



CHRISTOPHER  
KÖLLER

PORTRAITS IN  
BLACK & WHITE  
1980 - 2015

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STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

## Chance, intrigue and narrative: a coffee with Christopher Köller

Greeted with a hug, I was warmly welcomed inside Christopher Köller's home, given a full tour of the house and then introduced to his prized plastic Diana camera. Some time ago I fell in love with the images Chris had taken with it. They always seemed to be infused with serendipitous perfection, as if an element of magic had been present in their making. When I initially shared my feelings with Chris he assured me, 'you need to take lots of photos because it's so unpredictable and you never know what it will come up with'. The camera has obviously been stretched to its full potential over the years. It originally took images in 6x6 format but Chris filed away a piece of its interior, a DIY modification that means it now shoots in 6x7. It's kept wrapped in a silver padded pouch with the intention of preserving its life as long as possible; she's a very well kept lady.

As we sat down, with cups of coffee, at the dining table, Chris showed me the first of his black and white portraits—created between 1980 and 2015—to be exhibited at Strange Neighbour in exactly three weeks. *Untitled 1979/1980* is a dramatically lit portrait of his ex-wife and sister-in-law. Their outfits look somewhat fitting together, however the dress on the left appears as though it could in fact be a bathrobe. Looking for clues I realise I have no idea where this image was taken. The completely blackened background gives away nothing about its context. The woman on the left presents more questions than answers; the frame in her hands containing nothing within its borders except blankness.

An equally intriguing portrait of two girls in school uniform took on new meaning when Chris told me it was about ectoplasm. I must admit I had to look up exactly what that word meant. I knew it related to exorcisms but what I didn't realise was that when this occurs, a gauze-like substance is secreted from the orifices on the medium's body and draped over the non-physical body of the spiritual entity, enabling them to interact in the material world. Already loaded with erotic undertones, the girls now appeared to me as ready to conduct the séance of their fantasies. The girl on the left with a ladder in her stockings and her legs slightly parted reads as if eagerly awaiting a spiritual discovery. The girl on the right, however, is perhaps more scared than excited.

The construction of narrative is essential in the creation of Chris' images. There is always a back-story that has inspired him, but they are open to multiple interpretations. Chris pointed out that the home guard featured in the UK series, who looks like he is standing in front of a bombed-out building site, is in fact an

in vigilator at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Chris managed to get him to shift in front of an exhibited photograph, then quickly snapped his portrait before the museum's closing time.

While arranging scaled-down prints on a rug to demonstrate the precise layout of the exhibition, Chris spoke about his favourite photographer, Daido Moriyama, who chronicled the chaos of everyday existence in Japan post the second world war. Looking down over the selection of Chris' portraits that span 35 years, I could see Moriyama's influence residing at the junction between the real and the illusionary.

Chance imperfections, such as a slip of focus, give Chris' images their own decisive potency. Before this meeting I didn't know that these elements were enhanced digitally in Photoshop. Chris works on the after effects with Peter Hatzipavlis, in a collaboration that has lasted more than 15 years, where they meet and challenge each other, with both of them innovating and exploiting the limitations of their respective mediums.

Chris also sees the portraits that formed part of his 2008 *Trust* series as collaborations. His models, who were mostly other artists and creatives, each brought something of their own to the image. Chris spent an entire day with his subjects at their house and the intimate connection is palpable. We're allowed closer to the subjects in this series than with any of the other portraits, with their relationships and their art often on display.

The Japanese series was the one that had me asking the most questions. My imagination was running wild and I wanted Chris to tell me exactly what was going on. Are the three schoolgirls about to jump? Does the man in the middle of the group have anything to do with ectoplasm? Can you tell me more about the scruffy businessman who seems slightly saddened by the alluring naked woman on his bed? I was fairly close in my assessment of the three schoolgirls. Chris read a news article relating to their actual suicide pact on his first week in Japan. What I didn't notice at first glance was that the girls are in fact lying down, playing with our perspective and sense of reality. The Japanese businessman also related to a very disturbing but factual story of a man eating his lover. The man with white paper on his head doesn't have anything to do with ectoplasm. Chris had befriended these factory workers while teaching them English. The one with white paper on his face didn't want to get stuck working there, however he ended up falling for and marrying a woman from the office. The covering of his face is symbolic of him being caught, although I'm not sure he would have known this when he obligingly posed for the photo.

The final image is a new work, one of the first portraits Chris has taken in black and white on the Diana camera, and it's a knock-out. Equal parts menacing and beautiful, it's a portrait of Chris' partner, Nanette. Dramatic shadows abstract the line between where the tree ends and Nanette begins. The use of black and white film for these portraits has the effect of allowing abstraction and symbolism to permeate the viewer's imagination and be transported to another place and time. In a sense these are portraits not only of the subject. They are also portraits of ourselves and portraits of the artist, connecting to the memories and desires both of the photographer and the viewer. They reward inquiry in the kooky world around us.

Alison Lasek, 2015

Image credit: Christopher Köller, 'Ectoplasm' (detail) 1981, Type C print, 85x85cm

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