

THE **RPS**  
ROYAL  
PHOTOGRAPHIC  
SOCIETY

Robert Gendler How to put  
the art into astrophotography

The RPS unveils its  
new documentary  
Distinction

# JOURNAL

DECEMBER 2019 / VOLUME 159 / NUMBER 12

WWW.RPS.ORG

**WALK  
THIS  
WAY**

Discover  
the pictures  
that made  
2019



LO QUE ME  
PRESIDENCIA  
NOS DEJO

chile habi...



# DEATH OF THE WESTERN GAZE

Austrian artist Lisl Ponger uses a full arsenal of media to question colonialist stereotypes and interrogate cultural identities. She tells Gemma Padley why

La Catrina or  
another Mexican  
afternoon, 2013

## IDENTITY

**F**OR DECADES SHE HAS used photography and moving image to question ideas of cultural identity, explode myths and challenge western assumptions. Now 72, Austrian artist Lisl Ponger points to one image on her website that helps explain the way she works.

'There be dragons', created this year, shows two figures pictured from behind and looking out to sea. 'One is looking into the faraway worlds they're going to explore', says Ponger, while the other 'is hoping to keep people from coming'. There is clearly more going on in the photograph than first appears.

'I'm always trying to put everything into one image – the whole history, the whole now, and across all countries,' says Ponger at her home in Vienna,

Austria. 'The more the better, which is a bit of a challenge if you want to really know what the picture is about. But you don't have to know.'

There be dragons is staged – like many of her works from the past 20 or so years – and has an air of mystery. It feels especially timely given current Europe-UK political relations but is ultimately open to interpretation. An image that sparks more questions than provides answers, it can be seen as typical of Ponger's art, which questions and probes issues to do with ethnology and anthropology, and what curator and author Thorsten Sadowsky calls the 'culture of foreignness'.

In an exhibition catalogue, Sadowsky neatly sums up what she does and how: 'Her work in photography and film illuminates the genesis and potency of images of "others", yet her carefully

crafted reconstructions are always also deconstructions of the European gaze. Her subjective visual anthropology often appears in the guise of stage settings that illustrate and critique colonialist and racist stereotypes informing our perceptions.'

Is Ponger's aim to turn the colonial gaze on its head? 'All of my work is concerned with white history and geography,' says Ponger, who was named as one of the RPS's Hundred Heroines earlier this year. 'I'm always taking an approach from my position – from myself.'

'What I've been working on ever since I came back from travelling, and even while I was travelling, is my interest in other cultures and in the western world led by my own involvement,' she continues. 'Most of my work in the last few years has evolved around the critique of

**'All of my work is concerned with white history and geography'**



Destroy Capitalism, 2005



Lucky Us, 2000

ethnography and the display of ethnographic objects in western ethnographic museums. It also touches on migration and issues like that.'

When we speak, Ponger is busy 'reworking' a 2014 exhibition originally shown at the Vienna Secession called *The Vanishing Middle Class* in which she questioned traditional modes of displaying ethnological museum work. The latest show opened at Kunsthau

Dresden in September. Also at the Secession that year, Ponger created a fictional ethnographic museum called the Museum for Foreign and Familiar Cultures (MuKul). A satirical take on museums that adopt names such as 'world museum or museum of cultures', it was 'the first show of my museum'.

Ponger had long wanted to create her own ethnographic museum and, when the Secession invited her to

show there, she proposed an idea that would involve her becoming the director and curator. Was there something of a performance element? In one sense yes, she says. She did guided tours, 'which was a lot of fun. People often couldn't tell on which level I was talking. It was definitely performative'.

Were you blurring the boundary between reality and fiction? 'I guess' ●

## IDENTITY

• that comes from the mediums of film and photography, where there is an element of fiction and reality,' Ponger replies. 'This is what it's all about – how real is a photograph, even more so now with digital work? I guess it came from my early involvement with Structural film – taking apart what film really is.'

Ponger's father was a photographer and she has memories of being in a darkroom as a young child watching pictures being developed. 'That, I suppose, is where it all started. I didn't always want to be a photographer, but I always wanted to be an artist.'

Born in Nuremberg in 1947, Ponger went on to train at the Graphische Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt in Vienna and, after 'doing all sorts of odd jobs in photography', moved away from photography. 'I sold all my equipment and said: "That's it. I won't take any more photographs".'

In the early 1970s Ponger and her partner travelled to Mexico where they were based for almost four years. While travelling, Ponger shot Super 8 film. Setting up a tripod she would 'let the camera run. I more or less shot documentary material and then made



There's no place ... 2007



There Be Dragons, 2019