

Jamestown Community College's Weeks Gallery presents *Weightlessness*, an exhibition of photographs by Arno Rafael Minkkinen, from June 8-July 30. The hours are 11 a.m.-5 pm., Monday-Thursday. Visit sunyjcc.edu/weeksgallery for more information.

The Scandinavian Folk Festival will present Minkkinen as the *Distinguished Scandinavian Speaker* on Saturday, July 18, at 3:30 p.m. in the Robert Lee Scharmann Theatre, which will be followed immediately by a reception and book signing. The reception includes a performance by Julane Lund who will play the traditional and Norwegian Hardanger fiddles.

The Weeks Gallery will be open during the festival from 10 a.m.-7 p.m. on July 18 and noon-5 p.m. on July 19. Visit www.scandinavianjamestown.org for more information.

The inside cover of Minkkinen's monograph *Homework: The Finnish Photographs 1973-2008* notes, "The vision of one of Finland's most productive and influential photographic artists is illuminated." This book presents old and new images, explains his artistic influences, exposes his most intimate thoughts and feelings, and reveals the challenges he faced at birth: He was born with a double cleft palette and received a series of corrective surgeries. His parents guide and predict his life with symbolic names. Arno reflects the river that flows through Florence, Italy, the birth place of the Renaissance. "My father tacked on the Rafael (the archangel who summons healing angels) to be my healer," adds Minkkinen.

At the age of six, he immigrates to America and faces another challenge--adjusting to a new life in Brooklyn, NY and learning to read and write in English. He receives his transcendent wings and rises above these challenges in late adolescence. "I was 21 when I finally gained confidence in who I was," writes Minkkinen. He boldly soars as he dates some of the most beautiful women on campus, meets his future wife--Sandra Jean Hughes, graduates from Wagner College, and re-visits his Finnish birthplace

His life and art parallel the ancient phoenix myth. The phoenix is a transcendent and prosperous bird that is symbolically depicted center stage within a ring of fire. The flames reduce the body to ashes from which the bird is reborn. In Minkkinen's photo *Pachaug, Connecticut, 1972*, he appears to replicate the phoenix myth by lying nude on a frozen pond, within a ring of fire. In other images, he flies like a bird over ponds and lakes, levitates over the Grand Canyon, and shapeshifts into miraculous forms.

The phoenix constantly searches for sensory experiences and in many of Minkkinen's primordial landscape images, he engages in risk-taking stunts that subject his body to trials that elicit acute sensations. His flesh, bones, and muscles are fully tested. These experiences are heightened by the fact that he is nude, alone, and in harm's way. "Bare foot and bare ass like a monkey in heaven," Minkkinen writes.

In Karen Armstrong's book *The Bible*, she writes, "Human beings seek "ekstasis" a stepping outside of mundane experience. If they no longer find ekstasis in a synagogue, church, or mosque, they look for it in dance, music, sport, sex, or drugs." Does Minkkinen encounter artistic-ecstasy after each photo-ritual?

To illustrate, in *Hirvensalmi, 1995*, we witness Minkkinen dropping the sharp point of a heavy sickle onto the middle of his nose. In several other images, he dangles from tree limbs that loom above steep cliffs. Imagine this: In *Hyvinkää, Finland, 1974*, Minkkinen takes a self-portrait, alone and naked, with one wrist tied to the ski jump's beam that towers sixty feet off the ground. This all occurs during a blizzard and after a restless night in bed. In the phoenix myth, the magnificent bird becomes stronger after each trial or sensory encounters

Research suggests that adult sensation seekers experience euphoria through the dopamine they produce. Does Minkkinen experience a euphoric rush after each performance? Did he experience his first combinations of pain, euphoria, and imaginative visions as he was transformed on the operating table? He recalls postop memories, "the adhesive tape that held my repaired cleft palate together, the

ether haze, a bright blinding whiteness, warm water baths, and smiling nurses?" Minkkinen later reconstructs fantasizes with the early visual memories from the operations.

The image on the cover of *Saga* presents a stretched face, mouth, and clavical that screams out to eternity. Purging pain and suffering, like John Coffey, the avatar portrayed in the film *The Green Mile*. Catharsis is known to cleanse and heal as well.

Several images evoke a Platonic quest, a search for the ideal or divine. In Italy, he caresses females who personify Venus figures. In other photographs, the male and female forms represent god and goddess, united in life and death. At his home, he hovers protective over his son with his arms stretched far and wide, like Zeus.

In *Afton Down, Freshwater Bay, Isle of Wight, England, 2002*, Minkkinen's camera frames his figure so it appears to be holding and becoming one with the ocean, beach, sky, and sun. Like the phoenix within all of its radiant glory, this image personifies unity and transcendence.

In *A Man and His Dog, 2007*, he shapeshifts his body and shadow into dog figures. In *Birds of Lianzhou, 2007*, his blurred arm becomes a bird that mimics the lines of a mystical landscape. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966), the author of several Zen and Buddhist essays, describes Zen: "Before Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains; during Zen study, things become confused: after enlightenment men are men and mountains are mountains, only one's feet are a little off the ground."

In *Fosters Pond II* (cover photo) the camera renders details down to the veins under the skin and the wrinkles on top. These photo-particulars help us experience what we see as a mirror of reality. The visual facts make the image appear super-real. Can you sense and feel the warm light, cool water and mist?

Conversely, the water surface that mirrors his figure, combined with the fog and luminous light set an ethereal stage for an imaginative vision. Real-life experience is abandoned through a masterful composition that elevates the body to monumental proportions, suggesting a Greek or Christian god walking on water.

In my mind's eye, *Fosters Pond II* conjures an Eastern metaphor as well. Minkkinen's arms and legs stretch gracefully in yoga-like fashion. Yoga brings balance to our bodies and minds. Through practice and devotion, it can train our consciousness for a state of tranquility and/or spiritual insight. Again, this image transcends what we rationally know to be true and represents weightlessness, grace divine, or Nirvana.

Is Minkkinen participating in pantheistic communion? Rather than taking the blood and body of Christ, his rituals consume the primordial landscape, balance and spark his psyche, envision man and women as the essence of god and goddess, and open the mind to infinite possibilities. His myths appear to reverently engage life.

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher and author of the *Ich und Du (I and Thou)*, explains how

humans live in disparate ways: as an "I and Thou" or holy relationship with nature, or as an "I-It" relationship that separates or disconnects humans and the natural environment. Minkkinen's performances embrace the "I and Thou."

While I was in Dallas, Texas, attending the Society for Photographic Education national conference, Minkkinen left a copy of *Homework* at the front desk for me to review before his interview. When I picked it up early the next morning, Ebony, the night receptionist, presented the book to me. She cocked her head and wore a wry smile on her face. We made eye contact. I *knew* she viewed the book and wasn't sure what to say or how to react with a stranger in regards to the content, the nudity! I sensed an opportunity to test a non-artist and pressed for a reaction. "What do you think," I asked. Embarrassed, she fumbled for words several times, then brilliantly exclaimed in her Afro-Texan voice, "He's getting it on with nature." "Yes, he is," I noted, "but in a manifold sense..."

Minkkinen gets it on with all of Nature. His risk-taking allows him to sense and feel, to experience fear and pain, to burn, to rise, and then to imagine-soar. This is what makes his work rich, fully human, and transcendent. The documentary photographs of his artistic exploits draw us in and allow us to bond with him as he creates the life, dreams, and visions we all desire.

- James D. Colby



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A great nation
deserves great art.

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Visit sunyjcc.edu/weeksgallery for more information or visit www.scandinavianjamestown.org for more information on the Scandinavian Folk Festival.

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