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Pernille Koldbech Fich - Künstlerhaus Bethanien

Danish artist Pernille Koldbech Fich continues to refine her work in the genre of photographic portraiture. She has long situated her subjects within specific surroundings, with both subject and context characterizing each other reciprocally. For the early series "Søstre" (sisters), 2002-2004, she photographed diakonisser, or Danish ordained nurses, in their own living quarters, letting the rooms that they themselves designed serve as an expressive stage.

Since then she has been emptying out her studio and stylizing her backdrops, emphasizing the pictorial space in itself as an atmospheric medium with powerful psychological and poetic connotations. "I wanted to minimize my expression," the artist reports, "and was interested in how much narrative I could tell by portraying people without a visible sense of belonging." To this end she developed an unusual process: First she arranges the setting, then she invites a group of people she hardly knows and allow their spontaneous interactions to suggest ideas for staging the image. Not until a second sitting does she take her individual portraits with a large-format camera. "It's a challenge to work with people I don't know. But it means I avoid too many preconceptions about their personalities," Koldbech Fich says, "seeing them `fresh,´ so to speak. I still have this excitement. For me it's important that none of us gets used too much to the situation of being photographed." The result of these simultaneously artificial and authentic encounters can be seen in the series *Introducing Viola* 2005 -2007, and *Black* 2009 - 2011.

The installation at Bethanien, comprising excerpts from these series, was designed to amplify the atmospheric, painterly effect of these large, dark-toned pictures: Hung at carefully measured yet intervals in a slightly darkened room, the photographs were precisely illuminated. Warm brown tones dominate in *Introducing Viola* and silvery luminous and deep black expanses in *Black* - indefinite, timeless-looking spaces that appear almost to enfold the figures. Koldbech Fich here often expands the image to a half- or whole-body portrait, bringing in body language as a part of the subject's portrayal. In *Black*, 2006 - a picture of an elderly man standing in a gray suit, shot from behind- the subject's bearing and his unexpected turning away from the camera are powerfully evocative. The woman portrayed in half-length in *Black center/earring#1*, 2009, also appears to be self-absorbed and strangely isolated, while the portrait achieves tremendous expressiveness via the empathetic reduction of pictorial elements.

Koldbech Fich has also been experimenting with pictures lacking a human subject that in this context nonetheless constitute portraits of a sort. *Bed and Breakfast #1*, 2005, for example, was shot on the set of "Introducing Viola" after the initial meeting of the protagonist. We see carafes and used glasses placed in a corner on the floor. The coloration and lightning are reminiscent of an old-master still life, while the composition's overall emptiness points to abandonment.

Similar, though far more abstract, is *Black board/table/light*, 2010. One can make out snatches of reality in the blur only after a delay: Reflected in the shiny black surface of a board that served as a backdrop on the set of *Black*, the edge of a table juts slightly into the image, with strips of tape marking the blocking of the figures, and harsh lightning transforming this real space into a sort of strange imaginary realm. *Black board/table/light* presents the essence of this series of portraits, which have been condensed into a maximum concentration of imaginative intensity.

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.