

A DISCUSSION WITH MONA KUHN

Mona Kuhn is a photographer best known for taking perfectly composed photographs of beautiful people, with beautiful light. Her most recent body of work, *Native*, sheds some of those constraints in order to better explore where she comes from. Although the work does not represent a drastic shift, it does demonstrate a move toward the more thought-provoking. The overall tone of the images is moodier and less optimistic and her previous work on a commune in France. This change seems to come naturally from a change in scenery, from hot, bright beaches to lush, dense jungle. The superficial change of scenery indicates a deeper move: from lighter themes of youthful romance to deeper ones of time and home. We asked Mona to speak a bit about these changes and what they mean for her work.

COUSIN CORINNE

Your most recent images have a darker feel than your earlier work. What changed?

MONA KUHN

I'd say that both works are equally about myself, but in different ways. I continue to go to France and that work is a big part of who I am and have been for the past 15 years. *Native* is about my first 20 years. It is about returning to my homeland with an emotional desire to understand the place where I was born and raised and left at age 20, It was more like the reoccurrence of something you once knew but had forgotten. I was surprised by how connected I still am, emotionally, to everything there: the smells, the taste, and the feel of my own body in such a familiar environment.

COUSIN CORINNE

Can you talk a little about the ideas of time and multiplicity that run through your work?

MONA KUHN

The still lives throughout this series are motionless – still, tranquil and static. In my way of seeing things, stillness can be a condition of the moment, like “Musical Chairs”, or of forever as existing in still, like “Remains”. I was visually playing with notions of overlapping past and present. We see the past only with eyes in the present. So, the past cannot be relived, but can be converted into meaning for the present. So overall, every element in this series of still images, has another life in memory. Like the dual life of a butterfly – does it remember having been a caterpillar? In “Doppelganger”, I was addressing those thoughts within the human condition, trapped into a representation of yet another representation, shadows and reflections. Behind that figure, time’s past fades into memories.

COUSIN CORINNE

People seem to be disappearing in your newer work (Native). Does this represent a shift in your work?

MONA KUHN

The new series gave me a chance to explore further new curiosities and open up my interests. People remain my main subject matter, but I am also interested in the surroundings and in what makes us who we are.

COUSIN CORINNE

In an interview on your gallery’s website you talk about trying to photograph «the human in people». Can you photograph «the human» in objects?

MONA KUHN

I think you can photograph a certain sliver of human presence in its absence. The images taken in the empty rooms, the marks left on the walls, disappearing shadows, etc are my attempts to represent visually my emotions of a past. It is there, you remember it, as if the person just left, but it remains unapproachable. It is impossible to go back.

COUSIN CORINNE

Do you feel less of a need to photograph people as your work evolves?

MONA KUHN

No, it is in my nature to be drawn to people, I wouldn't know any other way. The rainforest is a fascinating place, as a reflection of nature and human nature. It is filled with symbols and metaphors. The same goes for the images taken inside rooms. In a way, it plays with notions of public and private space, nature and human nature, memories of a past and its imperfect reminders in our present.

COUSIN CORINNE

Do you think it is possible for you to move beyond (photographing) people you know intimately? Would you want to?

MONA KUHN

Yes it is possible, I do so often in commercial assignments and commissions. But I didn't want it for this personal project. I wanted to photograph contemporary people that are part of my generation in Brazil, the people I might have been with if I were still living there today.

MONA KUHN was born in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1969, of German descent. She earned her degree in the United States from Ohio State University. Since 1998, she has been an independent studies scholar at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. Her work has been exhibited, and is included in public and private collections, internationally and in the United States. Kuhn's first monograph, Photographs, was debut by Steidl in 2004; immediately followed by Evidence, published by Steidl and released in Spring 2007. Her latest book is Native, published by Steidl. She has lectured about her work at the Cincinnati Art Museum, North Carolina Museum of Art, Georgia Museum of Art, and the International Center of Photography in New York City. Mona lives and works in Los Angeles. Visit monakuhn.com

