

Q&A with Anja Niemi by Max Houghton about her new series 'She Could Have Been A Cowboy'

It's hard to distinguish between America's historical cowboy culture and its representation in cowboy films, or Westerns. Your work is so filmic, it's as though you are slipping between myth and memory – does this idea resonate with you?

My character's cowboy life is all an illusion, made up of images from her favourite western movies and pictures of cowboys. The series shifts between her reality and imagination; a combination of what she is and what she wants to be.

Your sister has written an accompanying poem – is the work an image / text collaboration or are the two modes created separately?

Even though my work is visual and my sister has all the words, we often find ourselves burning for the same thing. We talk about our ideas all the time, and for this project we realized we had been working separately on the same subject. From then on our projects started merging and we decided to join the text and images in a book at the end.

Do you share her references – Deleuze, Minnelli etc?

Some of them, yes, but I am more Claude Cahun and RuPaul than Deleuze and Nietzsche!

Did your family watch Westerns when you were a child/Have they ever been part of your cultural backdrop? And if so, did the role of the woman – as siren or barmaid only – bother you? Did you want to be a cowboy? What does the idea of the Cowboy bring into your mind?

Maybe I was playing out my own fantasy a little with my cowboy. I certainly have never enjoyed dressing up a character more than this one! Still, the story is not really about being a cowboy. It's about wanting to be another. I was looking for a symbol, something that could stand for a

vast number of things. A lot of us have something we wish we could do or be but for some reason we can't. Like when a small girl wants to play the King in the school play and someone gets in her way. Does that bother me? YES it makes me furious!

'The Girl of Constant Sorrow' is a lovely title – I am guessing you are referencing the Joan Baez song, which was kind of an answer to her lover Bob Dylan's 'Man of Constant Sorrow' – as well as being a much earlier folk song. I can't help think that if a man is full of sorrow, he'd be considered 'deep', but a woman would likely be considered mad. What are your thoughts?

That is the reference, yes! I think the title is very descriptive of my character's state, and so fitting as it is an old western song. Everyday my character is trapped in the same pink dress, when what she really wants is to be a cowboy, dressed in fringe and leather, riding horses in the Wild West. She longs for a life she knows she will never have.

The sets you choose are always absolutely extraordinary – this interior may top the list. Do you want to reveal its location, or former use?

The interiors for this series are a variety of locations; one is film set and one a private apartment. It's a lot like shooting a movie, one scene at a time to form the visual you are after.

You are known for fulfilling every role in the image – is it the same with this work? If so, how ever did you manage the horse and the camera?!

I did work on this series the same way I always do, except for the image with the horse. I needed some real cowboy help for that! Riding that polka dot horse on the field where John Wayne filmed one of his movies, I felt as close to my character's dream as it was possible to get.

As with Darlene and Me, you make much use of the idea of the double, a concept beloved of Freud in his writing on the uncanny, and by filmmakers like Lynch. With this work, it is almost a quadrupling because

the woman is already another – a cowboy – and then sometimes appears twice anyway. What does the double mean to you?

In this case the double first appears as my physical character, and as her imaginary self, the Cowboy. Then the double appears again as two cowboys, this scene is all fantasy. She is playing out a cowboy duel in her mind with herself in both roles.

The idea of the road-trip is another traditionally male territory – are you reclaiming it?

I have to admit that coming up to this trip I was nervous, the thought of driving alone for weeks through Utah really scared me. Being from Norway, this was very foreign territory for me. Also I had no idea how I was going to pull off being dressed as a cowboy in public. In real life I am not one who likes to draw attention to myself. Standing there alone at the national parks in full cowboy costume, I thought, ‘This is for you cowboy’, ... or for whomever is out there, wishing they could walk out the door in whatever they desire! I have never been brave. I have so many fears, people, heights, horses, open spaces, crowded spaces, even driving makes me nervous. Did I reclaim it? Maybe a little for myself. It definitely felt good.

Why does America, and its vast deserts, keep calling you?

It’s so cinematic, and filled with drama. All of my characters are pretty lonely, and these vast landscapes are the perfect backdrop for their stories. For this series I wanted classic western movie locations, since they are the references for my characters dreams. Walking through those red and pink canyons in Utah felt like being on a film set, so unreal... which is exactly what my work is to me, fiction, fantasy and a break from everything ordinary.

What camera do you use, and is your equipment important to you?

I shot this series with the small-bodied Hasselblad X1D. I need my equipment to be light since I work alone and do a lot of traveling, but I want large beautiful files, so this camera was the perfect fit for me and I am delighted with the results.

Death never seems far away in your work. Does the graveyard really exist? Did you put the flowers there (I almost don't want you to answer this question)? Do you stage these elaborate images to keep death at bay? It's as though your narrative desire can only lead to the end (as per Freud's death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) ...

I do tend to work in places that already exist, but they are rarely coincidences. My intent with the graveyard was to remind my cowboy to leap before it is too late. As clichéd as it might be, we do only live once.

Max Houghton is a lecturer, writer and curator of photography.

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