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PHOTOS OF A FACELESS COWGIRL RIDING FREE IN THE WILD WEST

By Elyssa Goodman, March 13, 2018



Women are overlooked far too often in photography. How can we continue to combat this erasure? My answer is this column, "Woman Seeing Woman." While it's just the start of solving this problem, I, a female writer and photographer, hope to celebrate the astoundingly powerful female voices we have in photography by offering a glimpse into their work.

While Anja Niemi's most recent project is titled She Could Have Been a Cowboy, it's not really about being a wrangler and herding cattle. Instead, it embraces the construct of freedom that we typically attach to the Wild West. In the project, she plays two characters: A blonde bewigged cowboy out on the dusty range wearing a beige fringed shirt and rust-colored pants, and a woman locked indoors wearing a pink lace dress. By juxtaposing the characters' lives inside and outside of an aged motel, Niemi develops what feels like a chase for the scarce commodity of freedom.

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Through a pair of sequenced images, Niemi reveals the fate of her characters. The woman inside struggles to get out of bed, while the cowboy dances. Every frame of the cowboy offers a new movement, a shiver of fringe or flail of the arm. Indoors our lady in pink just stares down into a bathtub. The woman in the pink dress could have been a cowboy, a mistress of her own destiny, an explorer, a seer and a doer. But she isn't. And that's heartbreaking to her and the viewer.

"It saddens me that so many people feel forced to live their life being someone they're not, and I long for a day where we are all more accepting," Niemi writes in an email to me. "Growing up, I never really found my place. I tried but I never felt like I fit in. I still feel that way, but I don't care as much anymore. I have created a world where I can be whatever I want and I have realized that people don't really care. Maybe some people find it all a little strange, but I know now that I am more proud of being odd than ordinary."

Niemi, who hails from Norway, works without an assistant and constructed every aspect of the project on her own. She trekked out into the wilds of American national parks. She hiked and rode horses in a field where John Wayne was once filmed. "I am not a particularly brave person. The opposite in fact. I am scared of most things. But my desire to visualize my ideas makes me go a lot further than I normally would," Niemi explains.

Niemi is often the subject of her own work, creating other roles and inserting herself to tell a story. It becomes an act of transformation and escapism, something Niemi has enjoyed since dressing up as a child. The intention has shifted within her work now, of course. "Mainly, it's about my desire to turn ideas into images. And despite my insecurities and social awkwardness, I found a way to do that," she writes. And in her work including these guises and other lives, she also manages to conjure the curious, paradoxical amorphousness of what it means to be a woman.

One of Niemi's goals is to set a positive example for the responsibility that comes with creating and putting one's work into the world, especially now that she has two daughters of her own. "I choose carefully what type of characters I want to create for them. It is important that we have a diverse perspective, and I try to use my voice with a purpose," she explains. "Making She Could Have Been a Cowboy, I faced so many fears all at once. Riding horses, climbing mountains, and driving alone in Utah does not come naturally to me. But having done it all made me feel amazing. My girls knew how nervous I was before I left. Coming home to them telling them I did it felt really good. I always tell them they can do anything if they put their heart into it. But it's much better to lead by doing."

She Could Have Been a Cowboy is on view at Steven Kasher Gallery until April 14, at Photo London from May 17-20, and at The Ravestijn Gallery in Amsterdam from September 8-October 21.