

## Annelies Štrba – «My Otherness Colourfully Unfolds» 25.02.– 13.08.2023

Annelies Štrba (b. 1947) is a keen observer, but also a magician: She intuitively captures fleeting moments, then transforms them into images that come across as symbolic. Today, she is one of Switzerland's most internationally renowned artists working with photography. Her first solo exhibition though, in 1990 at Kunsthalle Zurich, was provocative. An unknown at the time, she appeared in public with her intimate family scenes, defying all expectations and breaking away from the rules of perfect photographic reproduction. Shortly afterwards, Annelies Štrba's works were exhibited in Berlin, London and New York. She has continued to amaze ever since. Always open to new stylistic devices, techniques and modes of presentation, she translates her view of the world into unconventional poetry.

In this exhibition at Fotostiftung Schweiz, her early work comes to the fore: Black-and-white photo canvases, colour photographs and (in a reconceived digital interpretation from 2020) the slide show *Shades of Time* present images from the 1970s through to 1997. They show Štrba's children Sonja, Samuel and Linda growing up. There are also indications of an initial shift in the visual language here, towards more movement and a playful handling of motifs, in which the daughters participate as young women. These almost traditional works are framed by the video stills created later. By means of manipulation carried out on the monitor, colours are remixed and stills dissolve into shimmering structures.

Annelies Štrba's grandchildren then brought her back to photography. With a mobile phone camera and digital photography, she accompanied her heroines and heroes through everyday life, opening up a new colourful cosmos, which she encapsulated under the title *Noonday* in 2015. From that group of works, Štrba has also composed a projection, specifically for this exhibition in Winterthur. The *Shades of Time* and *Noonday* projections run alternately in the exhibition, one after the other, uniting their eras in a never-ending flow of images. Finally, princesses sleeping in fairy-tale landscapes (usually granddaughter Shereen is the performer) whisk the observer away to the land of dreams: The artist had begun to work on the picture surfaces with brush and paint. Štrba made reference to art history and her own images, reproducing, defamiliarising and creating objects, into which the marks of time are, in turn, inscribed.

In 2015 and 2021, Fotostiftung Schweiz was able to purchase a group of Annelies Štrba's canvases, with support from the society Friends of Fotostiftung Schweiz, among others. These works were supplemented by generous donations from the artist. Representing various phases of her early work, they are now being exhibited together for the first time – and confronted with later works.

### Biography

Annelies Štrba was born in 1947 in Zug. After training as a photographer and completing her first professional assignments, she married Bernhard Schobinger in 1969, whom she accompanied and assisted in his work as a goldsmith and artist. Štrba came into contact with the art scene in her husband's gallery for contemporary art, which he opened in Richterswil. Mostly though, she took care of their three children: Sonja, Samuel and Linda. With the little ones in tow, she sold selected clothes and shoes for the punk and new wave scene at the Bürkliplatz flea market in

Zurich to support their modest household. Meanwhile, without any ambition at first, she documented family life with her camera, developing her prints at night in the attic and storing them in boxes. It was in Bernhard Schobinger's 1987 publication *Devon-Karbon-Perm* that Štrba's photographs first attracted attention. Her presentation of Schobinger's jewellery in pictures that look raw and unmediated, and reproductions of handmade prints with scratches and streaks, bear witness to a confident photographic language, vehemently rejecting any smoothness, perfection or conformity. However, it was not until 1990, at the age of 43, that Štrba first appeared as an artist in her own right. Bernhard Mendes Bürgi, who was Kunsthalle Zurich's curator at the time, offered her an exhibition.

### Triptych

The first room of the exhibition introduces Annelies Štrba's various spheres by means of a brightly coloured triptych – a group of three, albeit constituting *one* female figure. By extracting two stills from a video work and mirroring one of them, the artist has created a 'community' and arranged it as a psychedelic altarpiece: Shown frontally and immersed in golden brown, the internally calm queen is bowed to by her brightly dressed servants on the left and right – one in blue, the other in magenta, with glowing contours. Due to the coarse resolution of the video images, the surface and figure disintegrate into pixel-like patches of colour, bringing to mind the structure of paintings. The pictures' saturated defamiliarised colouring makes reference to expressionist works.

### Canvases

For her first exhibition, at Kunsthalle Zurich in 1990, Annelies Štrba enlarged her photographs on canvases in formats of up to 100 by 150 centimetres. From the very start, she emphasised the difference between a mother's snapshots hoarded in a photo album and these visual works that were now revealed to the public. The formats and the rough unprotected surface of the canvases gave the photographs the presence of paintings. At the same time, they came across like washed-out yellowed pictures from a bygone era. Štrba abstracted and thereby intensified the peculiar mood of the everyday scenes. She superimposed a heaviness, a seriousness, on the photographs of the children playing, sleeping or sitting together in the kitchen, which turned them into symbolic images of the human condition: loneliness in togetherness, eeriness in the familiar, the depths of the family.

### Kitchen pictures

The kitchen was the heart of the Richterswil house in which Annelies Štrba and Bernhard Schobinger raised their three children Sonja, Samuel and Linda together. Here, they did not merely cook and eat, but also received visitors, discussed and pondered. In this room, which looks cramped and humble, cosiness and chaos merge. Years pass, and suddenly adult daughters are sitting at the same table. The video *Max*, Annelies Štrba's first video piece, marks a turning point in her oeuvre and shows a bizarre kitchen spectacle. Although all movements are in slow motion, the activeness of Sonja and Linda setting and clearing the table contrasts with the rather passive attitude that they exhibit in many photographs. In flowing dresses, they make preparations, but these do not lead to anything and instead seem to represent an inherently strange ritualistic process. Annelies Štrba produced this video when a filmed portrait of the artist was required for a 1997 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and she did not want to leave the making of it to anyone else. Enthused by the possibilities for manipulation offered by the technology, which was new to her, she put the still camera aside and concentrated on video works, in addition to video stills produced as stand-alone images.

### Shades of Time projection

Also in 1997, Lars Müller Publishers released an extensive monograph that encompassed

Annelies Štrba's photographic oeuvre. Its title, *Shades of Time*, was provided by a sign on a shop front, photographed from a moving car during a trip to England. Years and impressions pass by in an associative and only roughly chronological sequence. The shots of sleeping and playing children are replaced by house fronts and landscapes. The heaviness of the early domestic scenes dissolves into increasing movement and colourfulness. This shift in photographic language can also be interpreted autobiographically. In 2001, Annelies Štrba conceived a slide show in which the images were projected in groups of three, with a techno audio accompaniment by Peter Ford. The duplication and mirroring of some individual motifs give rise to arrangements that sometimes appear ornamental or even sacral. The digital version of this projection was made in 2020, in collaboration with videocompany in Zofingen.

### **Noonday projection**

While growing up, Annelies Štrba's grandchildren presented her with a new world of images: a chaotic clarity, a banal colourfulness, in which there is also room for laughter and group photos. Annelies Štrba cleverly combined the children's joy in dressing up and acting with spontaneous photo shoots. Mostly though, she reacted impartially to life as it happened, proudly taking part in the daily routine and marvelling at it. Štrba herself remains invisible, but her backdrop, her colourfully designed nest, as if made for her little protagonists, frames the action. In 2015, the book *Noonday*, comprising over three hundred pages, was released by Lars Müller Publishers. In 2023, the artist has collaborated with videocompany to compose a *Noonday* projection, adding new motion to the captured moments, with the accompaniment of a soundtrack by her son Samuel Schobinger.

### **Buildings**

Already in her first exhibitions, Annelies Štrba placed architectural photographs between the pictures of her children. The bleak facades of residential blocks and high-rise buildings that she photographed on her travels through Silesia contrast with the depictions of cosiness at home. Often, the photographer seems to just glance at these buildings in passing. People also live in most of them, including families. On the other hand, the ruins of *Einstürzende Neubauten* (collapsing new buildings) captured in the Polish city of Sosnowiec recall Soviet planning and memorialise the Berlin band of the same name, founded in 1980. Štrba's interest in experimental and electronic music is also incorporated into her video works and projections.

### **Fairy-tale pictures**

The motif of sleeping children connects the *Shades of Time* and *Noonday* groups of works with *NYIMA* and *Momoka*. For the latter, Annelies Štrba edited digital photographs, some of which were taken in the context of *Noonday*, but also took new photographs: staged scenes, mostly featuring her granddaughter Shereen. All of them show resting girls – in forests, in meadows or on sofas, seemingly immersed in deep sleep. In their princess dresses, they appear to be from another time. Defamiliarisation of colours and superimposition of multiple exposures transform the photographs into visualisations of these dainty figures' dreams. Aesthetically and compositionally, they resemble the famous painting by the Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais, which depicts the drowned Ophelia lying in a stream, surrounded by plants, flowers and her magnificent gown. The romantic beauty of Štrba's pictures can also evoke associations with the relationship between sleep and death.

### **Sleeping children**

The exhibition's final room completes the circle and leads back to the beginnings of Annelies Štrba's photographic oeuvre. While the kitchen has already been examined as an important motif, we now look into the bedroom or children's room. The artist remembers how, after long evenings in the darkroom, she used to find her children asleep. She would often feel an urge to

photograph them like this, cosy in their nests, or surrounded by evidence of play. However, the bed is also a platform on which the state of being awake can be presented: Time and time again, the artist produced portraits of her children sitting on beds.

### **Publication**

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### **Mediation**

Information on talks, guided tours and workshops can be found on the website:  
[fotostiftung.ch/en/guided-tours-workshops/guided-tours-and-workshops](https://fotostiftung.ch/en/guided-tours-workshops/guided-tours-and-workshops)