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Notes and thoughts on the photography that I am looking at...

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Bordeaux Series: the contemporary nudes of Brazilian artist Mona Kuhn



Each year, Brazilian born photographer Mona Kuhn travels from her home in Los Angeles to a small summer house in La Lande — a village nestling amongst the pine forests of the beautiful French countryside outside of Bordeaux — where she will spend several months entertaining her family and friends. With no electricity, and only a collection of oil lamps to light the warm summer evenings, the house is lacking in almost everything material, harking back to a period in time when life was simpler and lived at a slower pace. But Kuhn says, '...it is abundant in spirit and shows marks of moments well lived. There is something intoxicating about being in a place where

everything is stripped down to simple life.'

Noted for her distinct visual language with its basis firmly routed in classical figurative art, Kuhn is one of the most significant and distinct voices in contemporary photography. Following her series *France* (2002-2008); *Venezia* (2010); and her earlier black-and-white work produced between 1996 and 2002; her latest body of work, *Bordeaux Series* (Steidl, 2011), focuses on those who visit her at her summer house each year. With each portrait in the series being made in the same sparsely furnished room — where a rich red-and-black drape forms a backdrop to each of Kuhn's photographs, and the only other prop comes in the form of a wooden chair with an upholstered red seat — one could consider this a sequel to her earlier series, *Brazil* (2009), a body of work produced in her native homeland. However the two series differ, in that Kuhn adopts a more formal approach to her portraits in the *Bordeaux Series*.

The simple titles of each portrait reveal little about the identity of the sitter or their relationship to the artist, other than to represent the sequence in which each image was made. In, *Portrait 9*, a young woman sits on a chair, her folded left leg is brought in tight to her chest, her foot resting on the seat of the chair, whilst her head is turned to the side, with her gaze firmly fixed beyond the confines of Kuhn's square composition. The same woman is depicted in, *Portrait 42*, this time she is standing, one hand rests on the chair back, whilst her other hand is placed firmly on her hip, in this image she does not look out of the frame, but instead downwards, as if lost in deep contemplation. In both these portraits, the alabaster qualities of the composition, feel

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almost sculptural, bringing to mind the classical forms of ancient Greek or Roman sculpture.

Influenced by Mario Cravo Neto (1947-2009) and Miguel Rio Branco, two Brazilian photographers who took on the nude with an intimacy and frankness lacking in any puritanical overtones; and frequently compared with the American photographer Jock Sturges, Elisabetta Piatti writes, 'What distinguishes her [Kuhn's] photographs is the skilful mix of beauty, elegance and naturalness, the effect of the confluence of her own personal inclination, cultural bias and artistic vocation.'

In another of these portraits images, we encounter a young woman seated as she toys with her index finger in, *Portrait 7*, her head turns gently to one side, her emerald green eyes making direct contact with the photographers lens, placing the viewer directly between the sitter and artist, and allowing us to experience the physical intensity of the bond that exists between the two.



'As I step into this house, I enter a parallel reality that unravels and exists only for a few months of the year,' writes Kuhn, 'We cook and gather around the table. We speak plainly together of ourselves, and it feels as though these moments we have shared over the years are strung together into a braid of tales.'

In this tiny room that forms her summer studio — where natural light floods in through the double doors which lead to the garden, illuminating those within and heightening the texture of the bare wooden floors — Kuhn says she is like a small town photographer before a simple stage. In these intimate portraits, she does not direct her subjects, preferring to allow them to find their 'own positions

and body language, allowing the method of expression to seek its own path,' within the physical space.

Whilst many of the portraits in *Bordeaux Series* depict individuals, there are also those which focus on couples or pairings. One such couple, recline on the fabric drape, in *Portrait 16*, the man lies on his back with his eyes closed as if lost in time and place, whilst his partner rests her head on his stomach, making direct eye contact with the photographers lens, her piercing blue eyes punctuating the warm hues of the photographic image. Marking the generation span of those that pass through Kuhn's home each year; a heavily pregnant mother stands in profile

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with her head turned to connect with the viewer in, *Portrait 25*, at her feet sits her young child, maybe her first born; in *Portrait 41*, we see another mother, her arms lovingly embracing her daughter. Whilst in contrast, we encounter the opposite end of the generational spectrum in, *Portrait 24*, here an elegant woman stands facing the camera, her fragile and translucent skin marking the passing of time, her head turns knowingly to the side — as if she has just spotted one of her grandchildren — her smile radiating warmth and happiness.

Kuhn continues the sensual exploration of the contemporary nude — for she is synonymous — in the *Bordeaux Series*, but this elegant body of work is also about recording her family, friends, and friends of friends, all of whom have passed through her small home in La Lande, and with whom she has a close emotional bond. These photographs are for Kuhn like bread crumbs, which she scatters ‘on the path to help memorise a way back to this place and these emotions,’ which she enjoys each summer.

The Bordeaux Series is at Flowers (Cork Street) until 29 October 2011. A monograph of the same title is published by Steidl.