

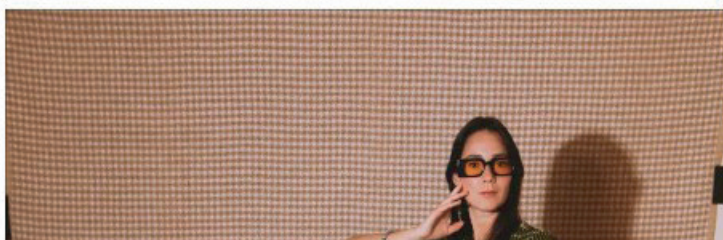
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“Together, we created a third eye” – Conversation with Elsa and Johanna

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Two recurring faces, countless characters and stories. Reality, fiction, nostalgia, melancholy, identity, longing, memory and loneliness.

These mingle in the work of two French photographers, Elsa Parra and Johanna Benaïnous, who have been working together since 2014. The duo's specialty is to photograph themselves in the various characters, playing the roles of model, stylist, set designer and photographer. Their sensitive and meticulous work explores geographical, social and cultural milieus, interpreted through the medium of photography. The exhibition *Climbing into Another Skin - The many lives of Elsa and Johanna* in the Mai Manó House shows the duo's three projects.



K. A. You met exactly 10 years ago in the United States. What was your most memorable experience in New York? What impulses did you have there that perhaps helped you to create or laid the foundations for your creative method?



J. B. The most memorable experience was certainly discovering the city and its culture together, sharing the same perspective. America has cradled pop culture for centuries and it was very exciting to immerse ourselves in it.

We found ourselves spending a lot of time strolling around the city, observing everything around us. We could spend hours on a bench commenting and exchanging thoughts on the faces we saw, the clothes people wore, their postures and the gazes they gave us.

E. P. Exploring the city together, taking photography courses at the university and meeting new people. Everything was new and it was a wonderful experience to share it with each other. We enjoyed going to popular neighborhoods of Brooklyn, especially we loved the Puerto Rican neighborhood. We were wandering around, observing the people, the houses. It all inspired us.

portrait
© Elsa &
Johanna

J. B.

We also talked a lot about our lives and realized that we shared certain related childhood memories, even though we didn't grow up in the same regions. The intersection of our memories, our budding friendship and common observations undoubtedly kindled the flame of our decade-long collaboration.

E. P.

We also both shared a love of the American photography movement, such as the work of William Eggleston. So tall this created a creative emulsion between us.

K. A.

Creating as a duo requires a certain kind of connection. Are your personal characters similar or complementary? When you work together how are roles usually divided between you?

J. B.

When we began working together, it was essential that we could both do the same things in parallel. Since we usually work without assistants and we both modeling in our photographs, we need to be autonomous at every step of creation, such as dressing, make-up, hair, lighting and photography. We have to be autonomous in every step of the creation process, as we usually work without an assistant and we are both our own models. Together, we created a "third eye", a common identity, which required a completely horizontal relationship in our work. We trust each other completely and we work at ease together. Although we have complementary characters, both of us are joyful and optimistic. I would say Elsa is very gentle and me more extroverted but we get along really well.

K. A.

You always create very cinematic universes. Which directors or film genres have influenced you the most?

J. B.

We draw inspiration both from real life and movies. Directors, such as Pedro Almodovar, David Lynch, Tim Burton, Agnès Varda, Alfred Hitchcock, Jacques Tati and Wes Anderson have left a mark on us. We are sensitive to films that lead the viewer through a unique aesthetic, a certain form of mystery and poetry. We love directors who capture the psychology of their characters in deep and complex ways plus who have an interest in female characters overall.

E. P.

I agree with Johanna. I thought also of Rosemary's Child by Roman Polanski or Thelma and Louise. Also, we are often inspired by mainstream series, because in the serial format, a character is developed and portrayed over several episodes and seasons, which is very exciting from the psychological aspect of the character.





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Photo: ©
Elsa and
Johanna:
Untitled,
from the
A Couple
e of
Them
series,
2014–
2016

- K. A.** How do you usually prepare a project? Do you plan in advance or is everything done on the spot?
- J. B.** We never know exactly what our series will look like. We always plan the trip and figure out the overall itinerary if there is one as well as booking accommodations in advance. It's important for us to know where we will be staying because these houses are not only our living spaces but also our creative space and studio for the period. Therefore, choosing this setting is crucial and then, we work a lot with unpredictability.
- E. P.** We always have a basic intention that develops and evolves according to how we feel on site. During a project, we immerse ourselves in the new place and observe the atmosphere, habits, lights, colors and textures. After we process all this information and then we give birth to an idea, a desire which at this point is also fed by references. Then we buy second-hand clothes, jewelry and accessories from local shops and choose our wigs to build our protagonists using our own memories and imagination. They evolve during the shooting according to the chosen setting

and location because the place of creation has a huge impact on the characters we create and their identity. Therefore we won't invent the same figures in Ireland or Italy.

- J. B.** We let life offer us tools to create our series. Undoubtedly what interests us is that the projects are unfolding progressively before our eyes and that keeps us always receptive and maintains a state of constant questioning.

- K. A.** Your work evokes nostalgia yet creates a surreal world. This duality brings a special quality. Is it a conscious decision to mix the two?
- E. P.** Absolutely, different atmospheres and aesthetic codes can blend in the way we create. This feeds the fantastical part of our work. We mimic reality but with an imaginary approach that can be nurtured by various styles, such as surrealism. This allows us to bring a poetic, sometimes absurd or offbeat tone to our work.
- J. B.** Our work is surely a reflection of what we love and what moves us. The feeling of nostalgia includes a journey through time while surrealism allows a total freedom to narrate, to invent, to offer something different to the world. These notions of time and imagination have always imbued us both.



- K. A.** Where do you find inspiration for the different roles you play?
- J. B.** It's a mix of various elements. We draw inspiration from our observations, memories and encounters but also from collective memory and imagination, the iconography of characters in films, magazines, advertisements or books.
- E. P.** Plus from the place itself. Sometimes an object or a room in a house can give us the idea of a personality on the spot.
- K. A.** A self-portrait by Frida Kahlo was an important reference for the series *Day and Twelve Hours of Night*, which is currently on display at the Mai Manó House. What inspired you in this portrait?
- J. B.** What we liked about this portrait is that it's very traditional in its composition, a black and white close-up portrait, direct gaze into the camera. But at the same time, it contains something very contemporary; the garment she is wearing is a kind of Mexican tunic which almost resembles a leather biker jacket, giving her the look of a rock star, a rebel. A multiplicity of emotions, through a form of simplicity. That's what appealed to us and became a leading line to the series.
- E. P.** This portrait of Frida encapsulates everything we admire in women: charisma, creative strength, resilience, elegance and mystery. It's like a compendium of personality traits that we find inspiring in life and creativity.

K. A. You work with both digital and analog techniques. What makes you choose one method or the other? Do you have a preference?

E. P. For us, the technique is always adapted to the project. It's always a question of which technique will make the most sense for our purpose and the same thing from an aesthetic point of view. It depends on the style and texture we want to achieve in the end.

J. B. Yes, each medium is indeed chosen according to the project's coherence and aesthetic.

Digital has a lot of advantages and practicalities and very precise rendering whereas analogue can be expensive but offers more grain and texture with less precision, and more unpredictability. These notions obviously influence our way of creating.

For example, our series, *The Timeless History of Moormerland* is partly about amateur and family photography, so it seemed obvious to create it in analogue.

K. A. You explore cultural contexts and places through photography. Is it important to draw conclusions from each series or is it more about raising questions?

J. B. Indeed, it is more about posing questions rather than concluding. We prefer opening doors rather than closing them. We especially want to encourage the viewer to ask questions, to step out of their usual patterns of thought and to wander a bit in our visual narratives. It's organic and alive; anything is possible.

E. P. We like to question issues of society and memory, whether private or collective. Our work holds up a mirror to notions of identity, gender and the collective imagination, inviting us to observe our own system of projection on an image or memory. It doesn't conclude anything but opens the door to contemplation and reflection.

K. A. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing young adults today?

J. B. I think the greatest challenge is to remain optimistic despite everything the world is going through. To maintain the desire to create, to build and to dream.

E. P. Keep an optimistic attitude, find meaning in your activity and be able to step out of the mainstream sometimes, to recharge your batteries and draw inspiration.