhaus's colourful images, there are distinct signs of the slow, but progressive, change that began with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

MD Melissa DeWitt

JB Jessica Backhaus

MD I was immediately attracted by the title of your book, *Jesus and the Cherries*; can you explain its significance to the work?

JB When I was laying out the book, I knew from the beginning that the title for one particular photograph would be *Jesus and the Cherries*. Then, while I was searching for a title for the book, I came constantly back to that one. In the end I thought that this title actually sums up the whole project. Religion, faith

and food are very present in this region, as well as the rest of the country. The cherries are somehow a symbol for the authenticity, and an untouched world; still raw and unspoiled, a place where time has stood still. I also think it is a very poetic and tender title that goes along with the atmosphere in the photographs...a certain mood of silence.

MD I am struck by the sheer beauty, the intense aesthetic quality of these images. What comes first in your mind, form or content?

JB Difficult to answer, because both are kind of mingled in one. When I take pictures, I follow my instinct. It is not a very rational process; it is much more of an emotional one I would say. You just know when something is catching your eye or inspiring you. But I believe that composition is a very valuable element in this process.

MD The mix of still lifes and portraiture is very effective, how did you make it work?



JB For many years now I have played with combining portraits and still lifes. It is a process where I play around with different images and see how they can work together... and create their own world, even though they are individual images. Again it is more the approach of a hunter, following your instinct and feeling. There is not always an explanation. I admit that I really like this part of my work. The "pairing" can stimulate the imagination of the viewer.

MD How do these interiors reflect the social values of this community?

JB The region, Zachodnio Pomorskie, where I was working is very vast, open and beautiful. Many lakes and many small villages. Rural Poland has a story of its own and one gets the feeling that this very traditional way of life has stopped in time. The inhabitants of these communities are mainly farmers. They live a very modest, simple and dignified life where traditions and religion play

a major role. Their living space "is a signal for their participation in the community. Homes are decorated to show visitors: all is right with our world. Our souls are as tidy as our rooms." (Schmidt-Wulffen)

MD Does your work also reflect the political situation?

JB I can't say that my work is reflecting the political situation, because I am not a photojournalist. I have only tried to capture what inspired me... the people in these villages and their living spaces.

MD For me, some of the objects within your framing, namely flowers and animal skulls, give a sense of memento mori, whereas other images portray traces of life, a peeling away, or perhaps a slipping away. Did you document this lifestyle because it will soon not exist?

JB When I started this project at the beginning



of May 2001, I didn't know where it would take me. I began with the interiors that fascinated me. People might imagine Poland as grey, but if you truly look at it, you can see that Poland is full of colour, and that the Polish people very much integrate colour in their living environment. After a while I realised that I was deeply involved within this community and didn't want to exclude the people. Therefore I decided to include portraits in the project.

With the time spent there, I could see and feel that changes were present and would slowly continue. Certain interiors that I photographed at the beginning are now fully renovated. The older people hang on to the past, but the younger generation want to move forward and change.

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 time itself are issues that occupy me and play a more and more significant role in my work. It is true that I am fascinated with this experience of vanishing and slipping away.

MD There is also a nostalgic feeling of loneliness and loss and a sense of foreshadowing in these photographs, international influences and consumerism leaking in around the edges exemplified by a lone plastic bottle floating in a lake, a satellite dish, a child in an America sweatshirt, or a bedroom plastered with posters of pop stars and actors. What do you feel is the future for this community?

JB I believe with time, in many years, this region will also change and try to adapt to the modernisations. It is actually already changing now little by little. It is in human nature to embrace change even though that very change brings uncertainty. You can sense from the younger generation that there is an underlying desire to escape and explore other parts of the world. Some are 'revolting' against the typical and traditional pattern: Young women have children of their own from an early age, and then are settled in a household routine, raising kids. They would like to be able to study, and work in different careers, but their



financial backgrounds don't always allow that kind of opportunity. The unemployment rate is high.

MD Framing and the vertical format of many of the photos dictate limited vision causing a layering effect in form as well as content — how significant is this to the work and how important is what's hidden outside the frame?

JB I was attracted to extracting certain corners from these interiors, instead of seeing the entire room. This constricted perspective allows more intimacy. Sometimes you don't have to show everything — a detail can be much more revealing and significant to be able to understand the whole story. It also allows the viewer to think, to reflect and to imagine.

MD Your work mixes fiction with reality, present and past, as well as formalism and narrative, causing tension within your images, which succinctly captures the current climate in the East. Were

you trying to describe the pressures and challenges of greater freedom and communication?

JB I don't see myself as a photojournalist. I was just following my fascination with this particular place and started taking pictures of interiors and then later of the residents of these villages. I don't precisely analyse my work and I don't feel comfortable when I have to choose one particular direction. I guess in that way I am always torn between formalism and narrative; I am attracted to contrasts and feel that it is important to be open.

MD These domestic interiors feel very feminine, laden with signs of ritual (e.g. crocheted afghans and pillow covers, flower arrangements, the paraphernalia of cooking and canning and cleaning); how do the men fit in?

JB The interiors are definitely the playground for the women. The men are working as carpenters, in construction, as farmers, or as craftsmen —





traditional professions. Occasionally the men have to travel to larger towns in order to work and they can be gone for extended periods of time. Women are very active; some work themselves on the field, manage the household, bring up the kids and create at the same time a beautiful environment. They are very much the force in these families, and try to keep the spirit together.

MD What is the significance of the refrigerators in some of the interior shots of living rooms?

JB Sometimes space is purely the reason, but what you see in most of these interiors that is commonly mistaken for a refrigerator is actually the old-fashioned ceramic wood burning stove that has been heating homes since the 19th century and is still in use today.

MD What makes this work different from documentary?

JB While I was working on this long-term project, it was important for me to have freedom within my work – meaning to be able to work in an environment where I was accepted and allowed to photograph whatever I wanted. Therefore I needed trust, and I can honestly say that without the trust and generosity of the residents this project would have not seen the light of day. Whenever I was taking pictures, the people were aware of my actions and me. They saw me setting up my tripod in all different corners of their homes, and observed me with a mixture of amusement, disbelief and wonder. I guess for many inhabitants it was unusual having somebody there who was interested in their homes and themselves.

In my opinion documentary is a form given more to capturing an event or moment. I was attracted more to the way of life, the space that these people live in. Visually, I felt that it was so strong that there was no need to actually document their day to day life; it gave me a way to be there without being intrusive. The result lets the viewer be the detective.

I went back and forth, and each time I gave them prints, which opened so many doors for me. They accepted me and their trust felt like a gift given to me by the Polish people. In that way I think it is different to documentary work. I didn't try to be invisible or to hide myself.

MD There is a feeling that you are present within these images. How much do they reflect you?

JB I guess this question is somehow connected to the previous one. And there is a truth to it: Photographs can at times reflect the person who took them. This project is very close to my heart and maybe, at times, the photographs reflected my mood or feelings of melancholy, longing, hope, etc. I have spent many summers and winters in Poland, which allowed me to grow closer to the residents of Netno and other villages. Like, my friend and mentor, Gisèle Freund once said to me: "The most important thing is to take pictures with your heart." She is right. You can feel if one photograph is truthful and

authentic, especially with portraiture. You create the picture together, and people can sense if it is superficial or if there was a deeper connection. I truly love taking portraits, and searching for that moment when a person lets go, and shows a glimpse of true emotion.

MD How much have you influenced the staging of these images?

JB In terms of the interiors I haven't staged the images at all. What you see is how it was at the time. Nothing is arranged or especially decorated for the purpose of taking pictures. I didn't want to arrange, because I felt that the photograph would lose its beauty and authenticity. For the portraits, I chose a location within their house or environment, and then decided to take their picture in that particular place; still trying to give them room and space to allow them to be themselves.

MD There appears to be a chronology to the work.

Left: *Roses on the fridge*, 2004.
Right: *Raspberry interior* 2004.
Opposite: *The Fridge*, 2001



How long did it take you to shoot this series, and what is next?

JB I have worked on *Jesus and the Cherries* for three and a half years, going back and forth. The distance between the trips allowed me to see what was necessary to complete it. I truly believe that turning this into a long-term project gave it its strength and honesty.

What is next is an intriguing question that haunts me. I have a few ideas, but nothing is set in stone. It is still vague, and I am curious myself where the next project will take me.

Jessica Backhaus will be showing at the The Photographer's Gallery Print Sales Gallery as part of a group show: *Portraits* 5th May – 15th July 2006.

Jesus and the Cherries is published by Kehrer Verlag, Art Books International is the UK distributor, £39.99. Represented by Yancey Richardson Gallery in New York.