

Anja Niemi: In Character

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Thames & Hudson, 2017

Wearing suede boots, a pastel fringed jacket and a synthetic wig, Norwegian photographer Anja Niemi straddles a spotted pony against a backdrop of Monument Valley. The image is taken from the series, *She Could Have Been A Cowboy*, in which she narrates the story of a woman's yearning to be something she is not. A new monograph by Thames & Hudson is the first retrospective of Niemi's work, charting her fascination with photographing herself dressed up as characters disconnected from their own realities. Focussing on the six key series that have defined her career to date, the publication contextualises Niemi's work with a detailed interview and supporting essay by Max Houghton.

When viewed in sequence, Niemi's photographs could be mistaken for movie stills, melancholic mise-en-scenes evocative of anticipatory cinematic pauses. In the beguiling *Do Not Disturb* series, she drapes herself alluringly across the furniture of hotel rooms; the colour palette and bizarre compositions borrow from an otherworldly Lynchian surrealism. Meanwhile, in *Starlets* and *Darlene & Me*, mannequin-like pairs of receptionists, showgirls, roller girls and socialites express the conflicted self, their hyper-femininity reminiscent of Hitchcock or Bergman. Houghton's critical analysis astutely relates the prickly unfamiliarity innate in Niemi's work back to Freud's writing on the uncanny and the superego.

In interview, Niemi explains her resistance to the description of self-portraiture. Whilst her presence is integral to each photograph, she adopts shifting guises to ask questions about identity, womanhood and humanity far removed from her own subjectivity. Layered in props and costumes salvaged from second-hand shops, Niemi uses her own body to construct an ethereal shell of each persona, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, character and storyteller, photographer and subject.

Text by Verity Seward

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