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UpstateDiary

## MARIANNA ROTHEN: 'SHADOWS IN PARADISE'

By: Kate Orne

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Rothen's new book follows 'Snow and Roses & other Tales,' which we featured in Issue 1.

In 'Shadows in Paradise,' Rothen continues to portray herself and her friends & muses. Shot at her upstate home in 2015, when the house was in a decrepit and nearly abandoned state, and then again in the summer of 2016 after obsessive renovations, this new series explores life after happiness, the time after you get everything you want but nothing is as planned. It asks what it means to be a woman, among women, in a world where men are banished yet lurking.

In tandem with the book, Rothen's first New York solo show is on view Feb. 23rd -April 15th '17 at Steven Kasher Gallery in NYC.



KO: This is a super cool property.

MR: Urs, my boyfriend, and I just bought this place. It's an 1860 farmhouse on 93 acres. The two newer wings on each side might have been built around 1900. The place is particularly beautiful because it has never been renovated. For now, until it's repaired, we sleep here without water or electricity making the experience extra special. We cook our meals over the open fire, up there on the hill at the edge of the forest.

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I love that the house sits back from the road, so when you look out of the windows, there is nothing but fields and forest. This last weekend I woke up surrounded by a mist that lingered throughout the morning – beautiful and mysterious. Each weekend is really a new exploration filled with surprises.

The book collection that the former owners left behind seems to be from the 1920's-60's. It will take me some major time to get through as there are so many treasured art books. I feel so fortunate to have access to this collection which may have taken a lifetime to acquire.

Rothen at her home in 2015:



The 1860 farmhouse in 2015. Ph: Kate Orne



In 2015 much of the interior were still left intact. Ph: Kate Orne



Rothen in one of the bedrooms in 2015. Ph: Kate Orne



Props collected and used by Rothen in her work. Ph: Kate Orne 2015

KO: And especially since you now own some first editions, like one of Marilyn Monroe's favorites, 'How To Develop Your Thinking Ability' by Kenneth S. Keyes. By the way, you don't sound like an American.

MR: Originally I'm from Canada, born to a Polish mother by way of England and a Swiss father who emigrated to Canada in the 70's.

KO: That explains it. (laughing) Tell me something about your work and process.

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MR: I shoot photographs and short films depicting women placed in nature or in manmade structures, a domestic environment. I try to find fragmented narratives to string a series of images together. I work with digital and analog media. My short films are extensions of my photographs. They are a more scripted playground where these women can really come to life. Happiness, beauty, the need to be understood and expectations of society are all themes running throughout my work.

KO: So what's your natural talent?

MR: Anything creative. I love making things by hand, making music, acting, dancing etc but with photography and films I can somehow encompass many of these together which is great.

KO: Was there a particular talent that required cultivation on your behalf?

MR: It took a long time to learn how to turn the creative impulse into a discipline. Channeling something specific and studying it while knowing what I am doing is the most exciting thing. I still need to learn to relax a little. My pendulum always sways strongly in one direction. (laughing)

KO: Tell me about your book 'Snow and Roses & other Tales'.

MR: It's a story about female characters who go from the confines of domestic drudgery to a world of freedom and independence. It's laid out like a film, an evolution if you will, with storybook chapters. It covers nearly ten years of work. I started some of the pictures in 2005, took some breaks, and then most of the photographs came from 2010 onwards. All of the book, except one photograph, is shot in upstate New York. One of the artists you featured, Mike Osterhout has let me use his home and church multiple times. Today its hard for me to imagine how I was able to do all of those shoots without having had my own place! I was really lucky to have friends like Mike and others upstate.



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KO: What's Blondie about, is she your alter ego?

MR: Blondie is a sweet but aloof housewife. An incredible blonde, kind of like a Monica Vitti type. She is developing into a rebel, becoming more eccentric. The film "A Woman Under the Influence" is an example of the kind of direction she's heading. I have tried to do self portraits with other characters but for some reason I keep coming back to Blondie. When I put on her wig I instinctively go into her character. She's always inspiring new situations and skits.

KO: It's obvious that you put a lot of thought and effort into what your characters wear. Where do you find all those pieces?

MR: If I'm looking for something particular I go to Ebay or Ritual Vintage in the city. Most of the costumes are sent to me, each month, from a dear friend in Australia, Greg Perano. We joke that it's called 'The House Of Perano Collection' but it's actually wonderful and cheap vintage pieces he finds. In a way, by sending me these fabulous costumes, he's collaborating from a distance.

KO: What comes first in your process – the costume or the character?

MR: For an already invented character, I try to work with what I have. If I find something particular, say a great nurse costume, I'll definitely build a character around that. Sometimes I will pick a wig and ask myself who this woman might be. Other times, the character I have invented doesn't work, and so, we change her costume and she brings more of herself to it.

KO: What would you rather not deal with as an Artist?

MR: I would prefer not have to finance my work but, then again, that brings a large degree of independence. Limitations can be very important – some of my best work has been created using tiny budgets.



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KO: What's your favorite quality in the models and actresses with whom you work?

MR. I'm very grateful for their willingness and their trust to work with me: that they allow themselves to become the character. I am always amazed by the performance and eagerness — every time. Even if I have shot a girl just once, I feel a big affinity for them. They become like family, living through my work. This is an invaluable gift.

KO: What is your relationship to the characters you invent?

MR: They are dream girls, or women I fantasize being. Their lives are so dramatic and interesting! I can feel them all very close to me. Although my inspiration comes from outside sources, my work is very personal. One of my models said that, when she see's herself in my work, she feels like she's looking at me or making an expression that I would make.

KO: What do you reflect upon that translates into your work?

MR. Ideas about the life I knew growing up versus the life I have now. I was brought up in the 80's but my European parents and family were very much connected to the post war world. I was taught to live a traditional life in the safest way. I am also still very influenced by the people I met immediately after I left home. That time was very impactful and what these people showed me still impresses me today; music, books, film, art, this was my unofficial schooling. I'm realizing a lot of this now. My brain always revisits these moments and I think, hang on, this was actually some time ago.



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KO: Why are there no men in your photographs?

MR: I can't relate to men in the same way as I do with women. They are not so easy for me to project onto. I tried it a couple of times but they just don't look the same in a wig! (laughter)

KO: What is it about distress that appeals to you? It has a big presence in your work.

MR: I think distress is beautiful and underrated. A life without distress would be a very boring one. For me, strength of character has to come from distress. I am just drawn to it, everything for me is a 'life or death' situation - it's either distress or a heightened state of euphoria.

KO: Which artist's work do you feel inclined to replicate?

MR: Robert Altman in the 70's. The women, the mood, the characters, the subtle unease. Everything was perfect, and just when you think you had a film figured out it turns around and completely surprises you. In some of his films he has this tragic death at the end which is always done in this perfectly sad way where you really feel for them and the ones they left behind. My favorite quote from the 'Altman on Altman' book: "Altman has often said that the greatest films are the ones you leave not being able to explain but knowing that you have experienced something very special". I feel this is incredibly true for any kind of good art.



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KO: Can you mention some insecurities that you experienced during your years in modeling?

MR: Actually, when I left modeling a lot of insecurities left me. When you model, the end is always looming and you ask yourself, "How can I support myself if one day the work suddenly stops? Who will hire a washed up girl? What happens when beauty fades and you have no college education?"

When I was 22 I was already considered an older girl. From one day to the next, I went from feeling like I was the youngest to being the oldest!

The biggest insecurity was probably being considered 'The Model'. It made me feel small and unimportant, as if I had nothing to offer beyond my face value. Strangely, now that I no longer do it, I have no issue with it being part of my history. Life certainly doesn't stop when you stop modeling. It has been a very positive force in my life and I would not have had these kinds of opportunities had I stayed in my hometown in Canada.

KO: So, what is it about Upstate, New York that drew you here?

MR: All the opportunities for photographs. I was introduced to upstate just as I was about to leave America for Australia, over ten years ago. It always stuck with me and it has been a dream for many years to have a home here. I believe that this house was really just waiting for us, it had been on the market for almost ten years.

KO: What's particularly inspiring about working & living here?

MR: I have always loved how upstate is so transformative - it has many different identities. Anything is possible. It is still off the radar by today's standards and this makes for a very special community of people, a lot of them creatives forging a new way for themselves.

I once heard someone say that 'upstate is retirement for hipsters'. This bothers me quite a bit because there is nothing 'retired' about upstate. I find that, away from the distractions of city life, it is an incredibly productive place. Most people I know that live upstate have become much more prolific artists as a result of relocating. And they're living a healthier life.