

# Roberta Thornley

b.1985

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“There are two kinds of photographers: those who compose pictures and those who take them...” **Ernst Haas**<sup>1</sup>

Roberta Thornley’s 2008 debut exhibition places her firmly in the ‘composing’ camp. And yet when we look at *Mother*, a photograph from that exhibition, we might easily think it had been ‘taken’ – that it is an actual moment of lived experience. It is utterly convincing emotionally. We feel for the apparent distress of the subject. Her feet seem to express anguish. The title, *Mother*, tightens the screw on our emotional discomfort as we imagine our own mother in such circumstances. We might also ask ourselves: would she want to be photographed in this state?

When we realise that the photograph has not been taken, but rather has been staged or composed and that the woman is in fact an actor, our emotional response to the image is tempered by admiration for the photographer’s artifice. We now feel more like a movie viewer persuaded to suspend disbelief (i.e. we ‘forget’ that we are watching actors pretending, so that we can be moved by the story). In that situation, the more skilled the director, the more persuasive is the image, and the easier it is to believe in the illusion.

It’s a measure of Thornley’s maturity as an artist that we sense such a confident directorial hand at work. Again, this is more evident when works are grouped, or seen, in an exhibition context. You can get an idea of this at Thornley’s website. Almost completely without text, the website encourages viewing of her images as a slideshow, and the experience is quite filmic. Her photographs have a consistently surreal and symbolic ambience, but they are not merely clever tableaux: the imagery feels warm-blooded and rich in narrative possibility. Traces of narrative connection between images are laid by a continuity of lighting and visual texture. There is no rational story-line here, but not all film, especially not art film, conforms to conventional, linear storytelling.

In this context, it’s worth mentioning David Lynch, a film-maker whose films often feel as if they had been made in a trance. His exquisitely composed and colour-drenched images, which frequently juxtapose female beauty with a creepy, gothic atmosphere, draw us into a frightening narrative web. But not a linear narrative with a beginning, middle and end – Lynch’s stories unfold with the logic of a dream or, as is often the case, a nightmare!

The dream state is evoked in Thornley’s work by frequent recourse to nocturnal lighting effects and a kind of chiaroscuro, where a caressing light reveals form in a field of velvety darkness. Look at how much darkness there is in this image. There is more darkness than light. Thornley knows the eloquence of emptiness. Here, it speaks of the nearness of death. The expanse of darkness or black is crucial, too, as visual counterpoint to the illuminated figure in her nightdress. The woman appears to recoil from the darkness as if clinging to the light.

## Gerald Barnett

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Haas was a leading 20th century documentary photographer.

### Artist website:

[www.robortathornley.com](http://www.robortathornley.com)

### Galleries and museums:

[www.timmelville.com](http://www.timmelville.com)

### Web search:

David Lynch

