



INTRODUCING

Tim Roda

TEXT **DAN TOROP**

A ceramic gremlin, replete with long lashes, antlers, and legs like sides of raw beef, sits in the center of a couch. The apparition's right arm embraces a child in a superhero outfit, who rests one hand firmly on the gremlin's thigh. The creature's left hand reaches behind the back of an Ali G-style gangsta wrapped in a fur coat. This outrageous threesome sits in what appears to be a suburban living room. Tim Roda, then a ceramics student at Penn State, made a postcard of this image and sent it off as an application to the University of Washington's interdisciplinary art graduate school.

The next year Roda found himself enrolled as a ceramics student at UW. With the encouragement of a faculty member, Doug Jeck (a ceramist known

for his technically accomplished yet disturbingly raw figurative work), and others, Roda made more photographs and spent less time by the kiln. As his photographic practice flourished, it continued to embrace the iconography of that postcard: a slyly skewed domesticity, which though blatantly constructed, evoked urgently autobiographical—yet increasingly surreal—family scenarios.

In the years since, the New York-based Roda has established himself as a photographer adept at making large-scale black-and-white images that are theatrical yet hermetic. These invariably star the artist himself, tend to include his son Ethan as a somewhat spontaneous supporting actor, and occasionally feature appearances by his wife Allison. The tone is generally sinister, verging on the claustrophobic. For example, *Untitled #152* (2007), is described by Roda as “Mirrors... Shadows... Generations... Good and evil.” Lit from below, his limbs emaciated by darkness, a boy pours water into the upturned mouth of a murky swaddled figure. The participants in the image are ritual actors in a distorted temple built of harsh shadows. The mirrored floor reflects the patterned wall above, creating another lost zone. The artist spent weeks folding the tiled cards that make up the background, the pattern inspired by M. C. Escher’s famously complex tessellations.

Roda points out that in the 1930s, Escher made three landscape prints—a lithograph and two woodcuts—of Pentedattilo, a now-abandoned southern Italian village that was the birthplace of Roda’s paternal grandfather. Recently, Roda traveled back to Pentedattilo, where he photographed Ethan on a nearby beach, a long stick in his hand, running toward the waves. Roda says that he brought a print of this image (*Untitled #121*, 2006) to his grandfather’s deathbed. “After I hung up the picture, he asked how I got ahold of that picture of him,” the photographer remembers. In this, and other works, Roda—as father and grandson both—directs

his gaze to the psychic strands of himself and his family. In doing so, he contrasts with the Israeli video artist Guy Ben-Ner, whose recent films (... *Self Portrait as a Family Man* and *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*) use his family as an intimate vessel with which to navigate the language of a wider, equivocal culture.

This insistence on the intimate and the familial—not as stand-ins for larger issues, but as the focus itself—is paramount in Roda’s oeuvre. “I make my own language and metaphor, which I understand; absolutely everything is a metaphor,” Roda asserts. He foregrounds his atavistic upbringing, and mentions that his father, at their Lancaster, Pennsylvania, home, slaughtered cows and chickens to feed the family. In images such as *Untitled #63* (2005), Roda reenacts that paternal/filial scene, with his own son now learning to use the butcher knife.

After a foray to Italy and stays at far-flung artist residencies, Roda now usually makes his photographs in his Harlem workspace. He arrives early at the studio, and with the aid of a thermos of coffee spends the day constructing and lighting a set. Sometimes he positions his camera to work out the composition, other times he leaves it at home in order to focus on the construction. Late in the day, Allison and Ethan arrive. Roda and Ethan pose themselves, and Allison takes a photograph. The family sits down to dinner, often in the studio, and discusses the day’s scenario. “This is the way I can open up,” Roda says. Then Roda tears down the set.

“We all feel comfortable with ourselves,” says Roda, “It’s safe, we can talk freely, we trust each other.” Roda suggests that his work with son and wife lies somewhere between therapy and an odd sort of family business endeavor. This framing of his practice seems aimed at preempting the hysterical accusations of irresponsibility surrounding the work of an artist such as Sally Mann: that explorations of familial dream life expose pre-age-of-consent children to an improperly sexualized

CLOCKWISE FROM PREVIOUS PAGE: *Untitled #102*, 2006. Black-and-white photograph on fiber matte paper, 35 x 35 in.
Untitled #152, 2007. Black-and-white photograph on fiber matte paper, 38 x 33 in.
 Detail of *Untitled #75*, 2005. Black-and-white photograph on fiber matte paper, 38 x 42 in.



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CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: *Untitled #153*, 2007. Black-and-white photograph on fiber matte paper, 38 x 33 in. Detail of *Untitled #63*, 2005. Black-and-white photograph on fiber matte paper, 38 x 33 in. *Living Large #150*, 2007. Black-and-white photograph on fiber matte paper, 33 x 38 in. All images courtesy Gasser & Grunert Gallery, New York; Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle; and Art Agents Gallery, Hamburg.

public gaze. Nevertheless, it is this very tension, that of a potentially inappropriate revelation, that gives Roda's images some of their dark and discomfiting qualities.

In his self-made world, Roda explicitly creates every aspect of his photographs, from his sets to, arguably, even his sidekick, Ethan. He says that when he was a student at the University of Washington, Doug Jeck teased him that the one thing Roda couldn't control was the image's rectangular frame. Roda says that the angled *Untitled #102* (2006) was a delayed response to Jeck's observation. It is one of Roda's most elaborate constructions, in which books merge into a mosaic of



The participants in the image are actors in a distorted temple built of harsh shadows.

lines, and the figures seem to float on mirrors. It is a hand-built dream—one that underlines his ability to craft illusionistic space while showing his hand as an artifice maker.

In spite of this bent for surreal embroidery, Roda turns away from comparisons to kin visual eccentrics such as Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Guy Maddin, who are moved by similar impulses. Not that Roda denies all influences: "I look at Norman Rockwell a lot. He speaks a universal language, but has a perverted side." Rockwell's self-conception as an artist also bears comparison with Roda's. Rockwell worked outside the mainstream artworld, and although Roda is given regular shows by galleries in both North America and Europe, the photographer portrays himself as a similar outsider. When I asked whether he was thinking about Matthew Barney's early "Drawing Restraint" work when he made *Untitled #153* (2007)—an image of Roda hanging from a banister over some crudely built steps—he quickly rebuked me, replying that he had been thinking of relatives who had

recently died, and how tenuously we cling to our lives. Beyond quibbling about sources, the image holds interest because of a more basic photographic appeal: the depiction of a muscular man suspended above an odd broken-down chandelier, face strained, and toes pointed balletically.

Although Roda does give a shout-out to the staged photographs of definitive artworld insider Sam Taylor-Wood—"I like the formalism"—he articulates little interest in Taylor-Wood's talented peers. Recall that, during the '90s, photographers found their high-art tradition irrelevant until infused with the vitality of pop imagery. Roda appears to see that union as moribund, and stresses direct engagement with an urgently personal subject. He takes pains to reject what he sees as a style of conceptually cool banality. ("Sometimes it's 15 pictures of someone riding a lawn mower. It's thoughtless.") In turn, his work can annoy contemporary photographers, accumulating the vitriol reserved for images that bypass the fundamental tenets of the craft yet are viable in the



medium. "Technical criteria," says Roda, "are a way to distance." To that end, Roda seeks a profundity that does not depend on a dialogue with the recent history of his medium. "Everything has to make sense," he says. "Everything has to have a reason, even the hook on the back." To build the proper specificity into his images, he has sculpted chickens out of paper towels (in *Untitled #113* and *Untitled #127*, both 2006), and has carried the most innocuous props with him for years, even toting certain two-by-fours from Seattle to Montana to New York in order to

buttress his sets. This formal emphasis on materiality may be one key to unlocking Roda's evocative yet somewhat abstruse body of work. "I think that you need to be smart and you need to understand why you're working with the materials in a certain way. That's being smart. To be intellectual is like being middle class. Everyone says they're middle class in some way." By using his family as a type of raw material—a prop, even—Roda supersedes pedantic constructs in order to elucidate a basic pathos found in its mystifying workings.