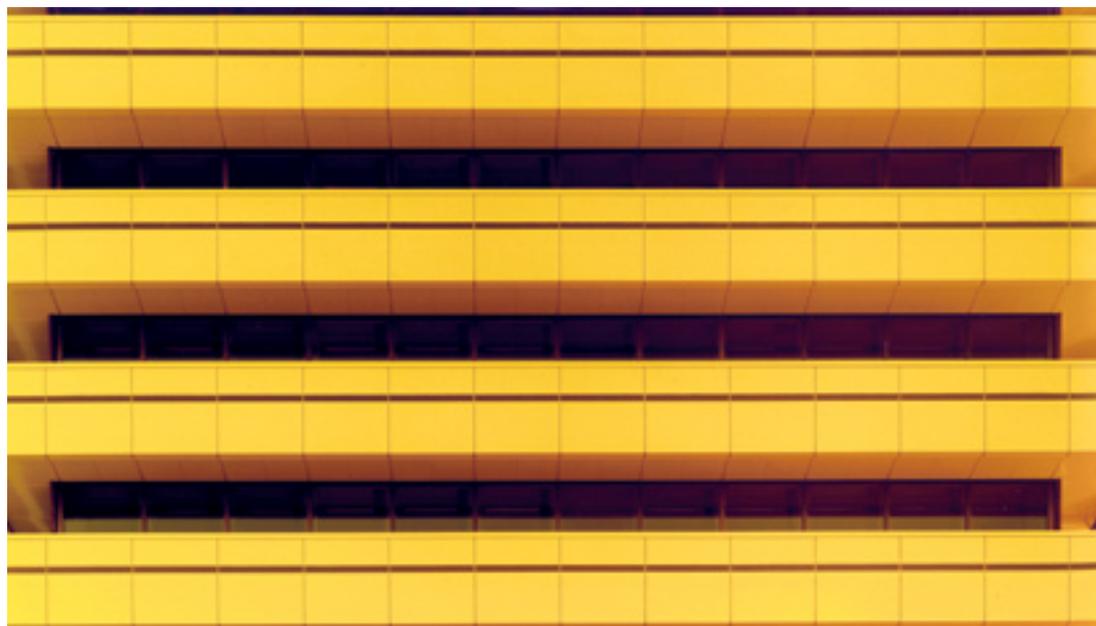


Reflecting the Surface

Ola Kolehmainen



Ola Kolehmainen is one of the most prominent figures within the Helsinki School of Photography, a group of acclaimed Finnish artists who have all been associated with the University of Art and Design Helsinki in recent decades. His celebrated work focuses on the geometric forms found in modern and contemporary architecture, abstracting such urban “skins” with the intention of eliminating “visual noise” and creating uniquely ornamental, minimal, visual structures. Selections of his work are currently on show at Purdy Hicks (London, UK) until the 21st April, and his new monograph, *Fraction Abstraction Recreation*, is due to be released by Hatje Cantz Verlag in Spring 2007.

AS Aaron Schuman

OK Ola Kolehmainen

AS To start, could you please discuss your earliest experiences with photography. What drew you to the medium, and why did you choose to pursue it seriously?

OK The first photograph I ever published was in *Transworld Skateboarding Magazine*, in 1984. I was living in Santa Clara, California, and my best friend was an aspiring skateboarder. He asked me to take some promo pictures – on a ramp, on the street, and then at various competitions – and some of these images appeared in *Transworld*. He eventually became a pro skater, and he was the first person who suggested that I consider photography professionally.

It took a while for me to follow his advice. I think I started taking pictures seriously around '86 or '87, and my main focus became music gigs; primarily jazz. A very close friend of mine was a music critic, and we got a monthly column in a jazz magazine together. We began to travel around a lot, and along with music, we would talk about all sorts of things; visual art became a subject very important to us.

Then in 1992, while I was pursuing a journalism degree at the University of Helsinki, I got permission to study for a year at the University of Art and Design Helsinki. Everything started there. I still clearly remember the moment when I understood that I had discovered something which I could call my own. It was a misty day in early September, I was having a break between two classes, and I literally “woke up”. Of course, I still knew very little about art or photography, but my hunger for information was immense. My life completely changed at that moment. After the year finished, I transferred over to the art school as a full-time student.

AS What images first truly inspired you?

OK My first love was the work of Eugene Atget; the quietness within his photographs fascinated me. But as I continued my studies, colour photography gradually became something very important to me. Unfortunately I missed

Exchange of Plates with Kristjan, 2005–06.
180×325cm.

All images © Ola Kolehmainen. Courtesy Purdy Hicks Gallery.

having Martin Parr as a professor, as he taught at the school a few years before my time, but I did encounter the positive aftermath of his influence. Also, William Eggleston's *Graceland* and Paul Graham's *Beyond Caring* became milestones for me, not because of their subject matter, but in the way they used space, light and colour.

AS When did you begin to focus your attention on architecture, and why?

OK Gradually, I found that it became increasingly difficult for me to photograph people. We had this one assignment, in which each student had to make their own book – the images, the edit, the layout, the binding; everything. I decided to make portraits of my friends. I had known all the “models” for many years, so I assumed that it would be a really fun project, but it turned out to be anything else. I realised that I couldn't really concentrate on making an image while someone else was present in the studio. My project didn't completely fall apart, but I have been trying to avoid situations that might involve directing people ever since. So instead, I became interested in working with space; issues of scale, colour, light and the space outside the frame became important questions for me.

Also, in Finland – a land very far north, on the peripheries of the art world – it was a great time, especially for an art student. My biggest influence during this period was Jyrki Parantainen. I was assigned to be his student assistant while he was making his *Fire* series, and I worked with him for five years. Jyrki photographed deserted spaces – apartments, old factories, art galleries, military barracks – which he would furnish and then burn, not completely to ashes, but so that the fire became an element in the scene. Maybe one wall would be on fire, or the bed in a room would be engulfed in flames. Everything was staged, but the final images appeared to be very spontaneous.

This process taught me a completely different approach to photography, and slowly it opened my eyes to architecture. First of all, what Jyrki did was not photographing in the strictest, documentary sense. We were making unreal situations reality in the form of a photograph. The scenario only existed as an image – nothing physically seen in the final picture was tied to the real world at all. But the conceptual bind was titanic. And the whole process was like walking on a tight rope; if you overdid it even once, the series would descend into nothing but boys playing with fire.

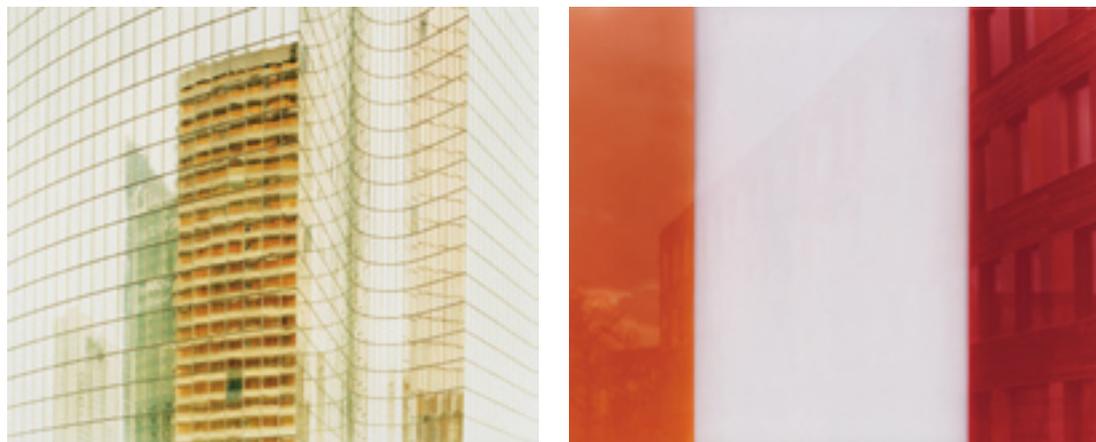
During that five-year period there was a constant flow of ideas between the two of us, with many conversations about his work, my work and art in general. In a sense, we were practicing performance art, in that we had a small amount of people viewing the act of making the photographs. Also, in making the pictures we were doing installations, building stage sets, and manipulating spaces. In short, we were working with the architecture, and although it may not have been the main focus of the work, space was present in our minds all the time. Furthermore, we were always talking about how to present the images – the scale, the selection, which pictures should be presented together, the medium and so on. We finally decided to present the images as light-boxes,



Super Composition, 2006
180×247cm.

Following spread:
Composition around Void,
2006. 203×234cm.





Jyrki produced one test box, and this piece became the guideline for future images, both conceptually and visually.

AS Considering that there is a strong lineage within photography of architectural imagery, conceptualism and minimalist tendencies, why have you generally chosen to photograph “high” architecture, rather than more vernacular architecture? For example, the work of Ed Ruscha, Lewis Baltz and even the Bechers finds inspiration within uncelebrated, rather common edifices, in a sense making something out of “nothing”; whereas your work seems to elaborate on what the renowned architects – Mies van der Rohe, Renzo Piano, Alvar Aalto, and Herzog & de Meuron among them – intended when they diligently designed these façades and interiors in the first place.

OK I find this question rather challenging. First of all, I do not see the strong lineage between the architectural photography and minimalist tendencies. There are minimalist tendencies in architecture, but architectural photography is documenting these creations whether they are minimal or not. Another question is: what kind of architectural imagery are we generally exposed to? The absence of people in photographs of architecture does not make these images minimal.

Secondly, a distinction needs to be made between commercial architectural photography, and photography of architecture as an art practice. The great artists you mention are engaged with the latter, but I find myself belonging to neither of these schools. I do not photograph architecture; I use it as raw material. This approach cuts all ties with reality. The final image is not dependent on the actual appearance of the architecture; it is an extract, which becomes abstract. I do not use digital manipulation in the process of making my work, but I do sometimes intervene in the original image within the darkroom. I might change the colours, or the light may be changed through different ways of exposing the photographic paper. I sometimes make a mirror image, or even turn the original up-side-down. Ruscha, Baltz and the Bechers are making



Left: *The Ocean*, 2006.
180×248cm.

Opposite left:
Uninvited Reflection, 2006.
180×232cm.

Opposite right: *Mirrors and Windows (Orange, White, Red)*, 2006. 180×235cm.

Following spread:
Unpredicted Composition with Clouds, 2006. 180×228cm.

something out of “nothing”, I am making something else out of something.

If I dare to compare myself to these masters, what we share is the use of photography as a medium of conceptual art. But our approach to the subject matter and our various agendas are completely different. For example, Lewis Baltz realised a “counter-aesthetics” through the depiction of desolate landscapes and forgotten places. This is not my aim at all.

Thirdly, the name of an architect is not an automatic guarantee of good material for me. In fact, quite a few of my pieces use architecture designed by lesser-known or entirely unknown architects. My main interests lie in modern and contemporary building structure. In the past, I have tried to work with architecture designed before the 20th century, but have not succeeded – a façade or interior of such a building cannot be made to “something else” by taking an extract; it does not become abstract.

Lastly, if my images elaborate the architects’ intentions, this is merely a coincidence. Conceptually, I think it is rather impossible; visually maybe it occurs. In any case, this is a secondary matter to me. But if someone sees a connection, I have nothing against it; on the contrary, I welcome it.

AS The titles of your works infuse them with a level of contextual, theoretical and conceptual weight that might otherwise go unnoticed if the viewer were to simply contemplate the images themselves. How important is it that the audience understands these undercurrents in your work?

OK In an ideal world, the titles would be understood; fortunately, this is not the case. By this I mean that I prefer that a viewer contemplate the works themselves – at least at the first encounter – without the written “instructions” disturbing the experience. That said, the titles are important, and are there for a reason.

In general, the titles refer to modern art history and act as a reminder of the works’ roots within minimalism. But some of the titles are completely indecipherable if you do not know the story behind them. For instance,



Changing Plates with Kristjan, (Yellow). This refers to the Icelandic conceptual artist, Kristjan Gudmundsson. I once attended a dinner party with around fifteen guests, and Kristjan and I were seated at the opposite ends of the table. In the middle of dinner, a half eaten plate of food was handed to me. His gallerist said, “Kristjan stop it,” and I didn’t understand what was going on, so I asked my neighbour. I discovered that this was Kristjan’s way of showing friendship – to share a meal, literally. Since I admire his work very much, and four strong, horizontal lines appear in this particular image, the title is a reference to his line paintings.

AS Your final works are very large. Could you discuss the importance of scale in your imagery?

OK It is essential. And not only is size vital, but the way in which I present the work is crucial as well – photographic paper laminated on Perspex with silicon. The very thin layer of silicon between the Plexiglas and the paper increases the density of the tones, and touches on the idea of the third dimension. Furthermore, large areas of a single color become almost palpable.

It is difficult to understand my works without seeing at least one of them in the flesh. When my images appear on the printed page, or on a computer screen, or in my portfolio, it is only a picture of the final work. The dilemma is similar to that of paintings, in the sense that a reproduction of a painting has lost many of its physical qualities and therefore much of its visual impact. Of course a photograph laminated behind Plexiglas is far from possessing the nuances and materiality of a painting, but it has its own detailed world.

Furthermore, an additional element in my work is the reflection seen on the surface of the Plexiglas. This is dependent upon the space and light wherever the work is exhibited. Usually, the architecture of the exhibition space is just visible on the surface. Looking at the work from different angles, the reflections change, appear more prominently, or even disappear. This aspect also encourages the viewer to come closer to the work in order to avoid the reflection. The large scale of the pieces makes all of these elements possible. The encounter between the audience and the image becomes more physical; this is a very important part of my work.

AS What exactly is it that you hope to accomplish, or to instill within the viewer, through your photographs?

OK Standing in front of a building and capturing its skin – or an extract of it – on film is a rather private matter. The final artworks exhibited are subjected to openness. The workflow does not contain a certain message.

But ultimately, I find that most of my works are rather contemplative, and one needs to allow oneself quite a bit of time to view them. Of course, this is nothing exceptional, but I do want to encourage such behaviour through my work. I believe that we should allow ourselves more time to view all visual art.

Opposite:
Above: *Untitled (No. 22)*,
2005. 180×256 cm. Edition
of 5.

Below: *Search for Mastery
IV*, 2006. 180×232 cm.

The Helsinki School of
Photography is showing at
Purdy Hicks until 21 April

*Fraction Abstraction
Recreation* is published
by Hatje Cantz Verlag.

