

EXPOSURES

Do you have a special photography project? Contact section editor Anthony LaSala at PDN, 770 Broadway, New York, NY 10003. E-mail: alasala@pdnonline.com.

Edited by Anthony LaSala

While the two stories in this month's Exposures feature images that differ quite a bit technically, both articles highlight worlds that are rarely on display. Jessica Backhaus traveled to a tiny village in Poland and, after gaining the trust of its inhabitants, documented their lives and homes. Her vivid color photographs capture the beauty and simplicity of a rural way of life that has become rare in a world obsessed with technological advancement. In our second story, photographer Michael Harlan Turkell reveals the intense effort and labor that takes place in the concealed back rooms of high-priced restaurants in two of America's biggest cities.

The Simple Life

By Phil Harris

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE BOOK *JESUS AND THE CHERRIES* (KEHRER VERLAG, 2006) appears more like something you would use to decorate your home or balance glasses of Merlot and elegant cuts of gourmet cheese on. Wrapped in the patterned, perforated white fabric that covers tables in old-world Europe, the book itself is a piece of art that you almost don't want to open. But when you get past the cover and glance at the pages, you realize the book, featuring images of a rural Polish village by photographer Jessica Backhaus, is much more than a pretty object.

Beginning in 2001, the 35-year-old Backhaus delved into the small Polish community of Netno. Following her mother, who had bought and restored an old barn in rural Poland after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Backhaus wandered around the area and soon fell in love with its charms. In her glowing interior shots and radiant portraits, she focuses on the simplicity of life, the inhabitants and the enchanting objects that make up their homes. The result is a vibrant snapshot

of a locale almost lost in time. Wooden tabletops hold hand-cut chocolates, floral plates and half-finished meals. Relaxed subjects smile and daydream, sitting in their homely living rooms. Children amble through fields of high grass and dive off the glistening planks of lake-front piers.

"I was very intrigued with the way the Polish villagers lived," says Backhaus, who is striking in her sincerity. "I just try to be as honest as I can be, to make work I believe in."

Jesus and the Cherries (the title comes from an image featuring a kitchen adorned with jars of fruit and a picture of Jesus) is a tribute to a way of life that is disappearing as Poland becomes ever more a part of contemporary Europe. The ubiquitous religious iconography, the rough country character of many interiors, the unselfconscious use of colorful clothing—all these things are likely to give way under the weight of outside influence. As beautiful as the pictures are, they are also a testament to a particular moment in a



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particular place, a moment that is passing.

Using Kodak 160VC and 400VC color negative film, a Mamiya 645 with 55mm and 80mm lenses on a tripod, and occasionally a handheld Canon T90, Backhaus began photographing the life around her with available light. It took some time to gain the confidence of her subjects. "At the beginning, the inhabitants of the houses were very confused, not so sure. But after a little while they [decided] they would trust me," says Backhaus. "That was the gift. I truly believe that without the confidence, the generosity, the trust, everything the Polish people in these villages have given me, I never, ever could have done this project. I had access to pretty much everything, a completely green light."

Though she speaks very little Polish, Backhaus spent three years working in Netno and the surrounding villages, gradually befriending people. Spending 2-4 weeks at a time in Poland, Backhaus accumulated hundreds of images. She found herself compelled to photograph, to print and return, to show people what she had done, so that they would know her intentions.

"Every time I came back to Poland I showed people the work I had done, and they were so happily surprised by my work. Because at the beginning they couldn't understand why I was interested in their living room or bedroom," says Backhaus. "They could see it was a very tender view, not something you could compare to voyeurism. It was very real and very aesthetically photographed. More and more doors opened—it was a snowball. Everybody connected: the brother, the sister, the grandmother. I met more and more people, and after a while most of the villagers knew about my project."

Backhaus began working in photography after she left her native Germany at 16 for Paris. Coming from an artistic household in Cuxhaven, Germany (her mother was an actress, her father a theater director), young Jessica saw a

Above, left: "Violetta by the lake, 2003." **Above, right:** "Pink pillow, 2002." **Opposite page, left:** "Janusz, 2004;" **Opposite page, right:** The title image, "Jesus and the cherries, 2001."

career in the arts as natural. In Paris, after earning a bachelor's degree, she began working as a photo editor for magazines. In 1992, she had the good fortune to catch the eye of Gisele Freund, whose photographic career stretched back to the 1920's. The 84-year-old Freund became her "grandmother," friend and mentor for the next eight years. Freund taught

her that "you can learn all the techniques, but if you don't photograph with your heart, you'll never be a good photographer."

By 1995, Backhaus had begun to see the limitations of her job, and decided that she needed to get to New York to pursue her dream of making her own work. Though she felt under-qualified, by knocking on doors she managed to land a job assisting David LaChapelle, which led to other fashion assisting work in New York. Eventually, the experience helped Backhaus refine her sense of light and color, giving her the confidence to strike out on her own.

The transformation from project to published book was not an easy one for *Jesus and the Cherries*. When Backhaus completed the venture, she winnowed the pile of pictures down to 160, put together a book dummy and went to the Frankfurt Book Fair. Over the course of five days, she showed the book to close to 50 publishers. Quite a few liked the work, but none were willing to gamble on an unknown. Backhaus' vision was so unwavering that she had already designed the cover (made out of an imported plastic and wax fabric called "Cerata" in Polish), a slipcased version, and a special edition with an original print—a Polish teacup, saucer and spoon. At last, she found Kehrer Verlag, a small German publisher willing to take a chance. Backhaus eventually had to trim the book to 94 pictures, but was allowed complete control of the sequencing and overall design. "They gave me enormous freedom. I can honestly say that it's a dream come true," says Backhaus.

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Over the course of a year, the book has opened doors for Backhaus. She's now represented by Yancey Richardson Gallery in New York and The Photographers' Gallery in London. "Jesus and the Cherries" has been shown in Germany and New York, and is opening soon in Poland and London. How did everything fall into place? According to Yancey Richardson, who loved the lush palette, sensitivity and deft layout of the images in the book, the strength of the work is reinforced by the personality of the photographer. "Jessica is very warm, very special, sincere," Richardson says. "Her work is not ironic, it's very sincere and observant and affectionate."



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Top: "Olga, 2002." Above: "Carrots by the sink, 2004."