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FRANK RODICK

Text by Clayton Maxwell

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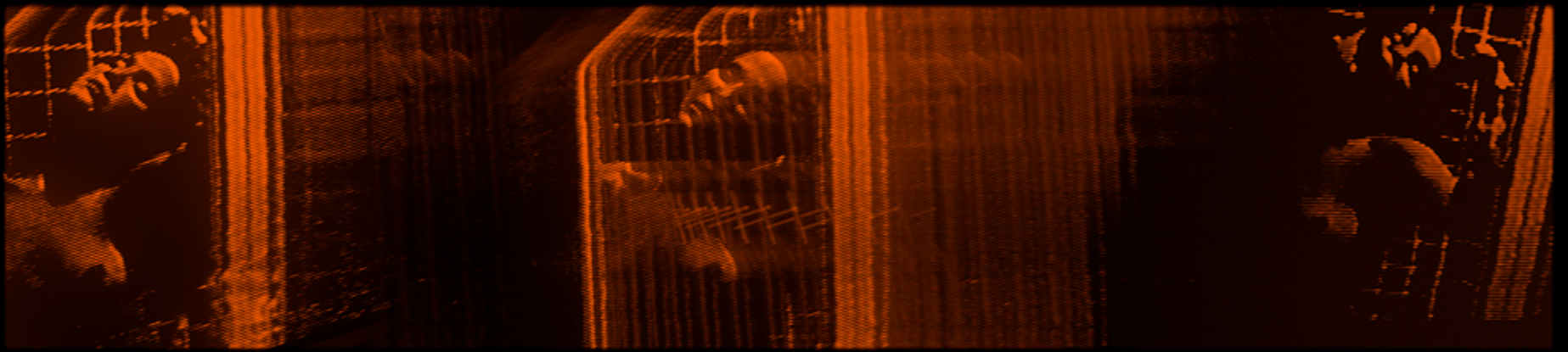
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Frank Rodick



© Frank Rodick - Solitary Mind, 2007 - From the Series Faithless Grottoes

You are asleep and dreaming and the depth and realness of the emotion and sensation in your subconscious world is complete and overwhelming. Then you wake up and try to describe or write or draw what happened in the dream, and you are left with vapour, nothing that can be translated into any medium we may have in this waking world. You have nothing to hold on to. Words and art fail us. But not always.

If you spend enough time with the images of Canadian photographer Frank Rodick, you may find that shifting intangible world of your dreams—or in this case nightmares—given form. Through his emotionally charged dream-like images, the unconscious is coaxed out of the shadows and we can actually take a look. But you do really have to take a look, a good look. You must engage with these images, take them in—and then, maybe, the more you look at them, the more they or what they represent lose their power over you. Monsters, like most things, aren't as scary once you get to know them.

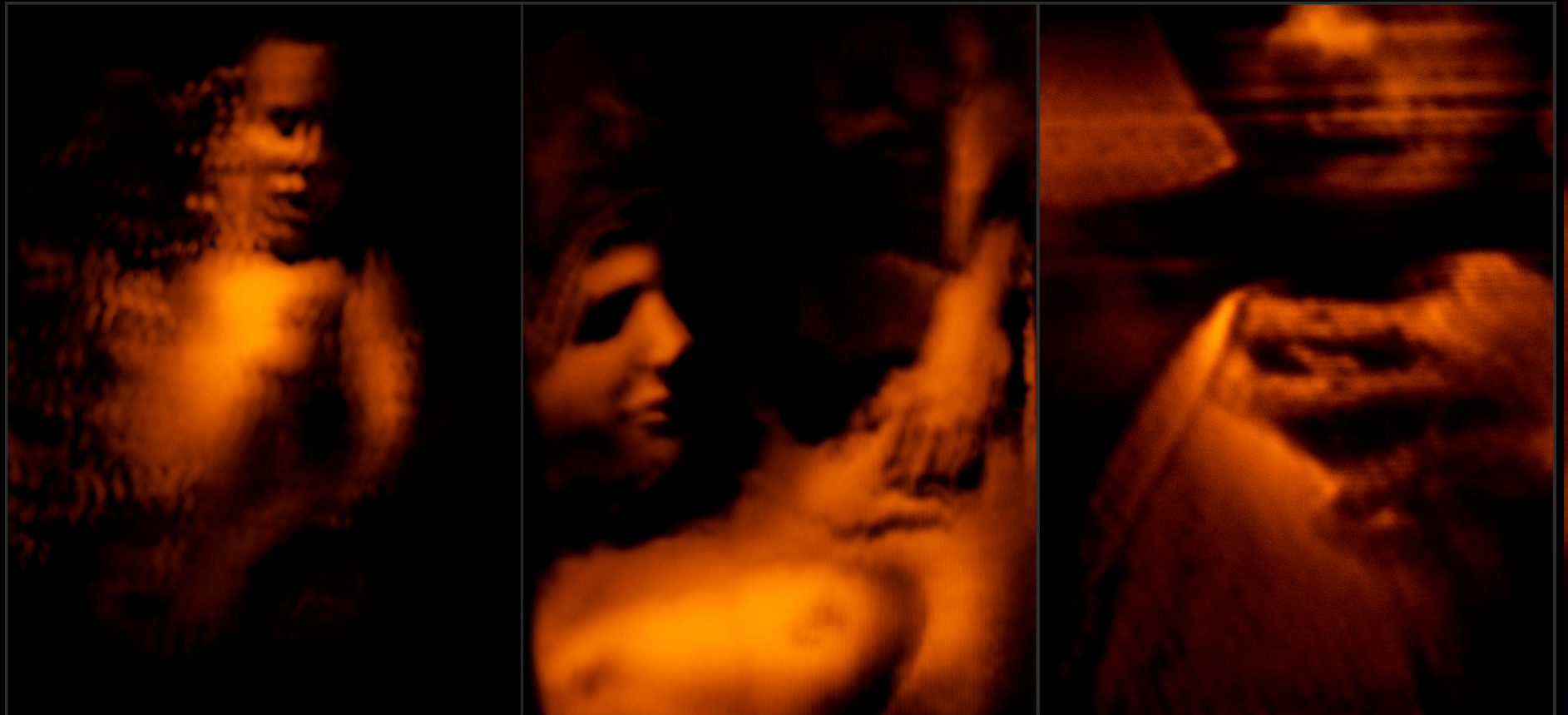
And that, amongst many things, is what Rodick's work shows—that photography can actually make the hidden come to light, the intangible tangible. His photos speak of objectless desire, gripping fears, vague uncertain sadness—things that for most of us are there, but we have buried them so well, we don't really know they are there. And then, one morning, you may look at Rodick's otherworldly photos and they trigger a crack in the barricade. Photography can do so much, and one of the best things it can do is help us know ourselves better.

The morning I first lingered with Rodick's work, there was a hurricane off the coast of Texas and thunder and rain pounded my office roof under a thick grey sky. My neighbours' grand old oak tree fell. I am not sure why, perhaps because I'd spent many hours of the night before listening for one of my two young children to wake up during the thunder, I felt a mild but real anxiety in my chest that made it hard to breathe. And there I was, alone in my office, looking through Rodick's nightmarish images of sinister visag-

es, lascivious hunger, fanged mouths, gnarled teeth. Oddly, my breathing relaxed.

Because I found honesty and humanity in his work. And because I spent so much time pouring through the images, considering and reconsidering them, I felt that there was a line of connection, albeit one-sided, to the person behind them. These nightmarish but expertly crafted photos felt real and raw to me, and in getting to know them, layers were stripped away; I forgot my solitariness and could fully entertain the truth and universality of the images. And that realness is always a relief. When an artist truly unmask himself, the viewer can be unmasked too.

So I wasn't surprised to find out that for Rodick, the making of these photos, at least most of them, is an acute personal experience that has much more to do with the guts and heart of the process, and almost nothing to do with how the work will be received. In an email he wrote, "Overall, I'd say that, for every body of work up to Revisitations, making them really



energised and excited me. I've never created something that was remotely like what I had in my head before I started working on it. In fact, what's in front of my mind's eye is mostly unformed, diaphanous, more a feeling or an atmosphere than an image. And all that gets incorporated, transformed, and worked over as I get into the process of making the work. I find this really terribly exciting albeit nerve wracking at the same time. It feels like the image is revealing itself to me, like a secret being whispered into one's ear very gradually. I don't know how to put this, but it feels like the height of reality, and that's an immense emotional turn-on for me."

His latest series, *Revisitations*, has been a more difficult experience for Rodick, however. In it, Rodick is working largely with images and objects he unearthed while sorting through his late parents' now vacant home; his parents were antique booksellers and their house overflowed with historic images, artefacts and books. In *Revisitations* (here represented by *Uncovering, No.1, Untitled, Three Studies for a*

Mouth, When I Dream, I Dream of You, and The Bathers), Rodick digitally alters the found images, and positions them with other photos, often in a triptych. These pieces are small and displayed in carefully crafted wooden boxes that one viewer alone is meant to open. Opening the box is like unwrapping your own private message—you can engage intimately with the images in a way that the open white walls of a gallery do not allow.

And it is only fitting that the *Revisitations* images should be viewed in an intimate way, because they are so difficult, so sad, you want to be alone with them. The sense of loss and death is strong, and you get the feeling that Rodick has really tasted those huge abstractions and swirled them around on his tongue more than most. (The third image in the triptych, *Three Studies For a Mouth-- Explorations in Statecraft, Love, and the Passing of Woes*, is a photo he took of his father's mouth an hour after he died, and he is still working with photos from his mother's death this past June) Because he has been close to it, death is something Rodick can translate into images

with honesty. In an email, Rodick wrote about one of his experiences:

"I remember once being with someone I esteemed a great deal who was dying in a dreadfully painful way—the whole damn awful nine yards—and it just felt like the whole world was being sucked into that hospital room, like there couldn't ever possibly be anything that would exist outside it. Now, of course, on one level, that's a preposterous thought and it didn't last. But that feeling had reality, a phenomenological reality if you will, and it has an enduring reality for me or I wouldn't be referring to it now. There's a certain point where one actually feels like one understands how an animal looks for a dry patch of earth to die on. It's hard to talk about; it cuts very deep." And that's what Rodick's photos do—they give visual language to the things that are hard to talk about otherwise, things that "cut very deep."

Take, for example, *Uncovered, No. 1*, the glowing orange triptych of a dead horse caught in barbed wire and bending over backwards. As a boy, he saw a variation of that image amid his parents' books and it

Above: © Frank Rodick - Illuminations of a living woman, 2007 - From the Series Faithless Grottoes



© Frank Rodick - Untitled, 2010 - From the Series Revisitations

imprinted on his young mind, it became a kind of defining image for his life, or a “psychic totem,” as he describes it. “It really crushed me,” Rodicks writes, “this picture: a single horse, drawn into this awful WWI carnage, an innocent dumb animal made to suffer in this most awful way.” Then, many years later, Rodick rediscovered the image in a World War One labour movement pamphlet and transformed it into *Uncovered*, No. 1.

But the piece that consumes me is *Untitled*, a triptych dominated by two images of a motherly looking woman in an early twentieth century skirt and blouse hanging by her neck from a tree—if Rodick remembers correctly, she is a Russian woman hung by Nazis. Rodick created these images from stills of WWII documentary footage; here he describes his experience and reaction to this image:

“I played around with that second panel in particular until I came up with what looked like a kind of halo

behind the woman, a warm glow that looked to me almost like the sun rising in the morning. And the more I looked at it, the more it occurred to me that there was actually an element of beauty in it. That appealed to me a lot because to me it was like the grand and obscene indifference that beauty, such as the beauty of a new day, has towards anything, including the most painful and indecent and atrocious acts. I mean, no matter what dreadful thing might happen to you or me today, the sun comes up tomorrow, which is another way of saying that the vastness of the universe really doesn’t give a damn. . . . Because the universe—with all the beauty we perceive in it—acknowledges no tragedies, it makes tragedy that much more acute.”

Like Camus’ *Stranger* opening himself to the “gentle indifference of the universe” before his execution, *Untitled* is a powerful visual message that as much as we may hope otherwise, the world is untouched by

our human losses, and the sun shines on the most barbaric of acts.

But Rodick’s art suggests that there is something powerful in our capacity, as humans, to bear witness, to pay attention to another person’s suffering. We can lessen the sting of the world’s indifference by our own willingness to witness, which is what Rodick achieves through his careful, considerate revitalisation of these images. While it would be naïve and cruel, even, to suggest that making art about another person’s suffering diminishes it—nothing can lessen the barbarity of the woman’s death—Rodick is making us think about her, her world, her last moments. Rodick reveals the horror, but he does it thoughtfully, compassionately. He writes,

“Looking at the image of the hanged woman, I kept thinking about what she might have thought and felt in those moments before she actually died...I know that in one sense it’s a very presumptuous thing to



do, but that's hardly the point—for me, it's more about trying to engage those feelings, those sensations, in myself, to give them some kind of life in the present, in my present. Anyway, I thought one possibility might be that she would think about a child, her child: the loss, the fear, the vision, I don't know, but the image, yes, that felt right to me. And then I thought, the branches—something physical, and dying is a profoundly physical act as anyone who's watched someone else die knows—the branches that she might catch a glimpse of as her head jerked back and she looked up...That's what I guess I was feeling. Not so much seeing as feeling. Those things, melding together."

In a sense, Rodick is honouring this woman and what it is to be human. Through his work, he asks the viewer to bear witness to others' suffering—that is what good photography, handled tenderly, can do. Now, in this triptych, I see all the love and intensity of

human bonds, of that between a mother and a child, and the staggering truth that we all will have to say goodbye, sometimes in horrific ways, to those we love the most. But, as Rodick explains, "to bear witness is a kind of honouring of what it is to be human, particularly when the winds are especially fierce." Photography, done well by the right person, can help us do that.

TEXT BY CLAYTON MAXWELL

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Frank Rodick photographs from the series *Liquid City*, available on EYEMAZING Editions.

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Above: © Frank Rodick – *When I Dream I Dream of You*, 2010 – From the Series *Revisitations*



© Frank Rodick – *Decrement*, 2007 – From the Series *Faithless Grottoes*

© Frank Rodick – *Uncovering*, no 1, 2010 – From the Series Revisitations



© Frank Rodick – *The Bathers*, 2010 – From the Series Revisitations



© Frank Rodick – *Three Studies for a Mouth*, 2010 – From the Series Revisitations

