

Nerhol, "INDEX" *Foam*, 8 MAY - 21 JUNE 2015



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Nerhol Index 8 May—21 June 2015

Nerhol's work unveils the small, ever present alterations within a portrait photograph. This is done not with multiple images side-by-side, in a row, but combined in a single image: a blink of an eye, a subtle tilt or nod of the head, a spirt of water. Nerhol, a Japanese duo, accomplishes this through a unique approach.

They meticulously scoop out and carve the faces in their photographs, combining a layering of the images with reductive carving. In the Japanese language, 'to scoop' and 'to carve' have the same pronunciation: hol. In addition, Ner means 'plan'. The artists always start off with a plan, deciding to carve one photograph more vigorously and to show only very small changes in another.

Foam first encountered the fascinating work of Nerhol in Europe at the Festival Images 2014 in Vevey, Switzerland. We were immediately struck by their refreshing take on photography.

Nerhol's structures are quite impressive. From beginning to end, the artists truly work from a transdisciplinary mindset.

The up-and-coming artist duo was established in 2007. Nerhol is a collaboration between graphic designer Yoshihisa Tanaka (1980) and sculptor Ryuta Iida (1981).

Together they explore the tension between photography and sculpture. The first is a technical and distanced medium that often creates single images, whereas the latter typically comprises physicality, expression and multiple perspectives. Their work cleverly pushes a rethinking of the medium of photography and the concept of the portrait, to the point of questioning the 'system' altogether.

Nerhol's intriguing work comprises series of individual time-lapse portraits at various stages of the process. By using sculpting techniques such as digging, curving and carving, the duo reveals a complexity in the image that is normally obscured by photography.

Traditionally, a portrait presents a three-dimensional face on a flat plane. Nerhol aims to emphasize the complexities and difficulties of this idea. The duo transforms the two-dimensional portrait into a three-dimensional sculpture. Occasionally, they also render this back onto a flat plane. To make this concept a bit less abstract, we will give you some insight into how they work.

The duo starts by asking their subjects to pose, remaining as motionless as possible, while they work with an exposure time of three minutes. This results in hundreds of slightly different portraits. These prints are layered in a 30-millimetre-high pile, which they then dig and curve into a sculptural portrait. In return, Nerhol sometimes re-photographs this 'sculpture' and prints the resulting image two-dimensionally as a new portrait photograph. Nerhol's presentations include photographic sculptures, too, which makes the whole process transparent.

For their newest works included in the exhibition, Nerhol has also photographed animals and things. In our interview with them, they elaborate on their working method and their first international solo exhibition at Foam.

By Zippora Elders

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ON COLLABORATING AND ARTISTIC PRACTICE: AN INTERVIEW WITH NERHOL

**The title of the exhibition is Index.
 Can you explain this?**

We set up this exhibition in order to put together components of works we have created up until now. Having confronted various finite substances, we discovered several things that didn't feel normal. That is, bringing in a 'time element' to images. Those components that we discovered change the perspective that is important to us, and have the potential to be realized through a piece of work. We draw upon these components similarly to a table of contents in a book. This is a meaning that is included in Index.

How did you come together and decide to collaborate?

For a start, we found each other's works appealing. Tanaka was creating work as a graphic designer, whereas Iida was a sculptor. Despite our different fields, we sensed similarities in our objectives and our aesthetic sense. To explore our common points, we began creating works together. Firstly, there is this pursuit to give flat items a three-dimensional impression. We combined our respective fields by creating works that used the typography of paperback books, and explored a relation between paper and the printed letter. We maintained the components of those works, increased the amount, and connected it to the present series of portraits.

Tanaka 'kneads' the plan and Iida 'sculpts' the prints. Could you describe the way you work as a duo?

Our respective fields differ by nature. We think that our strength lies in being able to only

think from the perspective of one's own field. Essentially, we create a piece of work together from start to finish. We divide the actual work, but we consult each other on all the decisions.

Could you describe your process, step by-step? And how long does this take altogether?

Our ideas always come from mutual discussions. We find out about things that captured our attention and impacted our everyday life. We believe that things always relate to society, or even to the world. We can't say with certainty, but it seems that the works are born when there is a desire to give an actual form to those images that we share inside us. *Scene to know* came from thoughts about the custom of making memorial portraits. Painted portraits of nobility from the past, became pictures taken by this machine called a camera. Moreover, we started exposing the fact that pictures lack firm authenticity as a form of record, due to the present situation where anyone can easily photograph with a digital camera.

Naturally, with regard to paintings, these are painted by the artist, who decides how to paint the face. In this case, what do the portraits reproduce? By adding a chronological axis to a still image and bringing out our subjects' individualism and unconscious instability, we wanted to grasp this immanent 'phenomenon'. Firstly, Tanaka selects photographic subjects. We then do not photograph those subjects ourselves, but ask several photographers to do it for us. However, light and the overall composition is entirely our doing. We ask more than one photographer to help us, for the reason that we do not want their individual egos to stand out. Tanaka closely examines all the photographs that

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Scene to know No.025, 2013



Nerhol in their studio



Nerhol in their studio

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Nerhol in their studio



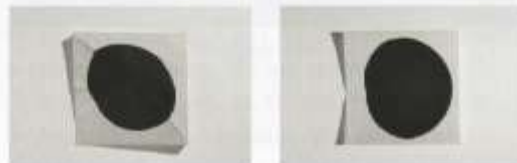
Existence, 2012



Oratorical Type, 2007



Nerhol in their studio



Circle, 2012

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are taken and prints them, one by one, following the chronological axis. Afterwards, he hands them to Iida in the form of a paper bundle. Iida then cuts them apiece. While doing this, he aims at reflecting the feeling exuded by the person in the picture. Because the person's movements and impressions are not visible, the cutting is done with both of us present whenever possible. In this way, we completed *Scene to know* after four years of repeated experiments.

What kind of experience do you aim to offer with your reconstructed/deconstructed objects?

The chronological printing of pictures and merging them into a paper bundle represents the existence of time in the paper bundle itself. This is a way of thinking typical to sculpting, but in the materials used for sculpting, like wood and stone, time is inherently present. We feel that seeing a shape in materials that have this component of time is an important part of sculpting. Our work is the only method that visualizes the temporal aspect of sculpting with pictures that, up until now, could only capture a single moment. From this method, I think it is possible that a sequence of moments can always exist within its own time frame, and that the relationship between yourself and the other can be expressed.

How does your work relate to Japanese contemporary society? For example, the work with the fish contaminated by radiation; on what levels is this a reference to the Fukushima nuclear disaster?

Our works have a temporary component which is a part of a continuous flow. In this continuous flow, the finite substance is constantly born and then vanishes. Our works are like punctuation in the flow of time. We think that Japan is presently in the middle of a gentle stream. It seems as if the

stream of reforms which began after the Great Tohoku Earthquake, for better or worse, unified people's opinions. Turning away from many painful and unhappy things, they cling solely to good news. Politics lost real meaning. We presented this state of affairs by choosing a fish as our photographic subject. Brought ashore by us, after a certain amount of time this fish will come closer to death. A fish cannot live out of the sea. It will move its body, wriggle and resist. Soon after, as time progresses, a muscular action occurs as a sign of ebbing life. Finally, the fish stops moving and dies. By recording each of those steps, we wanted to express the 'gentle stream' of contemporary Japan.



Item 06, *Scene to know / daily No. 001*, 2013

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Covisistence, 2014

Nerhol's unique approach creates work that is both enigmatic and fresh; a clear story that truly reflects upon the framework of the medium and the way in which we have adapted to the conventions of its usage. The surprising outcome is that, while the portrayed faces at first appear to be very distorted, they are in fact accurate representations of real faces, captured over time. This poses the question of whether it is even possible to truly reflect the human face, or everyday phenomena, through photography as we know it. Surely, their body of work can be seen as a response to the volatility of today's fast-paced reality, in which many things disappear as soon as they emerge.

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