

Jacob Aue Sobol

Sabine

Reviewed at Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, 26th May – 15th July 2006

Published in *Source* no.48, Autumn 2006, pp.50 – 51

I was first acquainted with *Sabine* when it was published last year in *Eight Photojournalism*, where the project – the portrait of a nineteen-year-old Inuit girl, Sabine – sat comfortably alongside other traditional documentary photography project exposing stories of other cultures from around the world. However, the work has been exhibited widely and its meaning has been shifted from a very personal documentary project to an intensely reverent celebration of a quite ordinary individual.

Sobol's desire to document the Inuit culture began after reading a book given to him by his late father which described the simple life of these extremely remote communities. After graduating from the Danish School of Art Photography in 1999 he received funding to travel to Greenland to fulfill his curiosity. His brief was to explore the conflict between the traditional, simple way of life and modern Greenland, but he wanted to avoid the clichéd image of Greenland wrecked by Westernization and alcohol abuse, the victims of which frustratingly flocked to Sobol's lens. He returned to Denmark after five months, only to be disappointed with his photographs. However, Sobol refused to be perturbed and after a few months returned to Greenland on the invitation of Hans, the local priest who had already begun to teach him how to hunt and speak Greenlandic.

Sobol soon fell in love with Han's cousin, Sabine, and it was her that his camera turned to. For Sobol, "Sabine is Greenland". However, this did not happen before Sobol lost interest in taking pictures altogether and immersed himself in the Inuit culture, hunting daily for seals, polar bears and salmon, instead of only taking pictures of these occurrences. Sobol lived with Sabine for two years before realising that he would never be completely assimilated into the community. The image of one of the funerals for one of three men who committed suicide during the time Sobol was there, taken from a distance showing a cluster of villagers surrounded by snow and mountains, conveys a sense of Sobol's dislocation from the community. It reminds me of one of

Robert Capa's lesser-known anecdotes, that if you want to share the funeral, you have to share the procession [Robert Capa, *Slightly Out of Focus*, New York, Holt, 1947].

The grainy, monochrome aesthetic of Sobol's images is very classical and they are beautifully printed for this exhibition. Although his decision to use black and white does prompt a depressing impression of the environment; precisely the image Sobol sought to avoid. If Sobol wanted to challenge the clichéd view of Greenland, perhaps he would have been more successful showing some colour, such as one of his cited inspirers, Martin Parr. However, we should remember that this work is not the social investigation Sobol originally embarked upon, but something far more biographical.

Sobol has described the monograph as a love story between a Danishman and an Greenlandic woman, however, Sobol does not turn the camera on himself during the narrative (with the exception of the image taken in the mirror with Sabine's hands clasped around his torso) and does not show his own range of intimate and personal emotions that he does his lover. We could conclude – as has one Greenlandic critic – that Sobol was destroying her privacy, and this girl is simply Sobol's muse. Although Sabine appears predominantly naked throughout the project it is their acute intimacy which strikes the viewer that raises Sabine beyond a woman who has been merely objectified.

The choice of which dozen or so images to removed from a much larger text for a gallery exhibition will never satisfy all viewers' tastes. With the exception of a few diary extracts translated from the monograph, the prints are without titles and hung seemingly at random. There is however, a good reflection of the overall project, especially showing the images of the other villagers and the environment which contextualize Sobol and Sabine's relationship. The image of a half-butchered seal on someone's blood smeared floor juxtaposes well with the image of menstrual blood dripping down Sabine's leg. Perhaps this is a crude interpretation of what Sobol means when he says that Sabine *is* Greenland. There is a dichotomy between the images of the environment and those of Sabine. The land is mostly shown in darkness and look uninviting and rather ugly, while the pictures of Sabine naked suggest that there is in fact warmth – both literally and emotionally – within this most challenging environment.

Sabine is a project straight from the heart and it is refreshing to hear a photographer describe candidly the dilemmas they can face when photographing a culture that is so different to their own, and to be unashamed about changing the direction of their work halfway through a project. However, for some viewers (myself included) this work seems a touch over-indulgent: I felt at times like I was looking at someone else's holiday snaps or wedding photos and trying to look interested. I would have preferred to see Sobol complete his original project brief and look at more images of Inuit life, rather than image after image of a woman with whom he fell in love. His latest body of work, a report on equally remote villagers in the mountains of Guatemala which has won first prize in the Daily Life stories category of the World Press Photo competition this year is a suggestion of how his Greenland project might have turned out had he not met Sabine.