

Esther Teichmann,
'Mythologies',

by Skye Sherwin for
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Mother, father, husband: these are some of the subjects the young German-American artist Esther Teichmann fixes her camera upon. Her portraits from the acclaimed series *Silently Mirrored* captured her close family members within the private universe of home: bathing, or more often, sleeping – activities closed off to those outside. At once unsettlingly personal and coolly objective, she monumentalises frail flesh, with bodies seen through the camera's unflinching gaze in extreme closeup, to a point that they lose individuality, and take on the contours of a corporeal landscape. Mr and Mrs Teichmann solidify into archetypes.

Often turning to her childhood stomping ground in the Rhine Valley for inspiration and backdrop, what is drenched in memory undergoes a similar process when used in Teichmann's photos: the personal rubs up against a world of mythic symbols.

An early series depicting nightswimmers captures local bathers half submerged in the midnight blue waters of a lake, about to be engulfed by darkness – a narrative of death, birth or the complexities of the subconscious buried under the water's still surface – while in *Mythologies* (2008), the most recent Teichmann series, the artist's parents are now shown adrift in a dingy within the swamp near their home. Using hand tinting, nature is transformed by a psychedelic palette, fizzing with a supernatural glow. With the father lying, eyes shut, in the mother's lap, they seem poised for a journey into the underworld, or the next life.

Here Teichmann discusses eroticism, the relationship between fashion and art, photography and death.

Skye Sherwin: I've noticed there are a lot of references to religious imagery in your work, Esther. For example, hands are photographed like icons, or relics even.

Esther Teichmann: I think a lot of the references I look at are outside the medium of photography: painting and sculpture are what I've been drawn to. Even though I don't come from a religious family in

that sense – my family is Quaker, so it's religion without images – but the area in Germany that I come from near the Black Forest has a history of both Protestant and Catholic iconography. It's something I've constantly been surrounded by and fascinated with.

Skye Sherwin: You've mentioned your family almost immediately. What was the starting point for the photographs of your mother and your husband that you showed in your series *Silently Mirrored*?

Esther Teichmann: It evolved organically. In previous bodies of work, I'd used a mix of people I knew, sometimes street-casting subjects. I felt that the images of my mother and the people I was close to, my family and my husband, were the ones that were most successful. I think because I knew them visually in a way that I didn't know the other people I worked with, and I didn't have any time pressure when photographing them: it was also much more of a collaboration.

Skye Sherwin: I've noticed these images keep turning up in international newspapers and magazines in a bewildering variety of settings. What is striking in the images is your presentation of the body as a landscape: the surface of the skin, the contours of the body.

Esther Teichmann: It's about looking at the body of the lover, whether that be the partner or the mother, as a body that we know best and yet are in fear of losing constantly. The idea I've had in my mind over and over is that when you're sleeping next to someone, they're too close to be seen as a whole. You see them in fragments. In this sense as a child you know your mother in the way that as an adult you know your lover. You have to pull back, as with the camera, to see them as a whole, and when you're close you see the details.

Skye Sherwin: It sounds very Freudian. Is that something you were consciously thinking about?

Esther Teichmann: Reading and writing have always been a large part of my work, and I've been interested

in those ideas. I'm now doing a Ph.D and what I'm writing about is very much that relationship between loss and the drive to make work, and looking at the origins of fantasy and desire. It's a mix of philosophy and psychoanalysis and art history.

Skye Sherwin: Are there particular painters you've looked to?

Esther Teichmann: Not literally in a one-to-one way; that's rarely how I work. But during the beginnings of this series, I saw a lot of work by Caravaggio and Renaissance art when I was visiting my sister who was studying in Naples. When I was growing up I saw work like Grunewald's Isenheim altar and Otto Dix's paintings. I think it was always the kind of work I was drawn to, even in terms of referencing artists like Egon Schiele or Gustav Klimt.