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# Aesthetica

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SELF

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Anja Niemi: *She Could Have Been A Cowboy*

"I am sick to death of this particular self, I want another," wrote Virginia Woolf in her ground-breaking novel of fluid gender identities, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). Woolf's theme of wanting to become another in defiance of constraint and conformity offers a key to the work of Anja Niemi, and it is a subject which finds a striking presentation in the artist's new body of work entitled *She Could Have Been A Cowboy*.

The Norwegian artist, who has been represented by London's The Little Black Gallery since 2012, works alone, not only in taking the photographs but creating the characters: staging, directing and acting out the scene as part of an ongoing

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investigation into the self and its limits. Overcoming considerable technical challenges, she features in all of the pictures, often appearing several times in the same image, introducing unsettling themes of the double, or doppelganger. These are not straightforward self-portraits: they subvert the idea of the “selfie” through the artist’s performance of various characters. The end results are filmic, and evoke contrasting narrative interpretations, such as humour and tragedy, simultaneously.

In this particular series, Niemi returns to the iconic image of the American cowboy, a symbol largely drawn from the mythmaking of wild west movies than the realists of the job it represents, and addresses the strict gender division between the agency of the cowboy protagonist and the limitations of the female roles on offer in such movies, as a symbol of wanting to become something other. The female character in the series is referred to at times as “The Girl of Constant Sorrow,” a reference to a traditional western folk song which has been reinterpreted by Joan Baez and Bob Dylan among many others. As Niemi explains: “Every day my character is trapped in the same pink dress when what she really wants is to be a cowboy, dress in fringe and leather, riding horse in the wild west. She longs for a life she knows she will never have. My character’s cowboy life is all an illusion. The series shifts between reality and imagination, a combination of what she is and what she wants to be.”

The series continues to develop themes established from Niemi’s previous photographic projects, notable that of split personas and duality, which are central to *Darlene & Me* (2014) and *The Woman Who Never Existed* (2017), which premiered at Photofairs San Francisco. Her series have rapidly become highly collectable, notably with *Rooms 81 (bed)*, from *Do Not Disturb* (2012) selling for \$7,000 in January last year, whilst *The Backyard*, from *Darlene & Me*, sold for \$6,794 at Christie’s Photographs sale in London last May.

*She Could Have Been a Cowboy* is presented by Steven Kasher Gallery in New York until 14 April (including AIPAD The Photography Show). It can then be seen at Photo London from 17 to 20 May, and finally at the Ravestijn Gallery in Amsterdam during Unseen from 8 September to 21 October.