

## **Longing for the Lightness of Spring**

Jane Rendell

[This essay was published as 'Longing for the lightness of Spring', in Elina Brotherus, *Elina Brotherus*, The Wapping Project, London, (2001).]

I had spoken to Elina Brotherus once briefly on the phone before meeting her. I was in a rush. She told me of her timetable – Helsinki, Walsall, Toulouse, Brussels, London. So was she. Even as I was speaking to her, the doorbell rang, I could hear children running in and laughing. But Brotherus sounded calm. The day I went to meet her, I was running late. I had only an hour to talk, before catching a return train from Walsall to London. Given her busy timetable I was a little anxious I had kept her waiting. But she approached me like her work: precise, clear and still.

### **the culmination of all longing and desire**

Elina Brotherus' photographs are it appears all about time – emotional time, time spent loving, time spent remembering, time spent mourning, time spent yearning. Much of the work is a recording of what has happened, rather than what is to happen. This is why 'Spring', a new piece of work commissioned by Jules Wright for The Wapping Project is unusual for Brotherus. As well as working in video, producing a site specific piece, two modes of working unusual for her practice, she has also produced a work that looks forward rather than backwards, in her own words, '*the culmination of all longing and desire*'. 'Spring' is composed of two installations: a video triptych in the boiler house and a back-lit image 3m x 8m, 'Untitled' (2001) reflected in the water tank on the roof of Wapping. 'Untitled', is an illuminated horizon that divides sky from earth. Like the scene in the distance, where a dark and dense London meets light cloud overhead, the pale grey sky of Iceland floats above once viscous lava now covered in moss green. Brotherus requested that the work be time specific. 'Spring' will open in Wapping as we enter winter, just after the autumn equinox in the northern hemisphere. [see fig. 1]

### ***moss green***

*It's a beautiful house - one storey building, with a square plan – born at the birth of modernism in the aftermath of the First World War. It embodies the values of early English modernism, of the arts and crafts movement: 'truth to materials' and honest craftsmanship. From the road it looks a little un-loved, in need of some care and attention. Up close it is clearly derelict, almost in ruins. We enter a room with windows at each end. Curtains are falling away from the runners. The fabric has been soaked overnight and is drying in the spring afternoon sunshine. On the window cill and spilling over onto the floor are piles of old magazines. The pages are stuck together and disintegrate if you pull them apart. There are some photographs of buildings. One is particularly damp, the corners are soft, the surface is wrinkled. It shows a tower block, just completed, empty and pristine, a moss green utopia, the modernist dream dispersing as it soaks up spring rain.*

### **Rain, The Oak Forest', Flood (2001)**

Brotherus told me how much she hates the darkness of the Finnish winter and yearns for spring each year. It was no different when she moved to Paris, perhaps worse because she felt trapped in an urban setting with no view of the horizon. In search of spring, she left the city and went to Brittany and the Loire Valley. The videos make up a triptych, projected on screens hung from the ceiling, Rain, The Oak Forest and Flood. The first shows rain, streaming down outside, as we sit snug in the car, like children, safe. The second shows an oak forest after the rain has stopped, but when drops still heavy continue to fall to the ground, John Betjamen's 'second rain'. The third is of a flood, a forest of elegant trees rise silver from a pane of shining water. [see figs 2-4]

Each video work has a different time loop, so there is an ever-changing combination of raining, rained, and rain over. The artist intends the work to

be watched in contemplation, in solitude, with no regard for time. Rain has a different 'time' in each piece. Each piece has a different duration. The viewer will never see the same combination of rain and time. The sound track of rain, wind and birds further distancing the advance of winter. In Finland, the skylark is the earliest bird to sing, its song heralds the coming of spring one month away. Like Jane Mulfinger's poignant piece, 'Nachtigall, 3.00 uhr, Berlin Stadtmitte', (1996) where the artist recorded the song of a nightingale, which sang all night in the city, until dawn broke and his song was slowly drowned out by traffic noise, Brotherus' water logged spring landscape recalls the delicate beauty of this stifled birdsong. For Brotherus, 'Spring' is about beauty. The work is beautiful, yet given what we know of global warming, it is also somehow prophetic.

### **white linen**

*I dreamt of the house last night. My mothers house in Cwmgors, south Wales, a place where it always rained in the holidays, that as a kid I resented, but now as it is being taken from me, I already begin to miss. I was in the dining room; the rest of the house was empty except this one room. The furniture was far too big and covered in linen. The air was thick and still, silent. With the curtains drawn, it was very dark, but the linen glowed white. I went towards the mantel- piece to take a look at myself in the mirror, and I saw for the first time in the reflection, that the room was full of plants; so alive I could smell moisture still on their leaves.*

### **depicting a sentiment**

When Wright first showed me Brotherus' work, I was drawn immediately to the series called Suites Françaises 2. These are photographs of Brotherus' home when she first arrived in France from Finland. On strategically placed post-it notes, Brotherus' script precisely yet gently names each object she sees in her new tongue, as well as parts of herself and her emotions. Brotherus' says these are images 'depicting a sentiment'. [see fig. 5] She looks straightforward, child-like in her directness, yet the simple naming

operation demonstrates the inability of words to connect. To paraphrase Gillian Wearing, 'signs don't say what we want them to say'. Could it be that Lacan was right after all, that we are not in control of language, that on the contrary, language makes us?

Much of Brotherus' earlier work deals with intimate and personal subject matter, the death of her parents, the break up of her marriage, the desperation at the end of an affair. The photographs show Brotherus experiencing intense emotions. For her, these images '*tell it as it was*' – they are not set ups. We see her genuinely distraught, we feel for her. But she is also capable of standing back. In many, for example in 'Love Bites II' (1999), [see fig. 6] we are shown the artist holding the mechanism used to take the photograph. Here she is, both the image's subject and its maker. In showing herself as the producer of the art- work, Brotherus reassures us she is all right. She breaks the magic, the illusion of the image, and in so doing takes charge of her own emotional life.

Elina Brotherus trained as an analytic chemist before becoming an artist. The analytic chemist is still there, looking carefully, patiently breaking things down into their most simple components, and recording with exactitude life as it occurs. When we met we spoke of our mutual love of precision. Brotherus drew one hand down the centre of her face. She sees herself as split down the middle – the analytic chemist and the artist - the rational and the intuitive, the objective and subjective. It emerges that she has been working away from the personal towards the general: the 'post-it note phase' is right in between.

### **to be able to see far**

In 2000 Brotherus began a new phase of work, entitled the 'New Painting' after a comment made by a critic on the current state of photography. This work references classical work in its titles as well as its formats of landscapes and portraits. The portraits that feature people as subject matter are quite

different from the earlier work. In 'Femme a Sa Toilette' (2001) [see fig. 7] and 'Homme Derriere Un Rideau' (2000) [see fig. 8] for example, the figures are real people, Brotherus and a male lover, but they are 'models' acting in a scene. If these are attempts to capture the moment, they do so as part of series of critical explorations of certain motifs and genres in classical painting. For example, a series of five images entitled 'Le Mirroir' (2001) shows the artist in a bathroom filled with steam facing a mirror above a basin [see fig. 9]. In each successive image, read from left to right, the steam slowly evaporates and her face comes into focus in the mirror. Steam is a fascinating material, the marking of a brief moment of transformation from thick liquid to ephemeral gas. Rather like that brief instance in the mirror, when we hope that in catching sight of our reflection we will recognise ourselves.

Another group of work within the 'New Painting' focuses on landscapes rather than the human figure. Brotherus has produced a series of horizons: 'Horizons', 'Low Horizons' and 'Very Low Horizons'. Following 'Landscapes and Escapes', her earlier landscape series, she has shifted in standpoint from taking the perspective view to making flatter, more abstract images. These are scenes cut in half by horizons, ice and sky, stone and sky, earth and sky. [see fig. 10] There are also images where the ground line is barely visible, where we have just sky it seems, and then, barely perceptible, no more than a smudged line along the bottom of the image, we make out a thin, slice of land. [see fig. 11] The horizon is important to Brotherus; she needs "*to be able to see far*". All the New Paintings work with the same colour palette and distribution of tones. There are dark tones: blacks, blues and greens; and light tones: whites, pinks and greys; but not a lot in between. There is a strength and simplicity to this contrast in brightness that corresponds to the silver steel and rich brick of Wapping. The difference in weight between these sombre colours resembles the material qualities that distinguish between the elements – water, earth and air.

## **Bittersweet**

*In Palafrugell, a small town north of Barcelona on the Costa Brava is a derelict cork factory with a clock tower in front. The clock tower is a handsome structure, elegant and robust, but the clock on top has stopped. The floor is covered in dust and pieces of furniture, lamp-stands, chairs and old printing machinery. There are words everywhere scattered all over the floor: burnt orange, turquoise, black and white, bittersweet. We stay in the factory a long time. We don't speak, just walk and look. Later, once we've left the building, he brings something to show me. It is a white sign with carefully painted black letters: 'Bittersweet'. I reach into my bag and pull out a clear square section rod; along one side of it letters printed onto cardboard are embedded in the perspex. From the top it is out of focus, but from the side, you can read it: 'Bittersweet'.*

What is the colour of memory? What is the colour of bittersweet?

If matter has a weight, does emotion? If space has a colour, does time?

What is the colour of longing, longing for the lightness of spring?

Jane Rendell, October 2001.

## **Figures**

Fig. 1: Elina Brotherus, 'Untitled', 2001, *Spring*, The Wapping Project, London.

Fig. 2: Elina Brotherus, 'Rain', 2001, *Spring*, The Wapping Project, London.

Fig. 3: Elina Brotherus, 'The Oak Forest', 2001, *Spring*, The Wapping Project, London.

Fig. 4: Elina Brotherus, 'Flood', 2001, *Spring*, The Wapping Project, London.

Fig. 5: Elina Brotherus, 'Love Bites II', 1999. Chromogenic colour print on crystal archive paper. Mounted on anodised aluminium and framed 70 x 57 cm.

Fig. 6: Elina Brotherus, 'L'anatomie du ventre', 1999, *Suites françaises 2*. Tryptich of chromogenic colour Prints on crystal archive fuji paper. Mounted on anodised aluminium and framed. Edition 6, 40 x 50 cm each (x3). Courtesy the artist and gb agency, Paris.

Fig. 7: Elina Brotherus, 'Femme à sa toilette', 2001, *The New Painting*. Chromogenic colour print on crystal archive fuji paper. Mounted on anodised aluminium and framed. Edition 6, 80 x 66 cm. Courtesy the artist and gb agency, Paris.

Fig. 8: Elina Brotherus, 'Homme derrière un rideau', 2000, *The New Painting*. Chromogenic colour print on crystal archive fuji paper. Mounted on anodised aluminium and framed. Edition 6, 80 x 66 cm. Courtesy the artist and gb agency, Paris.

Fig. 9: Elina Brotherus, 'Le Miroir', 2001, *The New Painting*. Set of 5 chromogenic colour print on crystal archive fuji paper. Mounted on anodised aluminium and framed. Edition 6, 40 x 32 cm (x 5). Courtesy the artist and gb agency, Paris

Fig. 10: Elina Brotherus, 'Low Horizon 3', 2000, *The New Painting*. Chromogenic colour print on crystal archive fuji paper. Mounted on anodised aluminium and framed. Edition 6, 80 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist and gb agency, Paris.

Fig. 11: Elina Brotherus, 'Very Low Horizon 2', 2001, *The New Painting*. Chromogenic colour print on crystal archive fuji paper. Mounted on anodised

aluminium and framed. Edition 6, 80 x 100 cm. Courtesy the artist and gb agency, Paris.