

Jesus, Cherries, and a Way of Life

Looking at the photographs of Jessica Backhaus



Jessica Backhaus, *Maryszia's World* (24 x 20 in.), C-print, 2004.
All images courtesy Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York

The small village of Netno, Poland, is located in West Pomerania, a rural region that shares the fate of many similar communities throughout Europe—and the United States, for that matter—where modernization and the global economy are making inroads, but slowly, and for better and worse. Traditional values hold, and modest means and a resistance to change are reflected in the material culture of the homes—the appliances, the decorations, the religious imagery. In 1993, the family of photographer Jessica Backhaus, who is German, bought a *dworek*, an old farmhouse, in Netno. Backhaus was twenty-two at the time and living in Paris, but she went to Netno every year for holidays, and in 2001 she began taking photographs there. Four years later, she had accumulated a remarkable series of pictures, which she compiled in the book she titled *Jesus and the Cherries*. The photograph after which the book is named shows four squat jars of bright red preserved cherries sitting on an impossibly neat, blond wood countertop. Pinned to the wall behind the counter is a small, decorative postcard of a robed Jesus. The photograph reflects Backhaus's appreciation of the visual rhythms of the everyday, even (and maybe especially) in the most modest places.

Backhaus's color photographs bring to mind William Eggleston's interiors, and also the work of such 1970s photographers as Stephen Shore and Mitch Epstein,



who had a similar penchant for the vernacular and the commonplace. Her pictures alternate between intimate images of the leftovers of a meal on a table, with half-empty glasses, assorted silverware, and a bit of pink dessert left on a blue floral plate, and longer shots, such as one of children swimming off a dock. Backhaus has a wonderful sense of pacing and pattern, which is conveyed both in individual photographs (for example one in which circular shapes in a lace curtain echo the round pink blossoms of the potted flowers on the window ledge) and in the organization of the images in the book, which is itself covered in a delicate, doilylike pink-and-white lace. The turquoise blue of a bar of soap in one image is echoed in the blue sleeves on

a girl's teeshirt on the opposite page, and in her extraordinary light blue eyes. All of this gives the photographs a strong sense of coherence and narrative continuity.

Backhaus was born in Cuxhaven, Germany in 1970, and moved to Paris when she was sixteen years old. While studying photography there she met Gisèle Freund, then in her seventies, and became the celebrated photographer's friend and personal assistant: "I learned more than you could ever learn in a classroom," says Backhaus of her friendship with Freund, who died in 2000. Backhaus moved to New York in 1995, assisting fashion photographers and doing commercial work before embarking on the project that would become *Jesus and the Cherries*.

"People think of Poland as gray," she says, "but it's not gray at all, if you really look and spend time, there's color everywhere, and I was fascinated by how the Polish people in these small, rural towns live and how they decorate." It wasn't an easy task, she admits, to gain entrance into people's homes. After all she was an outsider, and a German. And they were often perplexed as to why she would want to photograph their modest homes. But, she says, "I believe that taking a picture of people's homes is sometimes as intimate as taking a portrait."

Indeed, Backhaus's portraits are accomplished, and suggest a comfortable familiarity with her subjects, but her interiors have an even greater intimacy and convey a gen-



on the particular, for which photography is especially well suited. “I wanted to uplift everything,” says Backhaus. And so she does, by homing in on the day-to-day minutiae—peeled carrots and dish soap and silverware on the ledge of a sink—that evoke an entire way of life.

*Note: Jessica Backhaus’s work is on view in a group show at The Photographer’s Gallery in London through July 15. Her book *Jesus and the Cherries*, published by Kehrer, was released in the United States in May.*

uine appreciation for the aesthetic ingenuity she encounters. “I was almost obsessed with showing what, for me, was this amazing sense of taste and beauty,” she says. However, her photographs also acknowledge the fact that certain traditions are already becoming history. The perfectly creased pillows, the ornate decorations, the stenciled wallpaper—even a wood-paneled wall holding nearly two dozen antlered skulls (not taxidermied busts, but skulls)—all suggest a place out of time, although her photographs of the younger generation—such as Wojciech in a red Nike shirt, or *Magda’s Room* (2004), plastered with the pages of pop culture magazines—hint that change is inevitable. In that sense, she has stopped time, with a focus

Top: Jessica Backhaus, *A Renovated Life* (24 x 20 in.), C-print, 2004

Right: Jessica Backhaus, *Blue Sink*, (24 x 20 in.), C-print, 2004

Far Left: Jessica Backhaus, *Malwina*, (24 x 20 in.), C-print, 2004

