

Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2008 & Esko Männikkö

The Photographer's Gallery, London

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For many photographers, the common response when they introduce themselves to a stranger as a photographer is along the lines of; “what sort of a photographer are you?” or “what do you photograph?” This may not only be tedious, but also not always that straightforward to answer, or possible to do so before the stranger's eyes glaze over. However, Esko Männikkö's introduction; “I am a photographer of fish, dogs and old men” should not only leave any stranger intrigued, but also might dissuade them from asking photographers the same question in the future. In fact, Männikkö is a photographer of much more than just fish, dogs and old men, although there is an eccentricity to his work which suits this description, and these subjects are also synonymous with the territory where Männikkö made much of his earlier work.

Männikkö grew up in a remote rural town in northern Finland and how his interest in photographing his surroundings developed epitomises Susan Sontag's observation in *On Photography* of the likeness of cameras to firearms: Männikkö was a hunter, but he substituted his rifle for a camera in his early twenties and photographed the wildlife, as well as the human inhabitants and their environments. His series *The Female Pike* (1990 –1995) for which he was acclaimed, was a study of bachelors and single men living almost isolated lives across the countryside. Männikkö is drawn to those who are marginalized or alienated and living on the peripheries of civilization, which is a theme that continues in *Mexas* (1999), a series of portraits of people living along the boarder between Texas and Mexico. In both of these series, Männikkö plays his sitters off against objects from their surroundings to create an eloquent and fulfilling narrative of an individual, rather than simply collecting their portrait.

Unlike the other finalists this year, Männikkö is extremely accomplished with his use of colour, and given that he “hate[s] sunshine”, exploits the late afternoon light in his portraits and interior shots beautifully. Although I would contest their descriptions as still-lives, his most recent and ongoing series, *Harmony Sitters* which focuses on small, sometimes abstract details of animals,

have an arresting quality, perhaps due to Männikkö's use of flash. However, all of these delicious images are installed very modestly, without glass in old wooden frames that have been rescued from disposal. Indeed, Männikkö is contrary to the fetishization of the photographic print, almost to the point of disregard. He has even been known to trim down prints from an edition to fit whichever frames he thinks will complement them. He treats his finished images almost as an artist might deal with anonymous or found photographs.

Given the DBPP's objective – to award an international photographer who has made the greatest contribution to photography over the previous *year* – rewarding a body of work that is retrospective of a practitioner's career might be considered questionable. However, Männikkö's *Cocktails* is not intended as the biography of the photographer or a chronicle of his oeuvre, but rather a new piece of work in its own right. Appearing without captions, the pictures have been jumbled-up, and installed in a continuous line through the gallery, allowing for new narratives to emerge. Considering the diversity between Männikkö's earlier series and his more recent works, there is a surprising sense of consistency to the new installation, which is a testimony to his photographic vision, although his trade-mark use of old picture frames certainly supports this. Männikkö has apparently managed to create a new photographic flavour with this installation, rather than a not so sophisticated concoction thrown together like a teenager plundering their parents' liquor cabinet. However, I refute the artist's – albeit tongue-in-cheek – assertion that the installation shows that "life is a junkyard". While the subject might be edgy at times, there is warmth in his work that gives a sense of optimism to this installation.

The question of rewarding a body of work that spans a long period of time arises with two other of this year's finalists, John Davies and Jacob Holdt. Davies is one of Britain's most celebrated landscape photographers, and was perhaps this year's favourite to win the prize. His collection of large format black and white works record Britain's industrial and post-industrial terrain. His exhibition *The British Landscape* was at the National Media Museum in Bradford and contained work dating back to 1979. Holdt, who describes what he does as being closer to professional vagabonding than being a photographer, was nominated for his monograph that was published last year, of the photographs he made whilst hitchhiking across America in the 1970s, which he has shown as a lecture on social and racial inequality across the world since.

All of the works of this year's finalists explore social and political issues, but none is as forthright as Fazal Sheikh's monograph *Ladli*, which examines the cultural and religious inequality for some women living in India today. While Sheikh's monochrome photographs may be quite formal and reticent to a casual glance, the texts with which they are juxtaposed recount some chilling home truths about one of the World's fastest growing countries.