

# Ancient Traditions

MAJA DANIELS: ELF DAHLIA

The isolated and mountainous landscape of Älvdalen – a small town on the border of Sweden and Norway – is the starting point for *Elf Dalia*, a collection of photographs by London-based Maja Daniels. Laced with history (the location of the Swedish witch trials in 1668) and with a population of 2,000 people, the town – where Daniels spent most of her youth – is one of the few places that still speaks Elfdalian, a North Germanic language derived from Old Norse that dates back to the Middle Ages. “Not only is it a mystery to linguists how it has been kept alive, but it also represents a personal mystery to me since I was never taught how to speak it due to the stigma that has been haunting previous generations.”

Featuring approximately 100 images, the publication explores both the mystical and the vernacular through the day-to-day lives of a hidden community. “I became interested in exploring the cultural value of a language and how the act of speaking reproduces a specific worldview,” Daniels explains.

The pictures are structured as a visual dialogue-of-sorts between the young artist and one of the founders of the Älvdalen Local Heritage Foundation, Tenn Lars Persson, a photographer from the early 1900s, who – like Daniels – dedicated a large part of his life recording the town’s culture, folklore, superstitions and beliefs, through a collection of 5,000 old glass plate images. There is a deep connection to be found in the spaces between analogue and digital –

authenticity and ownership. Daniels notes: “I felt a deep pull to his images. They hold a unique sense of eccentricity that drew me to Älvdalen in the first place, along with the desire to create a distinct non-linear, timelessness in my work.”

In juxtaposing both artists’ portfolios, the publication acts as a conversation between the past and present, as well as tradition and modernity – nestled within atmospheric landscapes and dappled compositions. “By mixing my images with Tenn Lars’ archive I carve out a timeless space whereby mystery, strange events and humour can co-exist and where we can think of ‘myth’ as a creative expression, a sort of mode of communication,” she explains. An example of this is two compositions – which are 100 years apart – depicting town men wearing Santa Claus masks, reflecting the ongoing fables still prevalent in Älvdalen today. For Daniels, these stories are the most important. Here, magic is not meant to be supernatural but rather “an emotional relationship with place through notions of ancestry and folk beliefs.”

On this reading, *Elf Dalia* is not only a selection of well-curated and insightful photographs but a visual history set down for generations to come. “One of the key functions of including an archive is to consider how we got here and to look to the future,” she explains. “This is something the youth in Älvdalen are forced to confront since they are directly responsible for the survival of their language now.”

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