

An Impossible Place

by Richard West for
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Water appears in a lot of my pictures. It stands for a desire to return to something, a uterine, primordial fantasy of return, but also a desire to be outside of yourself. One of my early bodies of work was of figures isolated in the water, which was an early memory, of swimming in a lake next to our house at night, the water becoming this thick viscous liquid, heavy with the heat from the previous summer day. It has a sensuality that is both frightening and exhilarating; the sense of being outside on your own and diving into complete darkness. Water as a containing and holding thing, like a boat floating, but also covering and cloaking. Water as a place of escape, almost of your own physicality. That's something I've returned to a lot, that it's a way to escape your body and its separateness from everything else.

The people in the pictures are not returning the gaze of the camera. It's not about their confrontation with me, the photographer. It's about them becoming the individuals who are imagining this fantasy landscape. I have always worked with people but I don't really see my work as portraiture. It sounds contradictory but it's not about that person as an individual although it is about my relationship with them, about the fascination and desire these bodies evoke as a mother or lover. They are turned away, as though withdrawn inside themselves in a state of imagining or dreaming. This withdrawal also always refers back to a sense of loss and grief, which is implicit in all the work. The loss and grief is a lot to do with my relationship to picture making: that it is in place of something missing, that it is trying to fill something when that is impossible. Maybe it is an anxiety about not being able to hold on to people and being in constant fear of losing them. By making something physical I create a world I can both momentarily control and escape into.

It is becoming more important that the people I work with understand what I'm doing, so there is no need to verbalise what the image is about. They is an unspoken understanding of what I'm drawing upon because they know me so well, and the physicality of this relationship is crucial in my work. Some of the images are in Florida, some are in Germany – in the Rhine Valley, near the

Black Forest, which is where I'm from – and some are from London in my studio inside my home. In the moment of photographing, the swamp of dead trees in Germany and the jungle and rivers in different parts of Florida, you feel like you are in the wilds, but in reality if you walk for 5 minutes you're back in built up areas. In fact, when I was taking the picture of my parents I could actually hear a big road a few hundred meters away. But when I'm looking through the camera all that falls away. It's similar to the way I build small sets inside my studio. It may only take up a few meters but in that moment with the backdrops, and the studio lights, and the plants and props, looking through the camera, it feels like you can't imagine anything else around it. That's is the world.

I have begun painting into some of the pictures. It was a way of working outside but having control and maintaining the element of fantasy, in the way I do when I work in the studio. I suppose by painting into them, they almost become like painted theater backdrops, which I have worked with in some images. I want to take it away from it being about a specific place. Perhaps it is about it being an impossible place.