



ANJA NIEMI

THE BLOW

THE RIDER

Galerie XII
Los Angeles

INTRODUCTION TO ANJA NIEMI

ABOUT

Anja Niemi (1976) studied at Parsons School of Design in New York and has exhibited in galleries worldwide. Four monographs of her work have been published and her images are part of various public and private collections. Recent museum exhibitions include Fotografiska (Stockholm and Tallinn), MAAT (Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology, Lisbon), Des Moines Art Center (Iowa), and Figge Art Museum (Davenport).

Niemi always works alone. By placing herself within her own meticulous tableaux, she constructs fictional stories where she is both the author and the character. In her work, Niemi appeals to ideas that are innate to the human condition, rather than being confined to a personal mediation. Whilst her poetic narratives are wholly imagined, they act as an intimate space to catalyze real conversations about identity, conformity, and the relationship we have with ourselves.



Table of Contents

**ABOUT
PAGE 3**

**THE BLOW
PAGE 5**

**THE RIDER
PAGE 6**

**THE INTERVIEW
PAGES 7-8**

INSTALLATION IMAGES

THE BLOW (2019)

At first glance, Anja Niemi's new work shows an unaccompanied woman dressed in black, with a face that is always turned. She drives to a solitary house in the desert and trades her clothes for those of a boxer. Niemi chooses boxing paraphernalia to accompany her setting to build the idea that each photograph is a site of mental training and introspective battle. As with all of Niemi's work, the narratives she constructs and then performs in as both author and character simultaneously, act as allegorical amplifiers to conversations that lie beneath.

In one photograph, boxing gloves sit on the concrete floor just outside the bedroom with nothing but the parched land beyond. Even without hands for them to clothe, and so close to a space of comfort and safety, they are present as the agents of rejection, denial, societal pressure, anxiety, and the countless number of conflicts we wrestle with as humans. Even when we are not directly contending with our rivals, we can always feel the residue of the past, as well as the anticipation of events which will force us to pick up the gloves once more.

These everyday scenes are placed next to louder examples of Niemi's extended metaphor. Now with the gloves on, an Airstream trailer and a quintessential boxing



FIGHT SERIES NO. 1, 2019, Inkjet on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag Baryta paper

ring are the arenas where Niemi's character fights unseen opponents as well as another version of herself. Who wins when we are fighting ourselves? The ideas of winning and losing seem, however, less relevant here. Instead, the photographs speak of a need to fight on, an ode to picking yourself back up after being put down by others, or even by yourself.

Concealment is an idea that is prevalent in *THE BLOW* and in Niemi's practice as a

whole. It is essential that here, the woman's face is never entirely revealed. By removing specific identities, Niemi orchestrates the dismantling of herself as a singular identity, and the work becomes a vessel for universal ideas we can all relate to. *THE BLOW* offers us time and space to reflect upon ourselves and reminds us that even if the conflicts of life can lead to bruises, it is important that we always stand back up.

THE RIDER VOL. 1 (2021)

THE RIDER VOL. 1 is an ideological progression from Anja Niemi's previous series *The Blow* (2019).

In her latest series, Niemi recreates her character's struggle in the form of a rider and her horse. Trust and the will to understand each other are essential to their mutual bond. In good times they are one, connected in trust and respect. They are on an open-ended journey, a journey that requires perseverance with the suspension of fear. A jodhpur trapped in a stirrup, with its leather strap tangled and hanging in thin air, hints to events of the past. Reminding us of the traumas that haunt us. *THE RIDER VOL. 1* is about the freedom found in progress and the ability to displace fear even if it's temporary.

THE RIDER VOL. 1 is a declaration of love, for the creatures the artist simultaneously fears and adores.



THE SHOW JUMPER AND THE HORSELESS RIDER, 2021, Inkjet on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag Baryta paper

"When creating *THE RIDER VOL. 1*, I had to change almost everything about the way I worked. Horses are willful and fast, and I wanted to photograph them on their terms without being too dominating or forceful. I could no longer be as repetitive and meticulous as I usually am, but what I got in return was really rewarding. I ended up spending my summer in the meadow, inviting the horses to roam freely in and out of my frame. I introduced them slowly to the black and white fabric I hung between the

trees, inviting them to join me but letting them go when needed. Towards the end of the summer, one of the horses willfully stands on the white fabric, resting his head on my shoulder. I can feel his weight as if he is almost asleep. I remember thinking what a huge honor it was that he trusted me so much and realized how far we had come."

- Anja Niemi

IN CONVERSATION WITH ANJA NIEMI

GLORIOUS, MAY 21, 2021

The art of solitude. The Norwegian contemporary artist and photographer on the empowering effect of embodying a different version of ourselves.

Throughout her spellbinding work, Anja Niemi celebrates the 'other,' whether that's a faceless character or a foreign land that jolts the senses. The artist and photographer swears by total solitude for her creative process and 'sport' is often the subject – but not as you know it. A horse rider is suspended mid-fall, a shamed boxer lies crumpled on the floor, and an immaculate cowgirl hides behind her wig. Her images blend fact and fiction, reality and performance, the familiar and the strange. Here we speak to Anja about identity, fantasy, and her new series *THE RIDER VOL. 1*:

Glorious (G): You have a meticulous eye for detail and primarily work solo. It's a big task to take control of photography, art direction, props, set, and styling, all whilst featuring in the images. Apart from photography, are those skills you specifically acquired or did you refine them through your practice?

Anja Niemi (AN): I've been using myself in my work for over 20 years. Since I am more comfortable when I am alone, I started playing out my own characters. I think everything – including my photography – has slowly refined along the way. Some things come naturally to me, and others I have to work on. The biggest challenge when you work alone is that you can't see what you are photographing. It takes time to get it right. It involves



FIGHT SERIES NO. 36 A - NO. 36 B, 2019 Inkjet on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag Baryta paper

a lot of small tweaks on focus and repeating the same thing over and over, but it's a small price to pay for being alone with my own idea.

G: When you think of a new series, how long does it take from inception to the final product?

AN: About a year. It's a slow process for me but I like taking my time, collecting costumes, and forming a storyboard before making it come to life.

G: In most of your work, such as *THE BLOW*, there often seems to be an element of challenging gender stereotypes and breaking the binary. Is this something you think about and consciously explore?

AN: I have always wanted my characters to have gender neutral issues. I want them to be relatable – regardless of sexuality or gender. More than being female characters, they are human.

G: Why are the characters in your photos often faceless? It seems this is often intentional, why?

AN: Most of my characters are faceless. I want them to be symbols rather than real people. By removing the face, our most personal feature, the character becomes more relatable. They could be anyone. I use them to catalyze conversations about identity, conformity and the relationship we have with ourselves.

G: Do you see your images as empowering to women and do you feel any responsibility to produce imagery that can be seen as such?

AN: I feel the responsibility, even more so as I am getting older and have two daughters. I think my characters are getting stronger in every series. *THE RIDER VOL. 1*, which is still in production, will show a lot of strength and encouragement. I think we all need that right now.

G: What/who have been the main influences in your work?

AN: My stories and characters are built up by fragments of everything that has made an impression on me. As an artist I think you unconsciously process your experiences and create something that's your own because the combination of elements are unique to you.

G: Sport is often featured in your work. From boxing (*THE BLOW*) to horse riding (*THE RIDER VOL. 1*.) Your new site is about horses. Are horses a big part of your life?

AN: A riding accident as a child scared me away from riding most of my life, but when my daughter started riding a few years ago, I realized that I had been missing something. Every time I was in the stable with her I felt so much joy, and realized I wanted horses back in my life. I now own a beautiful Hanoverian with my sister and it has changed my life. My main task is to overcome my fear, become a confident rider and keep this lovely guy happy and healthy. As a photographer I naturally felt drawn to this new part of my life, so I started working on a new character, *THE RIDER VOL. 1*. I feel like everything has been infused with horses and I wanted a place where it could all fit naturally together, so I started the Instagram account @thehorse.anjaniemi. It's a nice way to connect with like-minded horse girls and cheer each other on.



FIGHT SERIES NO. 18, 2019 Inkjet on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag Baryta paper

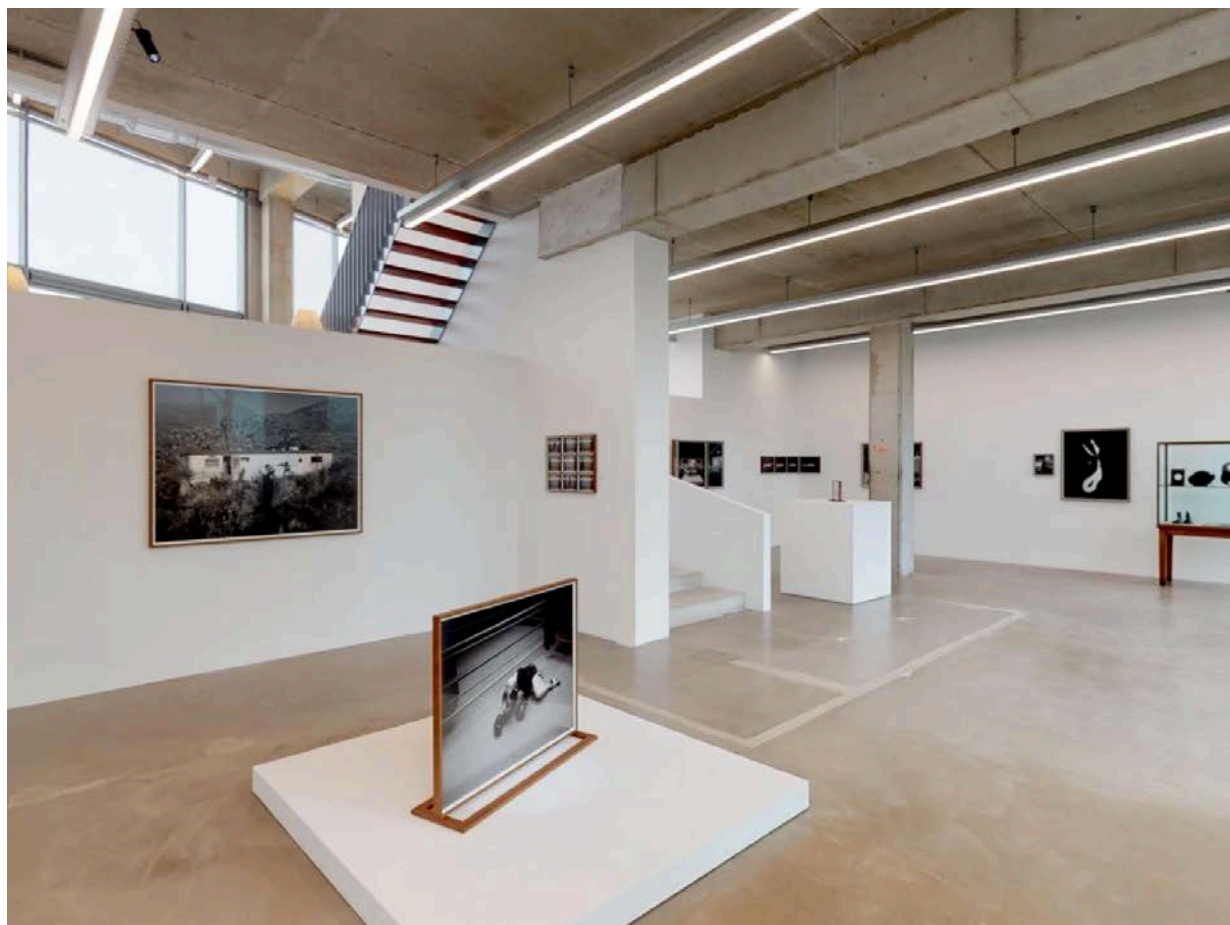
G: How was your experience working with animals while shooting *THE RIDER VOL. 1* and relinquishing some of this control?

AN: When I started the production of *THE RIDER VOL. 1* I realized I had to change almost everything about the way I worked. Horses are willful and fast and I wanted to photograph them on their terms, without being too dominating or forceful. I ended up spending my summer in the meadow, inviting the horses to roam freely in and out of my frame. I gave up some control but what I got in return was really rewarding.

G: Do you see horse riding being used as a theme throughout your work in the future, or are you looking to explore other subject matters?

A: I purposefully ended my story of *THE RIDER VOL. 1* before she had achieved what she wanted. Progress takes time, so I wasn't looking for her to succeed right away. I am working on *THE RIDER VOL. 2* to see what happens next.

INSTALLATION IMAGES THE BLOW



INSTALLATION IMAGES THE RIDER





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