

WONDER



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With the Ability to Marvel

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by Marcel Feil ~ curator Foam_Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam

Imagine that the Martians succeeded, after all, in reaching Planet Earth and managed a safe landing. Without us earthlings noticing, they have lived among us for some time and have been able to examine our planet at their leisure. It is interesting to attempt to see our own environment through their eyes. What do they see? What strikes them? And what will fascinate them enough to take back with them as typical of our planet?

What these questions are really about, of course, is an attempt to see the world we assume to be familiar without any prior knowledge, without any prejudice or hypotheses. It is an attempt to see and experience things as they really are, as they exist outside of us. It's a renewed acquaintance without artificial connotations, and therefore as objective as possible. Of course that is extremely difficult, if not impossible. How can we escape from our own selves and experience the true nature of things? And what is that, anyway, the true nature of something? It's a question which philosophers and scientists have been asking themselves for centuries, and which they have not been able to answer satisfactorily. The problem is greatest when man and his actions are themselves the subject of observation, examination and analysis. That is where we encounter most obstacles. But in fact the same goes for every form of observation and for all phenomena. It has never really proved possible to separate the things around us from ourselves. Our links with the world, and vice versa, are so strong that it is not particularly odd to conclude that they are inextricably connected and that the world exists only because of us and within us.

Does this mean that we cannot be amazed about what happens on our planet? Yes, that indeed is what it means. But it doesn't mean that we cannot be amazed by the things we see around us. Thank God

it doesn't. Perhaps the ability to feel wonder and surprise is an intrinsic human quality. It makes us ask questions and is therefore the origin of knowledge and development. This, however, may be where the snake bites its own tail. For the more we know about the way the world is put together, the greater the danger that this will colour our way of looking at things and that prior knowledge will obstruct our ability to feel genuine wonder. In fact, however, our amazement may actually increase as our knowledge grows, and every answer may open up unknown worlds and raise new questions. This would make scientists the people with the strongest sense of amazement about our wondrous and inexplicable world.

Knowledge comes with the years. The occasional genuinely amazed scientist aside, the fact is that as time passes we feel less and less wonder and amazement. We just don't have the time. There's too much to do. In our daily lives we are mainly occupied with practicalities: getting dressed, eating, going to work, working, returning home. All our time is taken up with day-to-day worries, with all the things we still have to and want to do. Wonder is something for daydreamers, and our society is too focused on usefulness and efficiency to give them much sympathy or space. Our activities are result-oriented and it is on their results they are judged and valued. This attitude defines our perception, the way we see and experience things. Our brain filters out everything we don't need, at a given moment. And that is just as well. We cannot afford to walk around in a constant state of utter amazement. We would be caught in an autistic ecstasy. To function well in society, too much amazement is no help at all. I use e-mail and the internet dozens of times every day. I know how it works. By which I mean I know how to use it. I have come to take it for granted that it works if I hit a few keys. That no longer surprises me. But







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of course I don't really know in any detail how it works or how it has been constructed. There's no need for me to know. It's an invention I'm eager to use to my advantage without having a clue about the technology. That's nothing compared to the next generation, the teenagers in the street or in the playground. They are growing up in a world of gaming, broadband, satellites, interactive TV, texting and messaging. Nothing amazes them any more. The inherent danger is that they'll believe anything. Everything is possible – why shouldn't it be?

But how do you develop the ability to be amazed? Knowledge can be acquired, and so can behaviour and perhaps even taste. But wonder? It seems that it is an ability that only decreases as the years go by, crushed by the pressure of an achievement-oriented technology-based society. The danger that we take everything for granted, that we just accept everything we come across and lose our awareness of the wondrous, the bizarre, the unusual and the different is lurking just around the corner.

I recently watched one of my daughters closely study a strawberry. An ordinary strawberry. She took her time to do so, because a three-year-old doesn't yet have any real idea of time. She stared at it intensely. After a while she said: 'Look daddy, lots of little hairs!' She held up the strawberry, with an expression in which wonder and acceptance were in perfect harmony. She was right: every segment of the strawberry had its own yellowy-green little hair. It's something we could observe on any strawberry, but when do we take the time to study a strawberry in this way? Her discovery was the result of the untainted observation of a child who looks before she thinks.

Perhaps that is why a sense of wonder cannot really be learned. It's something that comes over you, suddenly and when you least expect it. Wonder is a strange phenomenon. Is it an emotion, a state of mind? In any case it's not something that can be summoned up – it just makes itself felt. For a moment you perceive things in a different way, and they appear strange or peculiar, as if the earth is tilted for a moment, changing the perspective.

But are we not constantly surrounded by things that arouse surprise, things we don't understand and which – when it comes down to it – are awesome or beautiful? Normally we pay them no attention and just carry on. It takes a particular sensitivity, the main precondition for which may well be an open, receptive mind, but it's incredibly hard to empty our minds and create space for new things to enter them without preconceptions. We would be a little like that three-year-old who discovers the world bit by bit, slowly creating a framework of knowledge and experience that makes it increasingly difficult to escape from reason, even for a moment.

One of the few fields where wonder has found a natural place is art. Art exists by virtue of a fresh way of looking at our world and the ability to be amazed by it. This gives form and meaning to the sense of wonder. It's the opposite of the practical and profit-oriented thinking that so impoverishes our society. In itself, art has no practical use.

Rarely has a tree been so beautifully portrayed as by the Hungarian writer and photographer Peter Nadas. He has a wild pear tree in his garden, which he photographed for a year at different times of the day and in different seasons, in ever changing light. The photographs are a silent, modest testament to the passage of time, barely perceptible but unstoppable and merciless. They are accompanied by *My Own Death*, a short story in which a man sees his life pass before his eyes while lying on the floor after a heart attack. After three and a half minutes, he comes round again. It's an occurrence that is as horrifying as it is commonplace. The two stories, presented in two different forms with different speeds, speak of time, mortality, acceptance and resistance, and of the thin line between life and death. Life and death, rise and fall are as incomprehensible as they are self-evident – for both the man and the tree. The difference is that the man knows it and suffers because of it. He can look back and see himself, albeit only briefly.

Perhaps life itself is, ultimately, the greatest wonder. No one knows why we are born, why we are who we are, how much time we have in this life or what the idea of death really is. I often think of the last words of a good friend's grandfather. He had devoted his whole life to the essence of man and to the way it relates to the rest of the universe. 'Well, I wonder...', he said – and then he died. Intrigued till the end, he surrendered to the inevitable.

While Nadas has created a very moving series about aging, the passing of time and mortality, in her beautiful book *Aila*, the Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi shows her bond with the world in quite a different way. Kawauchi's work is atmospheric and indirect. She shows a world caught in a divine light, before good and evil, a paradisiacal environment where all things have their natural place, however strange they may appear to us. It is an enchanted, vulnerable and fragile world. For Kawauchi it is of great importance that the people who see her work do so in an atmosphere of peace and security, as if, through her work, she wants to create an intimate and safe place to counterbalance the hurry and agitation of everyday life. In an interview with Masakazu Takei she once said: 'I want to create a quiet, intimate place where people can be alone and listen to their inner voices while they are looking at my work.' In her view, the photographs serve as instruments for reflection and meditation. They require a staring, unthinking way of looking, provoking an awareness of the miracle of life and of our living planet at every level. 'Aila' is a Turkish word for family and connection. In this case it may be interpreted as a feeling of connecting with the world, with an ideal of unity and essential mutual dependence. The longing for this ideal may perhaps provide compensation for the downside of modernity based on man disengaging himself from his natural environment and ultimately also from himself.

The photographic work of the Japanese monk Syoin Kajii is interesting in this context. Although Kajii himself is reserved about the relationship between his capacity as a monk and the photos he takes, drawing a comparison between the two is only natural. In the text Jim Casper has written to accompany Kajii's portfolio, he refers to Kajii's 'heightened sense of alertness' and the analogy between the impalpability of a wave and that of a Zen koan.

A koan is a paradoxical statement or unsolvable riddle which, in Zen Buddhism, serves to confuse a student in such a way that rational thinking is pushed to the background and direct observation takes its place. The continuous direct observation which can thus be attained, without preconceived notions and prejudice, becomes the state of mind that in

Buddhism is called enlightenment (*satori* in Japanese). Thus the waves photographed by Kajii do not appear to be recorded from a deliberate, conceptual viewpoint, rather they have originated from a completely open, unlimited receptivity to the characteristics of a wave. Where in the West, for example throughout the Romantic era, natural phenomena which were simply too large and too complex to be defined rationally were viewed with a mixture of fear and fascination, repulsion and attraction, the work of Kajii expresses far more acceptance that the essence of a wave ultimately escapes every form of capture.

Such acceptance is in essence alien to the Western approach to the world around us. Here, instead, there's a need to deal with the world rationally and to lay the phenomena we encounter in it on the operating table for dissection, description and analysis. This often gives rise to a relationship between nature and culture that is as absorbing as it is risky – risky because natural phenomena are thus forced into a straightjacket in our culture and looked at from a biased, conditioned viewpoint. The question then is how much justice is done to the often intangible characteristics of what is being investigated. Look, for example, at the intriguing spectacle the work of Sanna Kannisto offers us. She shows objects such as flowers, fruit, branches and occasionally a solitary small animal, which have been taken out of their natural environment and exhibited in the sterile, semi-scientific context of a field studio. About this process Kannisto herself says: 'In my series *Private Collection* and *Field Studies* I was interested in borrowing methods of representation, as well as working methods, from the natural sciences, from anthropological and archaeological practices and from still-life painting tradition to use in my photographic work. Taking photographs in a field studio has become one of my most important working methods. The portable photography box I have constructed is like a stage showing scenes from nature, which I direct. Once the object has been taken out of its original setting – out of nature – it becomes special. The aspect of a white background that suggests scientific recording and documentation interests me.' With a sense of humour and a certain irony, Kannisto investigates the way in which we approach nature and how the medium of photography interrelates with the recording and representation of reality, as well as with the accumulation of knowledge. By expressly making use of language and the theatre of science, she creates mildly absurd images that have a greater tendency to emphasize the impossibility of using this method to find out more about the exhibited objects.

The complex relationship between science and art, between knowledge and naivety, and the question of whether there is still room left over for wonder in our knowledge-determined world, also plays a large part in the fascinating work of the Dutch artist Koen Hauser, whose portfolio is included in this edition. A short time ago, Hauser was invited to create new work with material from the Spaarnestad Photo archives, one of the largest press archives in Europe. Driven by his own obsession with the diorama he interlaced the found images with work in which he himself is featured to render a fantasy world. In these carefully constructed images Hauser too plays with the idea of a world in which quite disingenuous things can be created and exist. It gives the feeling of a time in which there was still a place for voyages of discovery to unknown, mysterious distant places, a time in which there was still the opportunity to admire strange phenomena, a time that points to a past that is not yet so far behind us and where there was room for a fruitful and often wondrous mixture of science and fiction.

Usually such stories, and Hauser's images are no exception, deal with people with a particular obsession, people who are considered eccentric and idiosyncratic by others. Perhaps, however, these lone wolves are in fact open to the wonder in the world around us. In order to experience a miracle as such and marvel at our natural environment or the often curious behaviour of man and everything he has produced, there must be a certain distance. Ultimately, losing yourself in all-embracing holism is also the kiss of death. You cannot look at the world in wonder unless you do so with a certain detachment. This does not mean there cannot be a deeply felt social and natural bond. The opposite may well be the case. But those who are outsiders to some degree often have a well developed sense of the wondrous, remarkable or comical in what seems ordinary. Ultimately, it is about the juxtaposition of originality, individuality and singularity versus lethargy, blandness and conformism.

All images from the series Aila, 2004 © Rinko Kawauchi/Courtesy of the artist and FOIL GALLERY, Tokyo

*Rinko Kawauchi was born in 1972 in the Shiga prefecture in Japan. She studied at the Seian College of Art and Design and worked in advertising for several years before choosing a career as a fine art photographer. In 2001 she simultaneously released three publications, *Utatane*, *Hanabi*, and *Hanako*. Great critical success led to her becoming one of the most celebrated photographers in Japan. In 2002 she received the prestigious Annual Kimura Ihei Award. Her European debut was at the *Les Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie d'Arles* in 2004, curated by Martin Parr. Within a few years she had published three more significant books: *Aila* (2004) with Little More Publishing; *Cui Cui* (2005) and *The Eyes, The Ears* (2005) with FOIL Publishing. Rinko Kawauchi has worked with the Japanese filmmaker Hirokazu Kore-eda, making the still photographs for the award-winning film *Nobody Knows* (2004).*

With a simple, serene and poetical approach, Rinko Kawauchi depicts birth, life, death and time. She has sometimes presented her work alongside her own Haiku poetry, expressing her awe at everyday life.

Kawauchi has participated in many exhibitions in Japan and abroad. Major solo exhibitions have been at Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris; The Photographers' Gallery, London; Hasselblad Center, Göteborg; Semeur Museu de Arte Moderno de Sao Paulo and Huis Marseille, Amsterdam. Rinko Kawauchi is represented by FOIL Gallery in Tokyo.