

What happens when two talented photographers—one from Paris, one from Värmland, Sweden—fall for each other and are consumed by their passionate love affair?

Naked photos, lots of naked photos.

But not your usual naked photos—they are exceptional ones, real, earthy, and beautiful. Photographers Margot Wallard of Paris and JH Hengstrom of Värmland, photographed the hotel trysts, snowy walks, and giddy celebrations in the midst of what they called “an unstoppable and blind passion.” The resulting project, *Foreign Affair*, is a sumptuous, deeply sexy book available through Superlabo.

This book is sexy in the way of real intimacy and utter abandon. You get a close-up of two faces pressed together, as if the pressing will help them dissolve into each other. You get photos of two naked people all wrapped up in each other's arms, laughing, champagne bottle in hand. You get a photo of the couple in missionary position, Ms. Wallard taking a photo in the mirror whilst mid-coitus, presumably.

But there is nothing raunchy here—these images feel too honest and sincere to be raunchy. They are executed with the nuance and texture of two skilled photographers who feel at home both behind and in front of the camera. They communicate the exhilaration of drunken, besotted love, of feeling utterly and completely like there is no other place in the world you'd rather be, no other person you'd rather be with. You have it all. Right there. In a dingy hotel room in Paris.

And even in the snowy landscape of Sweden. The photos take us from the grittier side of Paris to the pristine remoteness of rural Sweden, two environments that rub up against each other nicely—a footstep in a vast field of snow and a rainy cobblestoned street in nighttime Paris.

This series is so raw, so intimate, that it stuns the viewer into a kind of sensual awakening. Hello body, curves, hair, nipples. You can almost smell skin and sweat. Even when viewing these photos in a semi-sterile office on a computer screen on a Monday morning, far away—both physically but even more mentally—from the intoxication of really good sex, they make something stir. These images touch something you probably have known but don't get to enjoy nearly as much as you'd like—the feeling of total sexual and romantic abandon.

None of the images portrays that abandon so much as the naked series with a champagne bottle. The two lovers are so playful and uninhibited, genitals a-flying, faces caught in laughter, that they enfold you, making you a tad giddy vicariously. What does it take, the photo makes you ask, to be that free from self-consciousness, to be so fully unabashed, to let your body and your delight be so exposed just as it is? (I presume there was no doctoring of images here—the rawness would not survive Photoshop).

While these photos do reveal that state of being drunk with passion, there is another feeling here, a foggy subtext lurking behind the giddiness of the love affair. They tell us, subtly but undeniably: this has already happened. It's passed. Not that the relationship here is over—that's not the point. But the very act of recording it on film is a kind of admission that yes, the joy of this particular experience is brief, so I will immortalize it on film while I can, as much as film can ever actually immortalize anything. The image is only a souvenir from an intoxicating trip: this moment, in this hotel, with this lover, on this rainy day is Paris—it's amazing, and it's fleeting. Just looking at the photos, you know—this is something that is already gone.

Not to say, of course, that the passion of the relationship is gone—not at all. It's just that we often take photos to record something we want to remember—and in that very act of recording there is an admission, whether conscious or not, that this is something that won't last. Photos feel like they are saving us from the inevitable loss of that particular experience, but no, they are just simulations of the real thing for us to look at later. You see these photos and you know that while that hotel room is still there, Margot and Jan have long checked out.

Which is why I like the images of each of them alone so much. They show the flip side. Eventually we have to pull away. Absence is always there, the lover's shadowy companion. Two particularly bold photos in the book suggest this absence with both humor and daring honesty—a vibrator and a rubber vagina. They are a facsimile for the real thing; they are dealing with absence. When we can't be with the one we love, improvise.

Distance and separation, therefore, are inevitably present in this book. One photo is of the couple's passports, one next to the other. Yes, they are together, side-by-side, Swedish and French, but alone and separate within that. Similarly, the pristine landscapes

of Värmland make a bold contrast with the urban delights (and squalor) of the streets of Paris; these are two separate homes, two separate cultures, two separate lives. Even so, the intimacy here still blows me away.

A journey, too, can be found within the photos. We see images of a man walking in the snow-drenched wilderness. Crunching step after step in the snow. Alone. We see the rain in Paris overtaking a cobblestone sidewalk. Both speak to us of a path, of moving, of stepping through time, perhaps alone but longing for the other.

I posit, how much can you be in total abandon and document it at the same time? Once you stop to get out the camera, are you not inevitably stopping the pure experience in order to record it? Not that a camera can't capture much of the playfulness and joy and intensity of passion, but you can't exactly describe an orgasm and have one at the same time. The mere experience of photographing something so all consuming breaks the spell a little. Pure experience evades documentation.

But because we have no other choice—most cannot dwell in all consuming passion for too long—a photograph is one way to make it last, even if just in half-glimpses, even if just in your memory. A strong photo can communicate volumes, and these do. In *Foreign Affair*, you get a taste of that exhilarating pleasure of abandon and it's quite delicious, even if only from the pages of a beautiful book.

TEXT BY CLAYTON MAXWELL

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