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Edition 5, Excerpt: Marc Kiska

*“To photograph is to hold one's breath,  
when all faculties converge to capture fleeting reality.  
It's at that precise moment that mastering an image  
becomes a great physical and intellectual joy.”*

~Henri Cartier-Bresson



# MARC KISKA



Marc Kiska was born in France in 1983, raised by schoolteachers in a small town. As a youth he was attracted to underground cultures, decadence, and rebellion. He realized as a young boy that he had an attraction towards other boys. Shame, denial, and confusion from being different in several ways undoubtedly marked his world view. Kiska started writing at the age of 14, in love with fantasy, the wonders of dreams, and internal twisted worlds of youngsters: doubting, opposing, and distrusting the hollow, grave reality of adulthood. Attending an authoritarian boarding school to become a chef represented a watershed moment in his life.

After graduating, he decided to leave France. Joining an exchange program, he randomly picked a tiny little mountain village in the middle of Norway. After a year, at 18, ostracized by his peers for being different, he fled to the capital, where he immediately met a young artist to whom he is married today, living on a small farm three kilometers into the forest of Norway. At the age of 20 he started taking a fast and growing interest in photography, discovering a whole new dimension in which he could express himself and the narratives from his stories. Some years later he attended a one-year photography course. Since then Kiska has devoted himself completely to his art, mainly photos, but still writing, doing some cinematic work, and sculpture.

**Vitruvian Lens:** Why do you focus on male subjects?

**Marc Kiska:** I have always been attracted to the male body. I find it expressing even more beauty than the female one. I don't think it is only because I am gay. A lot of gay artists work with female models. When I was young I looked at the male body and found

myself very touched by its splendor. I was not ashamed by it. It was very natural for me to have those feelings even if I didn't talk about it or really understand it. It was like an inspiration in a way.

I like to show bodies that reveal fragility, purity, and sometimes androgyny. It makes me feel that I'm looking at something almost divine, transcending the boundary of flesh itself, something that can't be defined—in between extremes—that doesn't fit into categories at all. It challenges the mind. It is as if masculinity and femininity merges into something completely new. My work isn't just about beauty.



Left: Kiska, *Metaphysics of the City*, 2006

Right: Kiska, *Sunday Morning Blues*, 2012



Above: Kiska, *The Cook's Apprentice*, 2010

Right: Kiska, *Wound Licking*, 2009

I take mostly pictures of young men because I am interested in the period in life when everything is possible. Magic and strong feelings are flowing, like hormones and something that can get quite close to madness. I'm trying to express through my photos how difficult it is to leave most of this magic to enter the serious and rational world of the adult in the contemporary society drowned by responsibilities, expectations, duties, and distress.

**V.L.:** What is it about your approach that sets your work apart from other photographers of the figure?

**M.K.:** I have to admit that I never actually talk much about my work. I look like a fool at my exhibitions, making these silly grins, laughing mostly when I get comments or questions. I am not the intellectual type at all, not a conceptualist, and I certainly do not feel comfortable lobbying—self promotion and trying to be at the right places at the right time to catch the right people's attention. I do this because I am not able not to. My inspiration comes from my emotions, and decrypting these images and impulses seems

paradoxical to me. Pascal said something that speaks to me I guess—my partner told me: "The heart has its reason that reason does not know."

For the past ten years, my pictures have been quite dark, fanciful, and sometimes childlike: A boy with a small tree in his hotel bed, or a big fish in his bathtub, together with a painted tree in a clearing of an old forest, a stripe of colorful flowers growing in a dirty cave. Symbols are important in my work, and I spend much time looking for the perfect locations and accessories. I often use places close to where I live, strange or spooky spaces like basements, attics, deserted houses, caravans, etc. I love surroundings making a surrealistic impression and dreamlike, like burnt down houses or falling apart buildings, taken over by the forest.

I am also quite fascinated by industrial spaces. One time I took pictures of a friend of mine in an abandoned wooden house situated alongside the railway of Oslo. We were supposed to come back the



next day to finish the work, but when we got there, construction workers were already half way taking the whole house down! I like to work with places and with accessories which one normally wouldn't get access to. One of my first sessions was actually inside the walls of the City Hall of Oslo. I used to work there as a cook, and I had discovered that there was a small, secret passage inside some of the walls. Some years ago I created pictures with at least a hundred kilos of out-of-date Christmas sausages. I use a lot of bright light and shadows, and often smoke.

Sexuality is a part of my work too which I sometimes get criticized for. Some people find it too challenging maybe. I remember one time this woman got hysterical over one of my photos showing two people having sex wearing animal masks. Sexual experimentation is important during adolescence. Not just in relation to different kinds of people, drugs, or positions, but in a way that is influenced by a kind of desperation and naivety, curious and almost bizarre expressions that we often lose quite fast, trying to fulfill some type of ideal or recipe, striving to make it porn-like or Hollywood-like, intellectualizing it, instead of letting it develop freely from your guts. Tamed or alienated by shame and fear of rejection maybe. I use quite a bit of naked skin to express that, pushing forward the undressed, raw side of the human, without the cover by which we are judged and categorized. I have been told several times that I was the dark side of James Bidgood. Maybe that gives an idea of my style.

**V.L.:** Other than the lady you mentioned, have you had other negative experiences?

**M.K.:** I'm immediately categorized as gay. This is not a problem, because I'm openly gay. But it would be sad if one reduced pictures showing naked people as communicating purely lust or the artist's sexuality. I wouldn't like my work to be labeled as gay art, or even activism, even though it sometimes can show two boys together as lovers. People relate so differently to homosexuality. For me it is natural that my pictures are influenced by my sexuality. Being part of a minority that undeniably is marked by much rejection and prejudice complicating sexual identity, makes it maybe more salient to who I am. Art is very often autobiographical. But I think that my work deserves more than only this approach.





Above: Kiska, *Another Room*, 2007

Next Pages: Kiska, *Imperium*, 2007







My photos are taken mostly outside. Two years ago, I photographed two naked men, carrying horns as elks on the roof of a tall building in the political centre of Oslo. At that time, a group of people were on the roof terrace of a building close, to having a smoke, and when they discovered us, some of the women started screaming. At first we thought they were cheering, but soon we could hear them swearing furiously. It amazed me that a naked male body can provoke such fury.

**V.L.:** Tell me something people might not know about you or your work?

**M.K.:** I work alone most of the time. I'm an autodidact and learn what I need to know through books or the Internet. I did go to this photo school, but I had already learned much of what was taught there. Before that I was developing my black and white film in my bathroom. When I organize a photo shoot, I am taking care of almost everything myself. It can be quite challenging. As often he has time, I ask assistance from my husband though. He used to do modeling, and he is also into art, so you often find him in my pictures, either as a model or some touch here and there. He is also a psychologist, which can be nice during shoots when taking care of the social circumstances—sometimes he even helps me develop my ideas.

You seldom see me working in a studio. It is not because I don't like studios, but simply because of lack of access. I live far into the countryside, and for now I haven't yet had one built. Sometimes I really want one, especially in the city, where it would be easier to get people to come. For me it would be an empty room where I could build scenarios. It would certainly not be a place with a lot of equipment and paper backgrounds. I have worked in fashion photography studios before, and I have to admit, I find it boring.

**V.L.:** Where do you find your models?

**M.K.:** For years my models were friends, friends of friends, and my husband. Later I found my models on the Internet, model agencies, social media sites, etc. It's a long process, since I'm a man looking for young men, it can be tricky to have the boys believing that I'm not looking for sex, and it is too often difficult to get them to my locations. As I work a lot at home it is a great issue, and I would sometimes have to drive quite far to get them and drive them back again.

One time a guy who modeled for me moved to Berlin, a boy with a really beautiful body who

wanted to be photographed naked. The location for the shoot was the house of my husband's father. We took pictures in the basement where the boy took off his clothes; I let pink paint run down his body, like a fluid flowing from his nipples. My father-in-law was having a party with his American van fanatic friends; big wasted men with leather jackets. When the shoot was over, the boy covered with pink paint had to cross the garden with only a little towel around his hips to get to the shower. All those huge men were sitting on the porch looking at this skinny thing running in nature as if it was a paranormal activity of some sort. We had a good laugh.

**V.L.:** Tell us about your very first exhibition.

**M.K.:** My very first exhibitions were group exhibitions when I went to this photo school and later at cultural events. My first solo exhibition was in 2012 in a small gallery situated near the City Hall of Oslo. I exhibited my series, *Alt for Norge* (All for Norway), about the Norwegian culture as seen from the teenager's perspective. It was about national identity, patriotism, and how it affects the teenager's self-understanding. A lot of people thought it had something to do with what happened on the 22nd July 2011, when this Norwegian extremist and cultural conservative killed all those teenagers in a terrorist attack. For at least a year every speech and every happening mentioned this, and everything seemed to *thematise* this horror. I don't even have TV, so I guess I was spared from a lot of the collective hysteria around it. Some people didn't understand the surrealism of my pictures I think. It was quite confusing. The exhibition was on the yearly queer festival of Oslo program, since some of the pictures showed boys kissing. I was also showing some other pictures in this queer collective exhibition by the group Skeive Kunstnere as I thought that it would be nice to reach a bigger public. A lot of LGTB people came by. It all got kind of mixed up—and ended in a hell of a party.

My first sale was during one of my early group exhibitions. I had a photo divided in four showing a boy holding a piece of meat shaped as a heart. A man bought it during the opening preview, and he came back some days later to buy another picture. I remember thinking that I priced the picture too high, and that I would never sell it. I was so surprised and happy that it was sold right away and to see how it touched the buyer. He immediately took it with him, as if he needed it right away for something very important and mysterious. I still am in contact with



Kiska, *Missing Shoe*, 2014



Kiska, *The Knave who was so Hungry for Meat*, 2011



Kiska, *The Troll Elk*, 2012 (cropped)

this man, and he comes to all my exhibitions. Pricing my photos is always difficult. I want them to be priced as works of art that took me a lot of time to create, but I also want my work to be accessible to people with less finances.

**V.L.:** When did you first want to be an artist?

**M.K.:** I realized that I wanted to be an artist when I was around 14 years old. Both my twin sister and older brother are artists too. I began with writing, and really believed I could live as an author. The photography came later, as I wanted to illustrate my short stories, even though I got my first camera when I was 11. The photography took over the writing nearly ten years now. I have just finished my second novel that I hope to publish soon.

**V.L.:** Other than photography, what else do you do?

**M.K.:** I have worked a lot as a cook and a waiter in Oslo, mostly at the City Hall. I now have a part time job as a cook in a psychiatric institution. It is quite good for inspiration actually. Years back I worked as an assistant for photographers for two years and from time to time I do little photo shoots for people who need photos taken, like at weddings for instance. But I try to do as little as possible with my camera that isn't for me, if you see what I mean.

I also spent the last six years entirely renovating two old houses with my husband. Selling the houses has enabled us to buy a small farm lost in the middle of the forest. Being surrounded by nature and having no neighbors was what we were looking for.

**V.L.:** What subject is the most challenging for you as an artist to capture?

**M.K.:** The expression of a face for sure. When I'm working, I need at least half an hour to be at ease, and to be sure that my model is too. I have to, so that I am able to see what I am looking for through the lens. It is magical—suddenly I know that I have caught something, it's like catching a fish—you need to hold on and don't miss the catch. The model also needs time to relax and find out what I want.



Kiska, *Awaiting the Prince*, 2009

Most of this goes on at a subtle level, but is ever so critical. The last pictures are often the best I find, that is when I can really find a look on my model's face that will be the answer to my idea. It can also be difficult for the model to really understand what I want since I have to explain myself in Norwegian, which is not my mother tongue.

Working with more than two people is also very challenging I think. Since I am mostly not working with professional models, it can be difficult for my models to understand that I don't want to show them as they are, like in fashion photography or pure portraits, but I need them to be like actors, playing a role. Often they want beautiful pictures of themselves but we don't always share the same concept of beauty I guess.

You can read more about Marc Kiska at his website:  
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