

TEETH

Teeth Magazine

Issue Five
Nature of the Beast

Featuring
Maison Martin Margiela
Damir Doma
Anne Sofie Madsen



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TEETH

Front Covers
top: Emon Toufanian,
middle: Camilla Sverdrup-Thygeson
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Editor's Letter **1**

Michael Salerno **4**

Moses Sumney **12**

Miguel Rangel **16**

Camilla Sverdrup-Thygeson:
Maison Martin Margiela Archive Special **20**

THEY. **38**

Kenneth Koo:
Anne Sofie Madsen Special **42**

Emon Toufanian **50**

Asger Carlsen **64**

Leigh Wells **72**

Camila falquez **78**

Anders Kylberg **84**

Cigarettes After Sex **98**

Novella **100**

Patricia Khan **102**

Odd Nerdrum **116**

Joss McKinley **122**

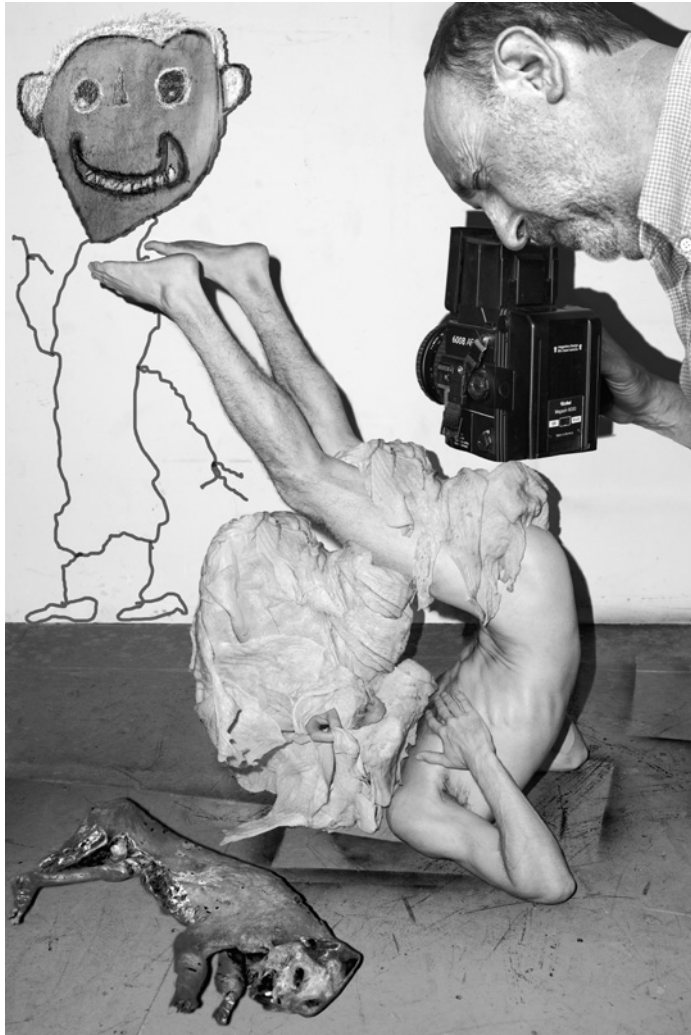
Madeleine Morlet:
Damir Doma Special **130**

Zuza Krajewska **160**

Open Dialogue with
Madeleine Morlet **174**

Credits **176**

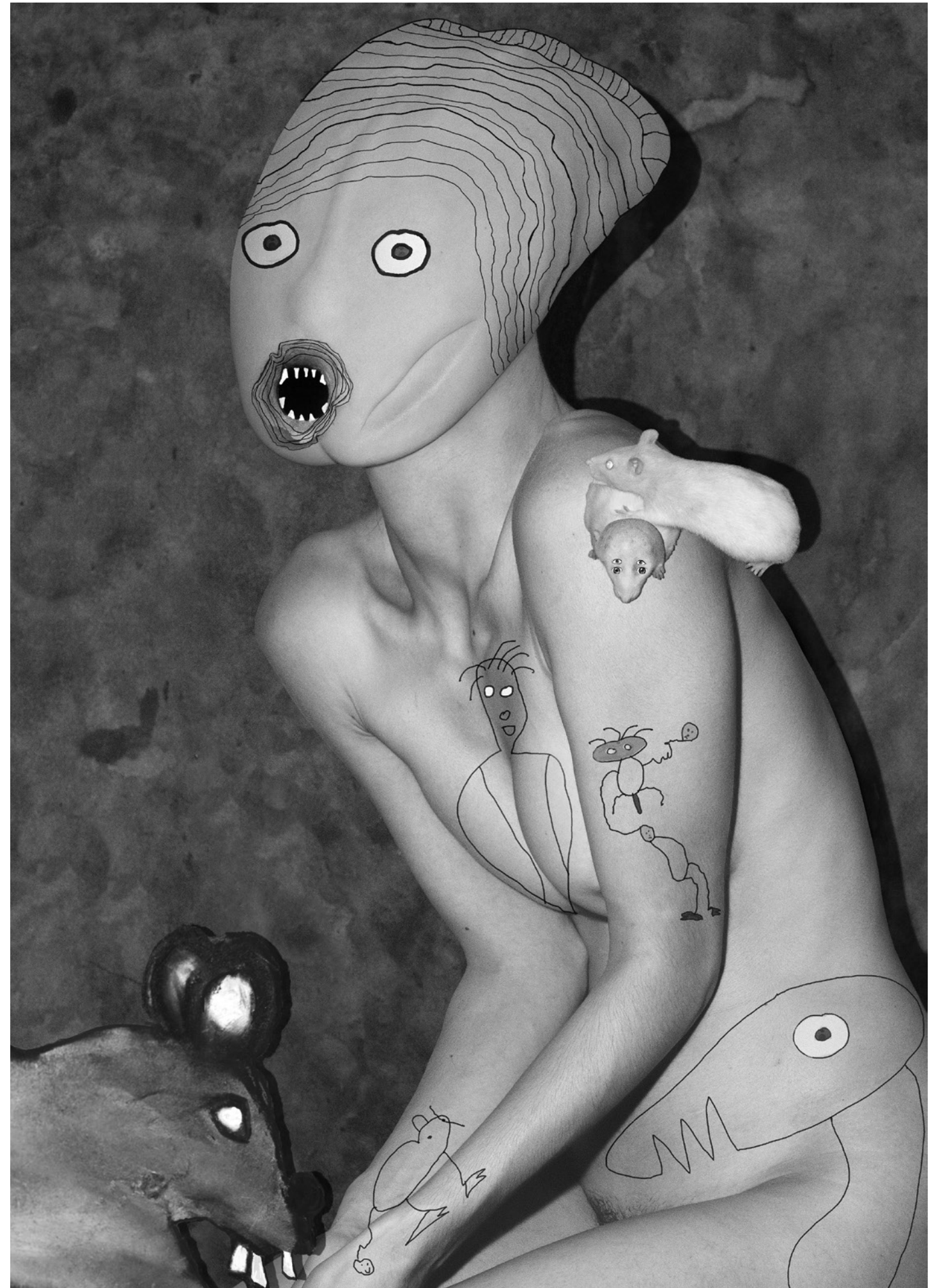
In Conversation with Asger Carlsen



Why is it so easy to condemn a body of artwork to the land of the unknown, to the place of the uninhibited, abandoned by the comforting light of meaning. Irrational fear intensifies when free flow of both conscious and subconscious is set free. Asger Carlsen is clearly aware of it. We had asked each other how it came to be that people nowadays are scared of a fiction, a question that echoes nothing but itself.

Interview **LIUCIJA ADOMAITE**

OUTSIDERS DON'T JOKE



Recently, Asger Carlsen and Roger Ballen have collaborated on an intense photography series called “NO JOKE.” Absence of norm and order within the pictures, as seen in the alternative conceptions of the Art Brut school, depart from any aesthetical form and take the viewer to the other side of reality. A result of long-distance Skype talks between two artists explains the phenomenon of co-inhibiting the collage not solely on the paper but in two separate minds. “NO JOKE” has become a metaphor of craftsmanship and that of a friendship. Asger makes it clear that the hours of internet-fueled discussion between him and Roger were the only condition that allowed “NO JOKE” to exist.

He tells me the story about a documentary he watched some time ago on Vivian Maier, a Chicago woman, “who was basically a babysitter, and when she died they found these amazing Robert Frank like images”; he takes a breath, “Yet it’s just photography. But think about it: this woman was completely isolated from the art world and wasn’t in any circle of photographers to discuss it with.” It appears that having someone to talk to is a method of keeping one’s creative sanity. We joke about it, and confess occasionally thinking about ourselves as being bipolar.



The conversation starts to feel like we were stealing from each other’s lunch boxes back in the fourth grade. Sting’s “Oh, I’m an alien, I’m a legal alien” sounds in my head.



LIUCIJA ADOMAITE: You were born in Denmark. Now you're based in...

ASGER CARLSEN: New York. I've been living here for ten years now.

That's a lot. Do you feel like home there?

I don't know if you can feel like home in a city like New York. You're constantly reminded that you might have to leave. You just have to be realistic that one day, you'll just have to move. The eyes are on US, I guess. I recently traveled to Mexico, and people there were like "what's going in US is insane," kind of laughing about it.

Why and when did you start taking pictures?

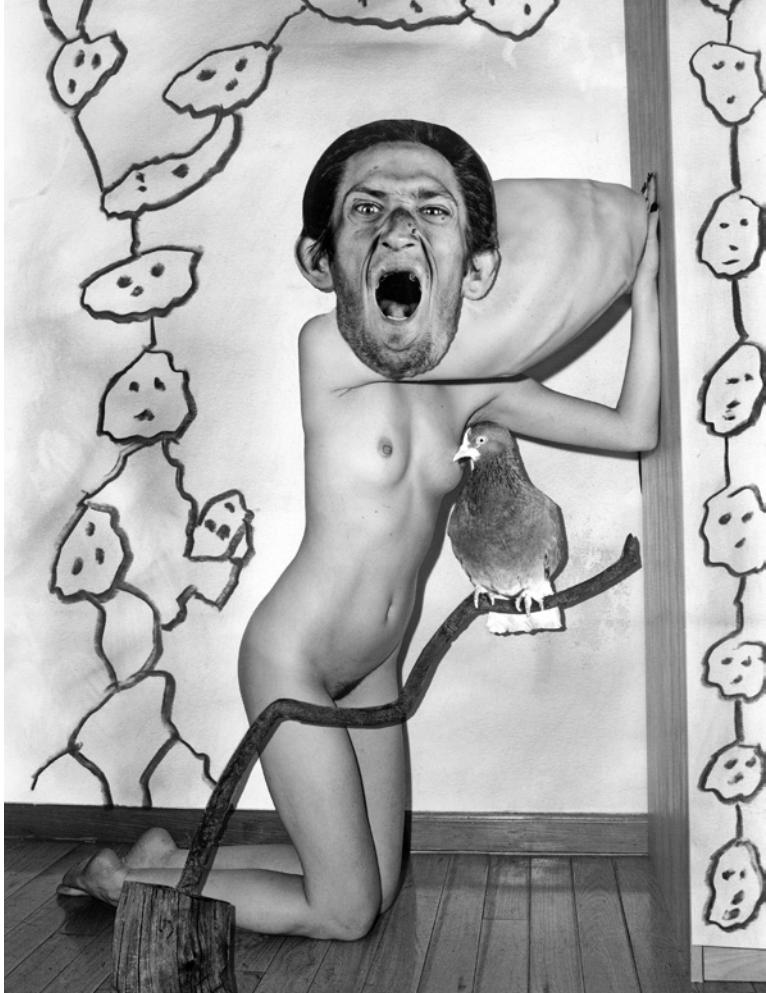
I started taking pictures when I was still in high school. I was interning at a local newspaper as a press photographer. The internship was a week long because you're in school, I mean you're fifteen. When that week was over, I just kept showing up, and after a while, they just had to hire me. So I stayed there for seven years. Then, I went on to crime scene photography.

Would you say that crime scene photography affected you in some way? Maybe it had an influence on your artwork years later?

There was a huge gap between being a crime scene photographer and committing myself to making art. It's more than a decade between. I could say that if you've been a newspaper photographer, you obtain a pretty good reference to reality, and what appears real. I very much took advantage of that.

Your work can be distinguished by its unusual style and uneasy pictures. Photographs from series "WRONG" and "Hester" shared the effect of something not quite right. You glance at the picture, and it looks beautiful at first, but when you look closer, you are struck by sudden horror. How did you develop such particular aesthetics? You said in one interview that Francis Bacon and surrealism was a significant influence.

He still is a very big influence. It seems that complicated narrative is leaning towards maybe something "dark," but to be honest, when I make images, I lose perception of what is dark. It's really not until I show the images that I realise or I get the response that maybe it is. I worked in many fields of photography, like newspapers, editorial magazines, and commercial photography, so I've been around the field. For me it's interesting to see if I can reinterpret myself within this medium that I know so well. And my new work that's not yet released, is a complete departure from photography. But the first project "WRONG" was conceived over the images that I had photographed over many years. I didn't know what to do with them. I liked the images but they weren't good enough. So I started building these props in my apartment. I inserted the objects that I built into the images that I didn't even think of as being good images, like top-notch images, you know.



Are you talking about actual hand-made objects?

Yeah, they were built from very simple materials that I've found in Chinatown where I live. When you take a picture, it has a very straightforward narrative, but if you take something else, a foreign object and then insert it into that image, the story will change completely. For me, it is a very magical moment.

So, in the beginning, you never truly know what you're going to get.

No, I never know. I mean I could do a little bit of sketching or researching before I start working on something, but I don't have an end goal. That's a real difference between doing a commissioned piece of work and then doing an art piece that is free from all restraints of being dictated.

You remade those initial photographs that you had from your archive because, as you say, they weren't good enough. There are many extremely self-confident artists out there, trapped in chasing the bubble of originality, certainty, and value. Instead, before releasing the pictures, you sit in the chair of your own jury and start a session of self-criticism.

Now that you're saying it, I really am tough on myself. That's something I could work on. Or not. (laughs) To be honest, at this point I don't consider myself as someone who makes photographs at all. I think what I'm dealing with has way more of a relationship to sculptural work. If I watch the interview with an artist who makes sculptures, I can recognise a lot of these complexities that they have. You have a very critical opinion on how you want

that shape to look like, and you can see when it doesn't work or when it feels organic, or something new. For example, when I worked on "Hester" there was one picture that I kept changing for four years.

So you kind of grew up with that image, didn't you?

Yes. It's part of the journey. When you finally get to the point when you make an image the way you wanted to make it, that's a moment of...

Enlightenment?

Yes, it's like a break through. I started looking at Francis Bacon, Hans Belmer, Henry Moore. I was thinking about this freedom that painters have, that lead to this place very deep and intimate... But photography has a limit because it has this capture of the moment, you have to travel to this location or mountain and photograph an image and travel sixteen hours back. So it's not very productive, not even creative, in my opinion. I was lacking this internal studio process where I could get up in the morning and just work on it. After "WRONG", I started really thinking on how I can get close to that freedom. So I took two images of the girl photographed naked that I already had on my hard drive from a while ago, flipped it around and it created this headless shape, this monster-like figure. I didn't want too many artefacts, like clothes or stuff that could related to our time. I wanted it to be timeless. To make these images was by far the most technically difficult thing that I imagined. The biggest problem that photography has, is this reality that it always refers back to.

"I was thinking about this freedom that painters have, that lead to this place very deep and intimate..."



One of the most prominent elements in your work is these strange wooden stilts, or legs. They were in “WRONG” and also in “NO JOKE.” Where did you get them from and do they even mean anything?

I just built them. Besides “NO JOKE,” being in a collaboration had some news aspects too, like self-portraiture of Roger and I. So I introduced the wooden legs back into this project, and Roger had a desire of getting that into the work too. I wouldn’t make wooden legs again.

Did you face any particular challenges when working together? The question of authorship comes to my mind.

It’s up to the viewer to detect the clues that are part of my work and Roger’s work. I don’t think I’m a collage artist, but Roger introduced this technique into the work. In many ways it was healthy for me and I am not a big fan of collage. We were never physically together in the space working. It was me starting an image here in New York, or him, manipulating it and then sending it back to him. He would print it out and physically draw on top of the print. Then, he would scan it and send it back to me. At a later point, he actually started making drawings in Photoshop, which was interesting for me to see. I think he hadn’t realized before that he could do that.

I’m assuming that before deciding to collaborate, you and Roger Ballen could understand each other and speak in the same artistic language.

Yeah. I mean Roger is an older guy. What’s the difference? Like 45 years. I don’t know, there’s a huge difference. He already had a career before I even thought about getting into this. He has had a huge influence on me.

Was it in any way challenging for you?

Maybe in the beginning, I was like ‘Oh, this is the guy whose art I really like.’ We started working in early 2013 and it wasn’t completed before 2016. So the process of exchanging the images went on for a more than three and a half years.

But have you even met each other face to face during this period?

Yeah. Roger did come to New York quite a few times, and we hung out and talked about the work, but we never did any work together. We had weekly conversations over Skype. I mean this project could never have happened if it wasn’t for the internet.

“NO JOKE” is often called “repulsive”, “disturbing”, “grotesque”, everything but positive, perhaps due to its cryptic nature. Were you expecting this response?

I never really think about it. It’s not an issue to me. I mean, I know this response. People are coming to my studio and telling me things.



Maybe it tells more about the people than about you? The insecurities of society and the origins of shared anxiety?

I would just say that when you think about people in the United States who are like ‘Oh, this guy deserved the death penalty’ and all that in the news... Why are they okay with the fact that hundred people got killed yesterday in the Middle East and suddenly they can’t look at this work that is a complete fiction. That thing always strikes me as very peculiar.

So you say people tend to get shaken more by fiction than by reality.

Yeah, I mean why are they offended by this? If you turn on CNN now, you will watch a cruel statement on humanity that is just terrible.

Susan Sontag was exploring this phenomenon in her writings.

Yeah, I am very familiar with her work. But having said that I’m not trying to comment on anything. I just make the images, and people can look at them or don’t. Like them or not, or whatever.

I believe that “NO JOKE” can be seen as a natural successor of Jean Dubuffet’s “Art Brut” school. You and Roger called yourselves the outsiders too. I’m interested in what way you see yourselves as outsiders, and where do you stand in the context of outsider art?

I think Roger and I are comfortable with being the outsiders – that’s a part of our nature. I don’t have an art education and don’t see myself as being a part of intellectual art world. Roger meanwhile moved to South Africa and he is a New Yorker, and he simply worked there without any knowledge of the art around. So if you choose to do that, I think you already are a little bit of an outsider by nature. So in the end, being an outsider is not something you necessarily choose, it just happens to go well with who you are. I also think it’s pretty easy to get labeled as outsider artist when you don’t make art that is popular and don’t fit the conversation of what is popular in the art market. I just happened to not have the ability to contemplate if it’s going to be popular or not.

Do you think that the archetype of an outsider has changed? It seems to me that we’ve come a long way from those who were primarily considered to be the outcasts of society, the out-norm. For example, the notions of Freudian female hysteria or insanity from a genius mind, like the painter Francisco de Goya, don’t relate to our modern selves as much anymore. Who do you think is the outsider today?

It seems there’s a change in the medium that’s used in the art world now. You see a lot of new art forms. And yet, it seems like everything relates back to painting and there’s still this conflict whether photography is art or if it can be perceived as art. Unless you’re a painter, you can very easily be perceived as an outsider. The problem is that some of the techniques that have been used, you know, like New York Abstractionists, they were using industrial technologies to their work, and in terms of European history, it wasn’t considered to be proper art or a way to go about it.

Let’s go onto the aspect of human body. It was a prominent narrative in your personal work, and it’s everywhere in “NO JOKE.” The narrative of self-portraiture too seems to be an important aspect in both of yours and Roger Ballen’s work.

Yeah. I would use myself for the “Hester” project too. I could simply undress and photograph myself behind my computer desk. It was a question of who’s available at the moment. The self-portraits happened in “NO JOKE” because Roger and I believe that any image can be used in an interesting way. And I simply said, why don’t you have your assistant photograph you in your studio and just send it over to me and I’ll work something out. When you look at Roger’s work, let me phrase this correctly, there are a lot of abnormal characters, body types, or humans. So I guess I already knew that he was interested in that part of the story too.

The human-like objects appear to be genderless. Is there a statement on gender ambiguity?

I’m not really interested in this, but you can say that this body of work has a male figure, a female figure, a transgender figure, a non-gender maybe.

You’re saying that you don’t see the point in dividing things that way?

No, people always say “why are you photographing girls?” like in the “Hester” project, even though I was in the images too. It’s also an aesthetic choice because I can’t work with males if they have a lot of hair. I need something more seamless. But having said that, I’m doing a project that is all about the male now. He just happens to have not a lot of body hair.

“NO JOKE” has distinctive primitive aesthetics. Very raw and basic visual metaphors invite viewers to approach your art instinctively. One can get a glimpse of almost a childlike perception of reality, where curiosity allows you to experience the world with all its abnormalities. Maybe that’s where the fear of monstrosity comes from. I am wondering if you ever had monsters that you were scared of?

I don’t remember myself being scared of monsters. I’m more scared of people if anything. Real people are a lot more frightening. I grew up with Star Wars and stuff like that. But I did see the “The Exorcist” when I was very young by accident.

By accident?

Yeah, I think it was New Year’s Eve and I was nine or something. My parents had some guests and they were celebrating, so my brother and I were staying up late. The movie was on the TV, and normally they would have said that’s not a proper movie for you to watch, but because they were going about their celebration and possibly drunk, I happened to watch it. It seemed such a normal movie at first and all of a sudden it evolved into horror.

Yeah, that movie is creepy as shit.