

ART

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ANJA NIEMI
JAMES WHITE
TISHK BARZANJI

ANJA NIEMI



The Desert, from the series "Darlene & Me", 2014 © Anja Niemi / The Little Black Gallery



The Terrace, from the series "Darlene & Me", 2014 © Anja Niemi / The Little Black Gallery



She Could Have Been A Cowboy, from the series "She Could Have Been A Cowboy", 2018 © Anja Niemi / The Little Black Gallery



words: HOLLY FRASER
artwork: courtesy of ANJA NIEMI

There is an unsettling otherness in photographer Anja Niemi's work. Quiet surrealism fuses with off-kilter characters that leave you feeling ever so slightly anxious. Like snapshots of scenes from a hypnotic film, there is an unease in the narrative that keeps you guessing – an inner conflict. It's little wonder then that one of her earliest inspirations is the father of cinematic surrealism. "I grew up watching *Truitt Parks*. I was totally captivated by it," says Anja. "I love how David Lynch blended surrealism and beauty to create such memorable characters and storylines. That severed ear found in the grass in *Blue Velvet*... it's an image that just never left me."

"For me, fantasy is taking a step away from what feels most ordinary and visualising the places of your imagination," she continues. "One of my other key moments was a realisation I had when watching *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, when she sits on top of that pink bus with all the chiffon flowing behind her – I realised that I wanted that. Even if I could only take away a fraction of it, it taught me that fantasy should have no restrictions and it saved me from my fear of being too much."

"This fantasy' has carried through in Anja's work, underpinned by the realities that we face daily – whether documenting the battling personas within one character in "Darlene & Me", unlocking the door to clinical hotel rooms that mirror their lonely occupants in "The Starlet", or her latest work, "She Could Have Been A Cowboy", a study of the frustrations of a woman bound by the outdated perception of femininity, and her subsequent quest to break free. But the characters, while otherworldly and cinematic, represent something bigger – they embody aspects of ourselves, insecurities that we do not always wish to confront. "I don't naturally fit into the general gender roles and I am constantly conflicted about whether I am proud of that or ashamed of it, the latter being my weak moments," Anja says. "I try to challenge my own fears and insecurities, and I find satisfaction when I do. I am becoming more aware of the characters I create, in realising that very often women are playing female characters directed and created by men. I am in a position where I have all the power and I want to take advantage of that."

"But my faceless women are not signs of weakness. Like them like that, it makes them more relatable," she continues. "[They are] something you can project anything onto. I want my characters to be symbols rather than real people. They could be anyone. It's not about who they are but what they stand for."

To further assert her own power, Anja is the sole protagonist in each of her images – from conception to completion, the project is entirely her – and that's something that has been part of her

practice for over 20 years, born from a childhood desire to be an actress that was squashed due to her shyness and social anxiety. Photography, though, proved to be the remedy Anja was looking for. "When I discovered photography, I realised that I could tell stories without words. The camera became a tool that could turn my ideas into reality," she says. "Since I am more comfortable when I am alone, I started playing out my own characters... I have often wondered how I ended up doing what I do, but looking back to the beginning, it makes sense. I was using my body to tell stories in a setting that made me comfortable, alone."

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While working alone has long been Anja's modus operandi, at no time has she felt more isolated than when she was creating her latest series, "She Could Have Been A Cowboy," shot in the Utah desert. Anja drove solo through the American Southwest for several weeks, with nothing for company except her rental car and her thoughts. She stayed in character the entire time, hiking mountain trails, visiting saloons and even riding a horse on the same field where John Wayne filmed one of his famous cinema battles, all the while pushing herself to embody the same fearlessness that her cowboy represented. "I was so nervous leading up to this trip, the thought of driving alone for weeks in the vast foreign scenery really scared me," Anja says.

"Being there slowly started to overcome that and was faced with something even more challenging: people. Some of these images are shot in national parks, and there was nowhere to hide. I knew that

If I wanted to get my images I had to do it in front of everyone, which I did. I learned a big lesson, people do not care what I am up to, and if they commented it was only to compliment my vintage cowboy gear. "Take your shirt" one person shouted out completely ignoring that I was in a huge blond confitted wig. It threw me off at first but then I gave in. I was, after all, playing a character who longed for the courage to be what she really wanted. The series shifts between reality and fantasy – a combination of what she is and what she wants to be. In the end the story is not really about being a cowboy. It's about wanting to be another."

Yearning for a life other than one's own is an affliction that we all suffer from at times, an escape from that banal nine-to-five existence, but for her the work is the escape. "For me, this has become one of the things that balance out the mundane. Some people like to hike up mountains to feel exhilarated. I like to dress up in big wigs and flamboyant costumes," she says, laughing. "My wardrobe is pretty minimal and neutral in real life, a big contrast to my costume shed. I don't make a spectacle in reality, social nerves and all, but in my work I am not afraid of that. Growing up, there were very few eccentric characters around me and I always longed for it. I think my fictional characters fill that gap."

Anja's character's provide her with more than just a livelihood and creative outlet though, they are also her meditation on identity and through them she can begin to uncover more about her true self, something that she admits has taken a long time to figure out. "For every identity I give them I take a little away, and it is turning me into something more confident," she says. "My cowboy, for instance gave me courage. I keep looking back, thinking if I can drive alone through the American Southwest I can most likely also do whatever else I might be scared of. I have done a lot of things this year that I normally would not have done, thanks to my fictional cowboy." Harnessing your potential in order to feel invincible? Perhaps that's the biggest fantasy of them all. ■

Anja Niemi is represented by *The Little Black Gallery*.
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