

HELENE SCHMITZ

Studies in Falling

photography

08.11.2024 > 08.01.2025

PRIVATE VIEW	Thursday 7 November – 5 pm > 8:30 pm
TALK	Friday 8 November – 6 pm: Meet Helene Schmitz
SUNDAY OPENING	Sunday 8 December – 2 pm > 6 pm
MEET	Tuesday nov. 26th – 6 pm > 8 pm « Les artistes font salon » – meeting with Helene Schmitz upon reservation only at reservation@photodays.paris Leica Store Village Royal – 26 rue Boissy d'Anglais, 75008
WINTER CLOSURE	from 22.12 to 29.12.2024 and on Jan. 1st 2025

The title of Swedish photographer Helene Schmitz's exhibition, *Studies in Falling*, is anything but univocal. In English and in French alike, the verb to fall —*chuter*— refers to the physical act of descending as well as a condition of *detachment from one's natural medium* and, metaphorically, the *entering in a state of degradation*. In Judeo-Christian culture, the term *fall* —*chute*— refers to the exile of humankind from paradise. From the get-go, *Studies in Falling* thus conveys a meeting of multiple topics, simultaneously pragmatic, symbolic, and transcendent.

Inspired by the 1818 painting *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* by the figurehead of German Romanticism Caspar David Friedrich, Helene Schmitz went to the island of Rügen itself, facing Germany's North coast in today's Jasmund National Park.

Friedrich's painting depicts a woman sideways and two men from the back, standing from a plateau where trees open to reveal a view overlooking the cliffs and the sea. The figures are contemplative, gazing at the chalk formations glistening in a strong and blinding light. As usual with Friedrich, the characters seen from the back invite the audience to also look at what they are looking at: the cliffs, then the sea and the horizon, and all the vastness of a dramatic landscape. There is great beauty in this painting, yet it is tinged with a feeling of fragility and dread from the potential collapse of the cliffs. This duality of emotions mirrors those of the characters themselves, overlooking the abyss and oscillating between fascination and vulnerability, between a sense of belonging and one of loneliness.

With the series of photographs *Studies in Falling*, Helene Schmitz chose to reverse the point of view and to be facing the location of Friedrich's protagonists. From a boat, she photographed the cliffs, this great hilly wall of limestone edged with a dense birch forest. By changing perspectives, not only does Helene Schmitz echo the undeniable beauty of the place, but she also ponders over the materiality created by the invisible meeting between the sky, the sea, and the land —*terra not so firma*. In *Seen from Here*, the precariousness of the landscape is tangible: the ongoing process of erosion can be seen through the wall of limestone as well as several trees threatening to fall.

The cliffs offer a vision between the known and the unknown. In this sense, the chalk they are made of is formed through millennia of sea microorganisms living and dying, thus becoming a "*testament to time's quiet work*".* The cliffs are therefore built from past lives, and by being in turn subject to erosion and collapses, are a witness of the infinite circle of organic transformations. *Bones of the Earth* is a horizontal black and white photograph, frieze-like, depicting the high cliffs, white as bones, upon which spreads a small strip of dark trees. By using the word *bones*, the artist conveys the idea of a supporting frame, essential yet bound

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to change. Their resistance to the movements of the sea, limited in time, turn the cliffs into a reflection of our ever-changing existence.

In her previous series (*Sunken Gardens*, 2010; *Kudzu project*, 2013; *Earthworks*, 2014; *The Forest* 2015; and *Thinking like a Mountain*, 2017), Helene Schmitz already alluded to the ephemeral, both literally in nature and metaphorically. These images sought to highlight the equivocal link between humans and their natural habitat: with nature symbolising paradise lost and the epitome of harmony, humankind have always striven to own and control it, in response against chaos. As technology evolves, humankind's interventions and increasingly violent exploitation of the Earth leave visible marks, like open wounds in the landscape. Limestone is not only the frame of the earth, it is also a major component of concrete, which in turn becomes the backbone of contemporary building work. By revisiting Friedrich's perspective and reversing it, Helene Schmitz opens it up and invites us, two centuries later, to look differently. **In *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*, the outlook is one of humankind's futility and insignificance in its battle against nature and the divine.** In her photographs, Helene Schmitz showcases the intuitive cycle of nature, spectacular, perpetually withering yet reborn, along with a stark observation of nature's premature decline in a contemporary context. In *Studies in Falling*, light and darkness, fossilised life and organic life –all merge before the vastness of the sky and the sea, that cradles and devours.

*Excerpt from Helene Schmitz: *Studies in Falling / The Island*, 01.10.2024 "[...] compressed into a solid testament to time's quiet work".

background

Born in 1960, Helene Schmitz lives and works in Stockholm, Sweden. She graduated in art history, cinema, and art theory (Stockholm University 1988, Konstfack 1977). Moved by her life-long desire to capture the ephemeral, she turned to photography as medium of choice. For twenty years, the relationships between humans, nature, and the elements have been at the core of her work.

She has had regular exhibitions at Swedish institutions: Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2011), Fotografiska, Stockholm (solo – 2016), Skellefteå Konsthall (solo – 2017), Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde, Stockholm (solo – 2018), Tommelilla Konsthall (solo – 2020), Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm (2022).

Her work is currently presented at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm as part of the exhibition *The Romantic Eye* (26.09.2024 – 05.01.2025).

Helene Schmitz's work is also shown in **France: Musée d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris (2007), Transphotographiques, Palais Rameau, Lille (2010), Paysages intérieurs, Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire (solo – 2014), Le parfum dans tous les sens, Palais Royal, Paris (2015), L'arbre, le bois, la forêt, CAC, Meymac (2015), and CHAOS, QPN#19, Nantes (solo – 2015).** In 2014, she was finalist of the **Prix Photo Caméra Clara** with her series *Kudzu Project*.

For twenty years, Helene Schmitz has had exhibitions worldwide (Estonia, Denmark, Norway, Ireland, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Germany, Slovenia, South Korea, United Arab Emirates, and Turkey – the Istanbul Biennial with the *Feral Atlas Collective*, 2019). In 2019, Fotografisk Center in Copenhagen hosted a personal exhibition for the artist, followed by *Thinking Like a Mountain* at **Fotografiska, NYC (2020)**, a solo show at **House of Sweden, Washington (2021)**, and an exhibition as part of the **Oslo Negativ Photo Festival (2023)**.

Helene Schmitz's work has joined the **collections of Moderna Museet, SEB, and Bonnier (Stockholm), of the Västerås Konstmuseum, of the Arts Council and Culture Agencies in Stockholm and Copenhagen, of the local councils in Oslo, Falun, and Rättvik, of the Public Art Agency Sweden (Stockholm), and of the Château de Chaumont-sur-Loire.**

Helene Schmitz also undertook **public commissions**: creation of a stamp for the Swedish post (2015), series of photographs for the underground station Mariatorget in Stockholm (2013-2015), and a commission for Karolinska Hospital (2010). Part of her activity is dedicated to her **books: *Blow Up – Natur och Kultur* (2003), *A passion for Systems, From the Shade of the Rainforest, Daniel Rohlander and the Journey to Surinam* (2012), *Borderlands* (2015), *Thinking Like a Mountain* (2018), and *1983* (2022).** Several of her books have been awarded the *Publishing Prize* in Sweden and have been acknowledged by the National Library of Sweden.

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