

IF YOU'RE DIFFERENT, YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THAT YOU'RE DIFFERENT

Interview with Kajsa Gullberg for EYEMAZING Magazine #2 2010 by Per Folkver

Kajsa Gullberg was born in 1977 in Gothenburg, Sweden, and has lived and worked in Copenhagen, since 1996. She was educated at Fatamorgana, the Danish national photographic art school, and Denmark's Design School, and works as both a freelance photographer and graphic designer. But this description, although accurate, does not come close to describing who Gullberg actually is. What her CV won't tell you is that Gullberg is interested in scars and wrinkles. It may be the marks on the bodies of others that she photographs but it's her own story she's telling.

You are currently working on a project you call Womanity. Explain what it's about.

The project consists of three parts: A personal part, which is mostly about who I am and who I want to be; a universal part, which deals with life, death, and the marks life makes on the body; and a political part, which is basically about the control society wants to exercise over us – a form of control that we often subject ourselves to. This is the feministic part, which explores how we reclaim the right to our own bodies. Our culture calls for a society without flaws and wants us to have a perfect life.

Why did you begin working on this project?

Two years ago, I became a woman, artist, and mother, enquiring, sensitive, strong, hectic and tolerant... and sharp.

But I didn't feel this way until two years ago. I had lived a pretty isolated life and felt very small for a very long time, which of course I wasn't. All of my energy was focused on the home front instead of myself. I worked in a design company where I never really felt comfortable. If you're different, you have to understand that you're different. If you don't understand that, you will keep comparing yourself to the norm and you will always be amiss. But if you understand that you are different, you design your own framework and seek the places that are able to confirm that you are different. Then, instead of being amiss, you are just different. I have to define my own boundaries to avoid that feeling of being in the wrong.

I have always felt like an artist, but I suppressed this feeling for 10 years. Then in 2008 I had what you could call a vision, that I could just as well take all of the energy I was spending to suppress myself and use it to express myself. So I decided that in 2009 I would accept, respect and

focus on myself as an artist. Six months later, I quit my job. I self-published my second book, which featured photos of people at Roskilde Festival. And I decided to leave my husband and begin the Womanity project.

The universal and the intuitive: what do these mean to you?

I am open – I don't believe in God, but I feel that I have a connection to something I call The Universal, which connects all people. I have this same connection to other people, which has been difficult to live with, because I sense people's moods and emotions strongly, which sometimes affects me greatly. But at the same time, it is also what enables me to take the pictures I do. I can spend two minutes with a person and then take pictures that exude openness and vulnerability. I feel that the pictures in Womanity are open and laid bare. I also take singing lessons, where I work on singing thoughts I have written down. Then I improvise, even though it's embarrassing to expose myself so completely. But to me it's about understanding what these women are actually doing for me when they take their clothes off and allow me to photograph them. They expose themselves, putting on display what our culture does everything in its power to forget – the imperfect, ugly and embarrassing. We want to be loved as we are, but we are constantly being told that it's impossible and that we have to change.

So you try to subject yourself to the same thing you subject your models to?

Perhaps I don't really need to sing those thoughts, because I feel that I already know a lot about vulnerability and being exposed. Maybe I do it to remind myself what it is like to stand in front of the camera and take off all your clothes and show the things you've always tried to hide.

What has becoming a mother meant to you?

When I became a mother and looked at the child I had given birth to, it was a shock. Suddenly I realised that this child was now going to have to experience all of the pain I had experienced. I cried and cried, but when I stopped, I realised that happiness without pain is impossible. I have often experienced anxiety and been depressed and it sucks. But it's a part of life and sometimes it is also what makes life great and puts it in perspective.

What do you believe in?

I am an atheist. I believe that everything we have is right here and now. The women I photograph have traces of life, scars and wrinkles – that's what I'm looking for, the marks that life makes on us. We shouldn't only show the good side of ourselves and all of our success, because there is no success without defeat. In the US, they believe in people who have gone bankrupt multiple times – the thought is

that they know what they are talking about, since they have been through all of the processes.

You say that the women you photograph are models and that you use them. Is this a conscious method?

Well, I do use them. I'm not taking portraits of them. I think that some of the women I photograph feel that I am taking portraits of them, and I probably also do sometimes. But I use their faces and their bodies to tell my own stories. I am seeking a narrative; it's not a narrative I've already created or thought out. And I like that about this project. My head is running like the Autobahn, all the time and in both directions. And there are constant collisions. That's also what it's about when I go to singing lessons. I try to create this project from my gut, but my mind jumps in all the time. But if I can continue the project and finish it, I am sure that I can extract the gut essence and put it into the pictures.

Are you creating a form of theatre?

Yes, actually, because the pictures are staged. I'm directing all the time. The pictures of scars and wrinkles is my story. I use the models to tell my own story.

How do you do this?

Taking pictures in people's homes and without a black background is new to me. First I tell them about the project and then they tell me about their scars. Then

I walk around their home and find a good location, which could be a corner or a chair. Then I decide on what light to use and ask them to loosen up, let their jaw drop open and breathe deeply with their stomach. Look this way, turn your head, lift your chin, close your eyes, show me your scar. They don't do anything themselves. I distract them and make them forget that they are about to be photographed.

Do you know how it is supposed to end before you begin, or do you allow yourself to be led by your models?

No, I don't know in advance. I'm constantly seeking, seeking, seeking. I would like to be able to stay within myself more, but I haven't gotten there yet – I think I am too hectic. I would like to be able to sit down and look at them and speak even more with them.

So why don't you?

Because I get so shy.

Do you hide behind the camera?

Yes.

You say that Womanity has three parts, but couldn't you also add sexuality as a fourth part?

Many of the women I photograph are, like me, in their mid-30s and are very interested in sexuality, and that is why I am so interested in it right now. Their thoughts

reflect many of my own thoughts in the past six months. Therefore I am focused on it now, but the project might look completely different six months from now. But there wouldn't be any people without sexuality. Eat, sleep, sing, fuck.

It isn't a completely conscious decision, but I am often very pleased with the pictures that come out.

Womanity is a search. I want to recapture the place and time when I did not see myself through the eyes of others – a place and a time where my body and my desires belonged to me alone.

You haven't even mentioned the word love. Why not? Are you afraid of love?

When you say love, I immediately think of twosomeness, and that is the life I need a break from. Love is my core value in life. I see two extremities: love and emptiness. The best and the worst. I have a lot of love; I inherited it from my mother, and I give a lot of love. So when you ask if I am afraid of love, I think: I am love. And that I am not afraid of something I am. But at this stage in my life, I am incredibly afraid of twosomeness love, because it limits me so drastically. I get so absorbed and possessed by the other person that everything ends up being about that. Everything else disappears, including myself and my pictures.

No matter what happens, my daughter is always number one, followed by my pictures. And that is where twosomeness is a threat, because then the pictures are no longer number two, but number three. I will probably do it again – I'll probably have more kids and everything, but right now I just want to give this everything I have.

When I have a period where I feel down and everything is black, it hits me with a bang and somehow I turn it around and become incredibly productive. I take fantastic pictures and I seek out other people, using the relations that arise as part of my own process, in which I mirror my own desperation to tell my story through the pictures.

When I meet a man, I become possessed. I know that this will eventually happen. It's happened before and it will happen again. It happens in my head. I want to meet the light and when it also involves sex it's because it's a way of forgetting myself. To take a break a break from myself. To be fulfilled by another, both literally and, just as importantly, mentally. In a way, I use these emotions to get a fix and when I don't get them I become restless, anxious and can't concentrate. And this is where many men opt out.

If you know that you disappear if you enter into a relationship, how can you say that you will do it again?

Maybe I hope that I will become a wise and sagely woman who can manage all of these things at some point. Maybe I hope that I can learn something, develop and grow, so that I can have it all: relationship, family life, myself and art.

What does the word freedom mean to you?

Well, it certainly does not make me think in terms of twosomeness. But I think that I have all the freedom a person could desire. I live in Denmark and am doing exactly what I want. On the other hand, I think that free will is problematic.

I lived with an old punk for eight years who thought that the whole idea of removing body hair was nonsense. It really surprised me what a taboo that is. Not removing hair, that is. Today, not removing your body hair is a choice. The norm is that you do remove it. The fact that I haven't even considered removing my body hair then becomes an involuntary statement on my part. It's a contradiction in our culture that we apparently value individual freedom so much without actually having it. In a way, it is a sick control of the body, but perhaps also a form of control that is not voluntary. And I'm not sure that it's womanly to be so fixated on control.

We also think that we need a big apartment and two children. I also think that that's wrong. It's almost worse living in a democracy that is a lie than living in a dictatorship where you know what you have and what you don't. But I think that we live much of our lives in a lie.

Don't you think that many people are satisfied with their lives?

Why do they complain so much? Aren't we an entire country of complainers?

Why do you think that they don't change their lives then?

They are afraid.

What are they afraid of?

Of the unknown. We are all afraid of the unknown.

What are you most afraid of?

Not being loved. And at the same time, I know that I am affirmed more than anything by what I do and the pictures I take. And I am afraid of emptiness.