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The Pool

THE WORK

LEFT TO RIGHT

Untitled #7
Cascais, Portugal, 2002

Untitled #27
Oslo, Norway, 2002

Untitled #11
Cascais, Portugal, 2002

Untitled #28
Oslo, Norway, 2003

Untitled #14
Annecy, France, 2002

Untitled #32
Oslo, Norway, 2002

Untitled #6
Cascais, Portugal, 2002

All images courtesy of:
Bonni Benrubi gallery (USA) and
Crane Kalman Brighton (UK).

C-print
50 x 50 cm or 75 x 75 cm

www.karinelaval.com
www.cranekalmanbrighton.com
www.bonribenrubi.com

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THE POOL. AS HER TITLE SUGGESTS, Karine Laval's photographs observe contemporary culture's obsession with leisure and the specific architectural spaces that are designed to facilitate such activity: locations which mix natural elements — water, beaches, etc. — with man-made constructions, and where families, friends, children and communities are pooled collectively on the same grounds. Public places in which we are forced to interact while supposedly unwinding from the stresses and strains of work and modern living. *The Pool* deals with the common and universal experiences of leisure and bathing but also with the broader issue of the relationship between body and space.

Laval's photographs rely on casual collisions and are at once vibrant, witty and spontaneous. Recording the world but transforming it at the same time, they find an extreme beauty in the banal and, by the same token, celebrate life and its more idle pleasures. By turns, the images snatch fleeting moments of people mid-air as they hurl themselves off jetties into the water or perch on the edge of diving boards doing nothing more than soaking up the sun. She recalls that whilst lounging beside one of Barcelona's outdoor public pools back in 2002 she was struck by the diversity of people as they went about their leisure activities, both the old and the young. Their repetitive movements seemed somewhat extravagant to her, like those of actors or contemporary dancers. She notes that the prosaic actions of people slipping in and out of the pool to cool off seemed curiously theatrical. *It felt like these scenes appeared to be composed by a silent choreographer. So I started to shoot with my old Rolleiflex, which allowed me to remain very discreet, almost invisible to the bathers, while being at a close distance. These scenes and my own experience of being there also reminded me of moments from my childhood (moments that were recorded by my family in hundreds of Super-8 movies...)*

Indeed, the influence of cinema has indelibly marked Laval's photographs: these scenes resemble a sort of stage set when isolated and frozen within the frame of the camera. *I never intervene in or set up the scenes. I photograph what I see but I like to make images with a narrative quality, she explains. I also try to question the ambiguity between reality and fiction, which is inherent to photography. The deliberate choice of a strong, sometimes surreal, colour palette reinforces this aspect. I also think that in my images you can imagine what's outside the frame, what happened before and what may happen after, a little bit like a still image from a movie.*

Cinema is also invoked in this body of work by the use of off-kilter compositions, unusual angles and odd cropping, the combination of which exhibits a set of strong formal lines — diagonals, horizontals and verticals — all intersecting and superimposing themselves upon each other. The fact that Laval uses a Rolleiflex means that by looking through the lens from above, she can tilt the camera to get peculiar perspectives which add to the humorous and quirky nature of the images. But it must be said that colour, however, is the real linchpin of her work. Not only does her particular palette serve to structure many of the compositions but it also works as an expressive tool and is as much a subject of her photographs as the swimmers themselves. In some cases, she opts for the bleached-out tones, a function of overexposing the film. Under these conditions layers of colour fade away; the constellations of bodies teeter on the threshold of visibility. This overexposure is also responsible for another striking feature: the absence of a sense of time. Here in *The Pool* series the summer appears endless, and could just as easily belong to bygone years. The dappled sunlight pierces through the heat haze resembling an endless, recurring dream interrupted only by the flotsam and jetsam of modern bathing wear. On other occasions, the colours are more saturated and the contrast is sharp, intensified by a dramatic chiaroscuro that springs from light reflected off the water and the darkness that lurks below its surface.

Adopting a *cross process* technique and adapting it to suit her own aesthetic agenda has become instrumental to her signature style. She developed this procedure by shooting with slide film and then deliberately processing it in a chemical normally used for negative films. Further manipulation in the darkroom yields such unnatural colours, ushering in the images' otherworldly feel. Given her rapidly growing reputation, it comes as no surprise to learn that this series was selected, alongside the work of Martin Parr and Massimo Vitali, for the 2003 exhibition *Contemporary Colour Photography* at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery in New York. Yet, at the same time, her work stands alone and resists comparison to anything else in photography. The curators though were evidently smitten by the masterful way she photographed the clear-cut azure blue of the sea at a lido in Cascais, Portugal or the serene whiteness of Barcelona's city pool.

THE ARTIST

KARINE LAVAL is a photo artist living in New York. Her work has been exhibited worldwide at numerous solo and group shows; she is represented by the Bonni Benrubi Gallery (NYC) and Crane Kalman Gallery Brighton, UK.

THE WRITER

TIM CLARK is a writer and lecturer on photography living in Barcelona. He works as an art critic for *The Metropolitan*, *Barcelona* and has contributed to various international publications. He is also the founder and editor of the online contemporary photography magazine, 1000words.







