

Political archaeology of the present

An outline of Inger Lise Rasmussen's career

Inger Lise Rasmussen (ILR) is an experienced visual artist whose CV not only features a variety of exhibitions in Denmark and abroad, but also records international recognition through museum representations in among other countries the USA and France. In parallel with her own work she has been associated with Nordic academies and universities as a dedicated teacher and communicator of her artistic specializations in the graphic arts. The interaction between teaching and her own creative work became especially intense in the Denmark of the 1990s, when she played a central role in the rediscovery of photogravure, a technique that had been more or less neglected since the Americans Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen created their epoch-making, evocative works at the beginning of the twentieth century. And today too, as supervisor of the [Højbjerg PhotoGraphic Workshop](#), her central focus is photogravure when she organizes workshops for artists or gives them expert assistance in the well-equipped darkrooms and at the photogravure press.

Since the mid-nineties the basic tool of her art has been an ordinary SLR small-picture camera. In the intervening years at least a score of photo series have begun as analog negatives on black-and-white film and have later been projected on to a printing plate which, after etching and inking, has been able to form the basis for so-called intaglio printing which have surprised the viewers with their long tone scale and palette of beautiful monochrome variants, from dusty green and pink through mahogany brown to violet. But the really interesting thing about these works is that – despite the above-mentioned high aesthetic finish on beautiful hand-trimmed plate paper – they have an *edge*. The visual artist from Aarhus has views and opinions and likes to use her craft to give these views language and supply a narrative. The themes vary and shift, but are often related. Let us follow a few paths through her work ...

One of the most striking features of her early work is the absence of human beings. If we take the series [Hå by the Sea](#) (from 1994) the unprepared viewer will see a natural beach with high walls of natural stone. But ILR's real interest in making the deserted southwestern Norwegian coastal area a subject for her camera is not the landscape, but that fact that the round boulders have been pushed up by human beings who, in the period of the Great Migrations, erected these cult sites for their dead ancestors. In the series [Prora – 1:1000](#) no human figures are to be seen, but the stones reappear. Now they are not beautifully rounded like the sun and polished by the sea, but challenge the waves with a straight line in concrete and brick that runs 4.5 kilometres along the beach on the German island of Rügen. Eighty years ago the island was declared a holiday paradise for 20,000 people that the Nazi regime wanted to make into their willing slaves using this strategy. If the human beings have vanished, the remains of their constructions are contoured all the more sharply: they are magnificent and yet humble at Hå, grandiose and overbearing on Rügen.

While these series from the 1990s perspectivize traces of the structures of the past, in several series from the 2000s ILR engages in a kind of political archaeology of the present. In [Tageska rten](#)

(2001) we visit the reunified Berlin, which in its efforts to eradicate the sombre past with new, imposing high-rises and building complexes is close to letting the old megalomania in at the back door. And in

[Villes Nouvelles](#)

(from 2003-04) it is the new suburbs of Paris that are excoriated by Rasmussen's visual irony and leave the viewer of the shiny steel architecture torn between admiration of its beauty, disgust at the overconsumption and associations with mythical symbols of isolation and alienation (like the 'Glass Mountain' of the folk tale and the 'Tower of Babel' of the Old Testament). That solid citizens now appear in the urban scene enhances our sense of the present, but does not change the focus, for the small human figures in the pictures are compositional decoration, not bearers of humanity but its victims.

"Toppling World" is the name of a section in the book about China that accompanies the exhibition [Brilliant City](#) (2009). Here the construction stones are once more at the centre in a thousand-year-old urban culture crushed under the weight of globalization, an economic boom and dazzling high-tech facades. But the impressions from ILR's well-conceived exhibition at Århus Kunstbygning flood the memory with traces that have much of the complexity of China itself: a whirlwind of contemporary images from floor to ceiling around a sculptural core of crimson plexiglass sheets with motifs from the dynasties' ideal world of serenity and beauty; and at eye level, an undulating frieze of delicately told tales of the many kinds of people who are to lead the giant country into the future.

[Brilliant City](#) is a major work of visual art which, with the tools of art itself, challenges prejudices and stimulates discussion of an incontrovertibly vital geopolitical area.

One is tempted to say that ILR travels abroad in order to come home. This postulate takes on special meaning in connection with the graphic artist's latest series, [REQEM Walk in the Desert](#) (2010), which is played out in Jordan, more specifically in Petra, which actually means 'stone'.

[Walk in the Desert](#)

, like

[Hå by the Sea](#)

, is the story of how nature and mankind merge in connection with the burial and rites of the dead. The references to the present day are apolitical, the tourists are integrated non-ironically and inconspicuously, and the result can be read as a spirited renewal of the photographic pioneering work from the time of the great explorations of the nineteenth century. The faintly toned graphic rendition of the stony desert revives the miracle for the viewer, who more than ever glimpses the spiritual dimension of the giant sand-worn princely tombs that resemble temples and palaces. For the spellbound artist who has stepped into the world of stillness, metaphor leaps out as incarnated reality.

Finn Thrane

MA., former museum director

