

BJØRN STERRI'S SELF-PORTRAITURE

By Stephanie Dean



Self..., as Frida Kahlo. Poor Frida Kahlo



Self..., as Self. Poor Self

For this issue of *F-Stop Magazine*, the theme is "self-portraits". The genre is deceptively simple, and if you wanted to, you could make the argument that the ability to create a self-portrait is as necessary as the ability to sign one's signature on a credit card slip or legal document.

Why? The ability to take a photo of oneself is more important to a public persona (or a person willing to be in public view) than a signature is. To create a self-portrait is to have the ability to assert control over one's own image and to provide the "real" version of you that is official—according to you. What do people put on their Facebook profiles? A photograph. Not always, but more likely than not. For some of us, (I venture to say, us women) the temptation to use an older photograph from when we were younger and more attractive is one we give into, and give unto the world — at least a few times a year, or a few times in our digital lives.

Naturally, taking control of one's image was a chronological inevitability with the invention of and now the ubiquity of the camera. The proliferation of online personas has unwittingly inducted many amateur photographers into the genre of self-portraiture – whatever that may mean to history. What else could possibly happen with the availability of cameras, camera-phones, and the aforementioned online personas. Now we can triumph over the bad DMV portrait and truly show our best, prettiest, thinnest or even most ironic selves to the world. With self-portraits we choose. It seems so simple.

To look at Bjørn Sterri's work is at first deceptive. His work consists of such ancient relics of ideas such as "identity", "humanity", "humility", "honesty", and even "humor".

If one takes the time to take a second look, both photographically trained and untrained eyes will see other intriguing "relics": film, Polaroids, 8"x10" format film, an abundance of black and white photos, constructed and wrinkled sweep backgrounds, and even the "nuclear family." Notions of family or rather the particular celebration of family as the extension of the self permeate and particularly define Sterri's work.

The deeper you look and the further you go into his website and vast body of work, the more you understand that each person in his photos — his wife, his two sons, his deceased parents are all him. They are all a part of him. Without them in his photos, even when he is absent in the frame, you would not get an accurate idea of who Bjørn Sterri IS; or who he might actually be; or who he is able to be.

That is not to say that to look at his pictures is to know the man — we all know that is one of the eternal paradoxes not only of photography but humanity itself — you cannot know a person by looking at a photo of them just as you cannot know a person by merely having one conversation with them. The impression they leave on the world — through their family, friends, colleagues and enemies —that summation will; if ever; give you the full " picture" or "knowledge" of the person.

So, when you see photos of Pablo, Jens Linus, and Alejandra with or without Bjørn in the frame — realize that these extensions of the self are also revealing the innermost self and soul of the man — the "self "that" created these portraits: Bjørn Sterri.

—The following is a question and answer interview that occurred between Stephanie Dean and Bjørn Sterri from March 26- March 28, 2011. Enjoy.—

SD: How did this project start?

BS: I am adopted and I know very little about my biological parents or family roots. Maybe because of this, I need a proof of my existence – That 'I am'. One way to carry through this "need" is to document my children, my wife and me through photography.

SD: How often do you shoot? Your website has so many images, I wonder about all the images that don't make it to your site or haven't made it up there yet!

BS: When there was Polaroid film around, I used to shoot every day. With the 8"x10" I 'only' shoot 2-3 times a week. Yes, there are a lot of images that do not make it to the website or exhibitions. These days I am actually in the process of 'cutting down' on the images on my web. 'Kill my darlings' - 'Less is more' - 'Cut to the bone'. Photography is all about editing – leaving something out...

SD: Have you noticed any differences in the way men react or respond to your work versus the way women react and respond to your work?

BS: It is, mostly, women who give me 'feedback' on my work. And most of the time it is about my way of showing 'myself' and that they like to see that from a man.

SD: During the course of making this work, what have you learned about yourself?

BS: I hope I learn something more about photography every time I photograph or go to the darkroom. 'About myself'? Ooohh that is tricky question. I am no intellectual – so I guess the answer would be 'no – I do not think so.'

SD: What have your viewers taught you about yourself?

BS: I think that the main goal in every human's life is the need to be 'seen & loved'. When people see & respond to my work it gives me a sense of being 'seen' & 'loved'. So to everybody out there who has seen my work AND responded; thank you so much.

SD: What do you think you have taught your viewers?

BS: I do not think I have taught them anything, but I hope that they can recognize themselves in some of my work - relate to it.

SD: Self-portraits are always a search – even a hide and seek game. For viewers and photographers, this is so literal that it may be redundant to a skilled, thoughtful and trained photographer such as yourself. However, to viewers looking at your work for the first time it will be worth the time for everyone to consider these questions:

What are you hiding?

What are you seeking?

What do you think the viewer seeks?

What do you think the viewer reveals to themselves through viewing your photographs?

Do you think it's possible to reveal something new to the viewer even though your body is the body in the photo? And your self is the self we are musing when we first look at the body of work "Self portraits"?

BS: I am more of an 'emotional' guy than an 'intellectual' one. Most of the time when I photograph I do not have any planned 'idea' of how I want the photograph to look like. I work, fairly quickly. In some cases it does not take more than a couple of minutes to 'execute' a session. And that is all included. Setting up the camera. (Most of the time it is already on the tripod). Bring it out in my outdoor 'backdrop studio', use something as a 'stand in' for focus, look in the camera and shoot. There are so many things that can go wrong. Like focus, exposure and finally in the darkroom. I am one of those photographers who believe the whole process is magic and I am 'surprised' each time there is something on the negative... So most of the time I am in very little control. NO time for 'hiding', NO time for 'seeking'. In other words – all the time in the world for 'nothing and everything'. In the end I hope that the viewer can relate to my work...

SD: Your family is growing, and the boys are growing up. How do they react to the camera now as opposed to in the earlier photo sessions? Do you let the boys have cameras? What kind of work do they make and how do they feel about your work? How do you feel about theirs?

BS: In the beginning, none of the boys really understood what it 'meant' to be photographed. But with time they do. Since he is older and has done it for a longer time, Jens Linus understands it in a different way than Pablo. But both of them are very supportive and helpful. I never photograph them if they do not want to anyway. And I never tell them to 'smile or look like this or this...' This is rather about documenting than making aesthetically pleasing photographs. Alejandra and I gave Jens Linus a small video camera last year. He uses that quite a bit, mostly to make small films of himself and his friends skateboarding.

SD: Your wife is exceptionally beautiful. She is of course a natural choice for subject matter, but you also photograph yourself. However, I feel like you aren't being completely honest with the camera: grimaces, facial contortions and even wigs obscure your face or perhaps "persona" or "Visage" is a better word. You are an attractive man. Yet, somehow, there doesn't seem to be a relaxed, natural photo of you up on your site? Is there a reason for this?

BS: Yes, my wife is very beautiful, both on the 'outside & inside'. Over the years I have done quite a few Polaroids of the 2 of us together with the title 'Beauty & Beast'. There is a 'reason' or a story behind all my photographs. I will not go to deep into the psychology bit here, but I can tell you this much, I am not that fond of my self and when I photograph my self it is almost as if I am not really 'there' being photographed. As I mentioned earlier, I am documenting and when I photograph myself – in most cases – I have a 'bad day'.

SD: Your whole site is about the self-portraits you have made. I want to ask a question about your "Self..." series. Why did you choose the particular artists that you chose? (Warhol, Calle, Sherman, Kahlo) and what does the inclusion of yourself and yourself as your mother say?

BS: That series was done very quickly around lunchtime one day. It is a kind of response to or a reaction against some artists 'out there'. No details needed. But it is NOT a reaction against the artist that I chosen. I really admire their way of expression 'self'. The wig I am wearing is the same as my mother used after she had chemotherapy treatment. In the series I am 'portraying' woman, so I found it natural to use the wig. As a kind of homage to my mother and Andy Warhol also used a wig. The title for each image is important to me, especially the last one of me. 'Self as self. Poor self'. As I said, I do not think that highly of my 'self'.

A friend of mine, a man by the way, called me up after he had seen the series and said; "the first time I saw it I laughed, the second time, I went kind of quiet and the third time, well then I started to cry." I think that is one of the best responses I have ever had to my work...

To see more of Bjørn Sterri's work: www.sterri.net

Stephanie Dean is a fine art photographer who resides in Chicago. She is a professor of the History of Photography at Oakton Community College. Stephanie enjoys writing and talking about photography, and this is her first article on a contemporary photographer.
www.stephaniedean.com

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