

POLAROIDS

BY

ROBBY
MÜLLER

Selected by

ANDREA MÜLLER-SCHIRMER

Every time I look at Robby's Polaroids I see them in a new light. The photographs show his incredibly brilliant eye for everyday details and how light brings things to life. For this series of his Polaroids, I wanted to create the atmosphere of an intimate, modest and serene world, a mood that suits Robby. – Andrea Müller-Schirmer

ALL IMAGES © Robby Müller Archive/Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam



KITCHEN

Kensington Motel, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, June–July 1985

A PERMANENT LIGHT

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THE POLAROIDS OF ROBBY MÜLLER

by

EVGENY GUSYATINSKIY



COFFEE MAKER

Kensington Motel, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, June–July 1985

When you first see the Polaroids of Robby Müller, you might not guess that they were made by one of the greatest cinematographers of all time. A close collaborator of Jim Jarmusch, Wim Wenders and Lars von Trier (to mention just a few), Müller made an invaluable contribution to their works, most of which are considered masterpieces.

The difference in scale is what may strike us at first glance: a tiny Polaroid with fixed dimensions stands even further apart from the theatrical big screen than a classic analogue photograph, which can come in different formats.

As a cinematographer, Müller created images so rich and emblematic that it has never been enough just to look at them. You want to be a part of them, to be there among those people, landscapes and narratives; they are so similar to reality, yet so different. And they welcome you in.

Müller's Polaroids engage us in a different way, as they bring the actual world, so familiar and yet unnoticed, closer to our eyes. While Müller's films transport us to another world inside the screen, his Polaroids are like postcards sent to us to (re)connect us with the universe we live in, the one that already belongs to us. Perhaps here lies one of the general differences between photography and film.

The older Müller's oeuvre gets, the more iconic and contemporary it becomes. This is probably the classic paradox of a genius: establishing or rather revealing and shaping an artistic canon without any intention to do so, creating timeless presence out of transience, even out of absence. Isn't that also the basic, original intent of every (still and moving) image?

A hollow Christmas bauble lying on the floor. Half a peeled orange. A coffee maker on the stove. A variety of glass bottles, empty, half-empty or turned into vases with flowers in them. The poetry of ordinary things and common places. In fact, this resonates with the medium itself, as Polaroids originated and became popular as everyday objects, mostly circulating outside the world of museums and galleries.

Like everyone else back then, Robby Müller was probably lured by the joyful magic of the Polaroid camera. It accompanied him on his travels and on shoots, at home and at work. However, he never used it to film the shooting process or behind-the-scenes moments; he used it for his own pleasure, not intending to make the images public. The accessibility and easiness of the Polaroid, which made it a mass-market commodity, are present in Müller's pictures too, lending them a dimension of humanness and openness, especially when compared to the 'high-brow' nature of his films.

You can almost feel that he made these images alone at home, or in a hotel room, contemplating his close surroundings, distracting himself from the outside world, away from the buzz and crowds of the film set. A daily ritual of solace, encouraging a moment of solitude that is so understandable and relatable.

These images bear no presence of human beings, except Robby Müller himself, invisible, hidden behind the camera, his

fingerprints most likely covering the surface of his Polaroids. On a couple of occasions he enters the frame by filming his hand holding half an orange or by taking a snapshot of his own shadow. Yet the intimacy and tranquillity of these works bears no relation to the intrinsic amateur aesthetics of Polaroid that preceded the era of home video.

One could argue that the invention of Polaroid was the first step towards the culture of Instagram, a culture in which the ceaseless production of instant images has become part of everybody's routine and has triggered a certain inflation of the medium. Most of the myriad of online images within this culture seem the same and interchangeable. Being very much aware of the specifics and effects of Polaroid technology, Müller subverted or advanced it by resorting to its very own means. After all, his snapshots are much closer to paintings, particularly to *nature mortes*, as they reveal the imminent stillness of the world that precedes movement.

As a visionary artist, Müller turns on its head the classic idea (and ideal) of photography, especially that relevant to Polaroid. He is not setting in stone a certain moment in time, cutting it out from the flow of an unstoppable movement, or saving it from oblivion. Instead, his Polaroids show that not everything exists in movement and not everything is dependent on time. There are things that prevail by being indifferent to the harrowing machinery of time and movement, but sometimes they don't look like that at all. Like the view from a window in New York. Like the choreographic interplay of light and shadow that repeats itself daily in a room.

Much has been said about Müller as a grandmaster of light, who captured the very essence of its elusive, abstract nature. Indeed, his Polaroids are struck by a ray of light emanating from inside the image to its surface, to the viewer, leaving the frame and lighting an actual physical space beyond it. Besides, many of the objects in his photographs are completely transparent. Basically, they are rendered as containers of light that make it even more visible. Light is transient (it appears and disappears), while transparency is permanent (it stays and persists). Along with stillness, transparency creates a sense of wholeness, uniting things of different shapes, materials and purposes.

Robby Müller's Polaroids may look like they are made spontaneously, without a second thought, perhaps taking only one frame at a time. But what they represent is far from spontaneity: a world of tranquillity, silence and resilience, a world that existed long before the arrival of the photographer, even before the invention of the medium. And it will stay like that even after the artist leaves. Unchanged and undisturbed.

Eternity, a grand concept that seems far removed from the lightness and sensuality of Robby Müller's style, and even further from the nature of Polaroid, is already here: it's in our rooms, on our tables, next to our windows. And there is no need, for an artist or for us as viewers, to create another one. ☺



LA PALMA

September, 1984



STILL LIFE

La Palma, March-April 1985



SHADOW OF SELF-PORTRAIT

La Palma, 1987



GRAMERCY PARK HOTEL

New York City, April 1981



PASTIS BOTTLE

La Palma, September–October 1987



APPLE

Taormina, 1987–88, while filming *Il Piccolo Diavolo*



RED GERANIUM IN BOTTLE WITH SHADOW

La Palma, September-October 1987



BOTTLE WITH LOVE-IN-A-MIST

Lindos, Rhodes, August 1980



STILL LIFE WITH LEAF AND GREEN GLASS BALL

Munich, c. 1985



ORANGE

Munich, 1981



ASHTRAY AND LAMP

Kensington Motel, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, 1984 or 1985,
while filming *To Live and Die in L.A.*



GRAMERCY PARK HOTEL

New York City, Room 605, November 1988



HONEY BEAR

Mayflower Hotel, New York City, 1988



MIRRORED HONEY BEAR

Mayflower Hotel, New York City, 1988



INDIAN CRESS AND OTHER FLOWERS IN A VASE

La Palma, 1988



DESK AT HOME

Munich, May 1984