

# Der kleine Bund

## It Can Only Get More Interesting: She Photographs Her Ageing Nude Body

Older women are largely invisible in photography, says Brigitte Lustenberger (56). A conversation about nude images and the beauty of ageing skin.

Regula Fuchs

In Brigitte Lustenberger's studio at the former Loeb warehouse in Bern, the many flowers immediately catch the eye. Standing in their vases, they have withered, yet they remain delicate and beautiful. For the series *An Apparition of Memory*, Lustenberger photographed the faded blossoms on glass plates, making them appear almost transparent. We are here, however, because of another body of work, which will also be on view at the Franz Gertsch Museum in Burgdorf starting this weekend. In the series *A Gaze of One's Own*, the photographer, who was born in Zurich in 1969, explores the representation of the nude female body—placing herself at the centre of that inquiry.

The self-portraits reveal curves and folds of skin, often on a large scale, and engage with the central themes that run through Brigitte Lustenberger's work: the fragility of life and the beauty of transience. With these images of the body, Lustenberger, who has lived in Bern for many years, questions not only the imperative of youthfulness but also the photographic gaze itself—which, in her view, has been shaped primarily by a male perspective.

*Ms Lustenberger, for A Gaze of One's Own you photographed your own body. What do you see when you look through the lens?* Curiously enough, I do not see myself; I see a body that I observe and question. In that moment, I am very detached from myself as a person.

*So the work is less about the individual than about the body itself. Is that why you are nude in the photographs?* No, that has to do with the history of photography. I am also a photo historian, and I have studied the representation of women. For 200 years, it was primarily men who took photographs and women who were photographed—often nude. This has left its mark on all of us. We lack visual references for many female bodies, particularly ageing ones. The same applies to many other kinds of people and bodies. There are gaps in our perception. Added to this is the fact that the prevailing image of the female body is highly limited.

*Young and beautiful?* Exactly. Young, white, idealized, sexually available. I am not saying that such images should not also be shown, or that they are inherently problematic. But this narrow perspective has the effect that, at the age of 56, I do not really know what my own body actually looks like.

*To return to the history of photography: women were photographed nude mainly in art photography, not necessarily in everyday portraits.* Yes, but even there the pattern

is often the same: the man takes the photograph, the woman is photographed. A striking example from the grey area between art and private photography is René Groebli's honeymoon photographs. They are very intimate, tender images of his wife. What I find myself wondering, however, is why I cannot also see him buttoning up his shirt, or smoking his first cigarette in bed. Instances of a woman photographing a nude man are exceedingly rare in the history of photography. Such omissions also shape the way we perceive our own bodies.

*My original question was whether it takes courage to photograph yourself nude as an ageing woman. But then I realized that, in asking it, I would probably be reproducing precisely the prejudice that a photographed body is supposed to conform to a particular ideal.* I have internalized these stereotypes as well. I look at my body and notice that it does not correspond to the image I carry in my mind of what a female body is supposed to look like. At my age, so much is changing, and I find myself wondering: Where has my body gone? You have to give yourself a little nudge to look again and to realize: here I can recognize qualities that a young body does not possess. Traces of a life lived, vulnerability, individuality, and also strength. I find that deeply compelling.

*In art, there are certainly women who show their bodies without embellishment—Cindy Sherman, Valie Export, or numerous performance artists.* I greatly value positions such as those of Sherman, Nan Goldin, Francesca Woodman, and Sophie Calle. They have influenced me. But what has also shaped me is the fact that the female gaze has been absent from large parts of the history of photography. Or that there were women who took photographs, but whose work was not exhibited. These mechanisms continue to have an effect today. I, too, repeatedly feel that women in the art world operate under different conditions.

*The title «A Gaze of One's Own» alludes, on the one hand, to Virginia Woolf's «A Room of One's Own» and, on the other, to the concept of the «male gaze.» What characterizes the «female gaze,» or your own gaze?* Curiosity. And a desire to challenge established norms and ways of seeing. At the same time, I will never truly know what my own gaze is, because it, too, has already been shaped by countless influences. But for me, what matters most in art is precisely this process of searching, of exploring without knowing where it will lead.

*You are now presenting works from this series at the Franz Gertsch Museum. But the project is not yet complete?* No, I am still right in the middle of



«The prevailing image of the female body is highly limited»: Brigitte Lustenberger questions the way women are seen.

Photo: Adrian Moser

*«Instances of a woman photographing a nude man are exceedingly rare in the history of photography».*

it. And as far as my body is concerned, the process of change is very much ongoing. Age continues to reveal itself more and more. And with that, new images and new questions keep emerging. In a way, it can only become more interesting. *You could also photograph someone else. What does it mean that you are your own model?* That is important. I cannot objectify myself. For this work, I did not want to do exactly what I am questioning: turn someone else into an object. It is also a form of self-empowerment.

*Your images are self-portraits. Could they be described as selfies?* Yes and no. Selfies have always been part of my photographic practice. A selfie is a means of self-examination: Who am I in this image? Who do I want to be? When I photograph myself, I am also engaging with the medium of photography itself. The person in the image is me, and yet it is not me, because it is only a piece

of paper. That is the magic of photography—something that has preoccupied many theorists over the years. This medium is full of paradoxes, and that is what makes it so fascinating to me. *You also cut up your photographs of the body and reassemble them. What does that achieve?* It reveals that the photographic image is a construction. By cutting an image apart, I make visible the fact that it is an illusion of reality. Visitors to the Franz Gertsch Museum will be able to experience this quite directly. An image of my face is installed there as a large curtain-like structure, cut into strips and suspended in the space. People can walk through my head.

*In Burgdorf, you are also showing images of withered flowers from the series An Apparition of Memory. Why do we find it more difficult to perceive beauty in human bodies that are ageing, fading, or approaching the end of life?*

Perhaps because we have learned to associate beauty above all with youth. I still remember vividly how soft, delicate, and beautiful the skin on my grandmother's cheeks felt. What interests me are the traces left by time. In my flower images, as in my works on the body, I am concerned with a form of beauty that arises precisely through transience. *Photography is a means of holding back the passage of time. Is it that for you as well?* Yes. Photography was invented to preserve moments. At the same time, every photograph points to the fact that the moment it captures has already passed. I love this paradox of photography. It is reflected in the material itself. I also work in photographic restoration and encounter images on glass plates that, even after 130 years, retain a striking quality. At the same time, countless family photographs are lost today simply because a hard drive fails.

*We can probably never entirely escape transience.* All the more reason to embrace it.



Prologue of an Elegy – A Gaze of One's Own: a work from 2019. Photographs: © Brigitte Lustenberger / 2026, ProLitteris, Zurich.



The beauty of fragility – We passed the setting sun: a work from 2023. Photographs: © Brigitte Lustenberger / 2026, ProLitteris, Zurich.

Cabinet Exhibition at the Franz Gertsch Museum, Burgdorf. On view through August 30.

Photo Basel: June 16–21.