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GALLERY

A
NEW TYPE
OF IMPRINT

SHE COULD HAVE BEEN A COWBOY

By Roslyn Bernstein, February 16, 2018



She Could Have Been A Cowboy, by Lena Niemi

*Suppose I were to tell you
about this cowboy
who's not really a cowboy,*

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*not in the regular sense of the term,
not in the sense that she drives cattle,
or rides horses,
or wears cowboy hats,
not yet anyway.*

*This cowboy is imaginary
but she exists,
like a sculpture trapped
inside a block of marble
waiting for her line of flight,
waiting for the sculptor
to start chiseling away at the stone.*

Back in Volume Six of A New Type of Imprint we first featured Anja Niemi's gorgeous photo series Darlene & Me. Utilising herself as characters in her photographs, Anja explores the self. Her controlled, cinematic photography feels like glimpses into a real life, balancing on the edge of believable and unbelievable.

In Anja's latest work, She Could Have Been A Cowboy, she turns the lens to a life lived under the constraints of conformity. Every day her fictional character finds herself trapped in the same pink dress, but what she really wants is to be a cowboy, dressed in fringe and leather, riding horses in the Wild West. Through this series of photographs with multiple layers and possible interpretations, Niemi delivers her most political work to date.

"The story is not really about being a cowboy," Anja says. "It's about wanting to be another."

In order to visualise the imaginary world of her character, Niemi had to experience it for herself. Alone in a rental car, dressed as a cowboy, Niemi visited and photographed all the places on her character's annotated maps. She hiked up and down the mountains of America's national parks and rode a horse on the same field John Wayne filmed one of his famous horse battles. Always trying to be what her character would have wanted, unafraid and unaffected by others. Niemi works alone, photographing, staging and acting out the characters in all of her images.

"My character's cowboy life is all an illusion," Anja explains in a Q&A by Max Houghton, "made up of images from her favourite western movies and pictures of cowboys. The series shifts between her reality and imagination; a combination of what she is and what she wants to be."

Discussing her ideas with her sister Lena, Anja realised they had been working on the same subject. Although they work with different formats, they often find themselves burning for the same thing.

"From then on our projects started merging and we decided to join the text and images in a book at the end," Anja says.