

ARTFORUM



Richard Learoyd, *Baltic (Surface 1)*, 2016, Gold-toned aelatin print. 47 3/8 x 67 1/8".

BARCELONA

Richard Learoyd

FUNDACIÓ MAPFRE CASA GARRIGA
NOGUÉS EXHIBITION HALL

Diputació, 250

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Richard Learoyd's technical process is everything contemporary digital photography's is not: a cumbersome, restrictive, time-consuming event with a high rate of failure, resulting in one unique grainless print. These photographs—made with a room-size camera obscura he designed himself—have an otherworldly luminosity. Their shallow depth of field brings the foreground into startling, exquisite detail, while softly blurring what's behind.

The photographs are often compared to Pre-Raphaelite and Neoclassical paintings, particularly those of Ingres, in their formal composition and lighting. The majority of the portraits in this exhibition represent women in a state of apparent inwardness; but unlike Ingres's sitters, Learoyd's don't make eye contact with us, forcing us into the uncomfortable role of voyeur. In the best of these works, *Jasmijn Towards the Light*, 2009, the subject's expression communicates something live, inexpressible. Collectively, however, this rhapsody of repressed female turmoil and unhappiness feels overdetermined—further obscuring the interiority it wants to reveal.

In Learoyd's oeuvre, the works that deliver the most profound emotional and psychological impact are the figure studies. The powerfully quiet *Man with Octopus Tattoo*, 2011, bears a strong compositional resemblance to Ingres's *Valpinçon Bather*,

1808—the naked figure turned partially away, shyly exposing a vulnerable back. As the photograph’s title indicates, Learoyd’s camera captures the sitter’s body art in crystalline focus, touchingly revealing not only the individual’s corporeal form but his taste and subjectivity as well.

For his most recent body of work, Learoyd constructed a portable version of his camera obscura capable of photographing outdoors. From this emerged the extraordinary *Baltic (Surface I)*, 2016—a mesmerizing cropped shot of the sea’s surface, as seen from slightly above, through human eyes. Who hasn’t gazed at nature, searching for some connection or answer within it? It’s a photograph that expresses so much about what is shared and also isolating about the human condition—that painful, complex gift of consciousness.

— *Jessica Lott*