

# Mikael Siirilä



Photo by Niklas Nordenswan

*Mikael Siirilä (b. 1978) is a self-taught photographic artist from Helsinki, Finland. Mikael learned the darkroom process early on in his childhood in an art-loving family. Decades later he would re-discover the darkroom as a natural and familiar ground for his artistic work.*

*Mikael has a reductionist and minimalist approach to photography. His work revolves around themes such as outsiderhood, absence and presence.*

*"I collect fragments and authentic observations from my daily life and travels and recontextualise them in the darkroom. I seek singular self-contained images that resist narrative and verbal expression. I aim to evoke a sense of calm, reflection and the je-ne-sais-quoi."*

*Mikael is a member of the international AllFormat Collective.*

**THM: What is your process like for shooting? Are the works planned and composed, or do you happen upon them?**

MS: The type of photography I practice has a unique relationship with reality. Photographs result from an outsider's gaze projecting into the world and the world directly, causing the image to form. I find this thinking both philosophically satisfying and poetic.

Consequently, I don't plan or construct images. Using a studio and hiring models would be a different art. I need my photographs to be discoveries and observations created with minimal disturbance beyond an occasional "stop right there". I feel I need to hold on to this principle to keep the body of work meaningful.

I do plan and prepare for opportunities with great care. I am rarely on the move without a camera. Our family has become accustomed to visiting and traveling to inspiring places with a persistent photographic agenda. I like to think it's a win-win.

**THM: And how do you shoot when deciding upon your composition? Do you usually shoot more open and then crop in the darkroom?**

MS: The idea of an image and the composition take shape in the camera. The practical thinking during shooting is part intuition and part recognition and cultivation of patterns that have become my visual vocabulary. Using edges meaningfully and cropping are certainly part of it. Months later, in the darkroom, I rarely change the original idea of an image. Nor could I, since for consistent 35mm film grain across my works, I can only crop so much.



Untitled (Girl and Wolfdog)



Untitled 190-23



*Untitled (Helsinki, 2016)*



*Untitled (Helsinki, 2020)*

***What kind of film do you shoot?***

I work exclusively with 35mm Kodak Tri-X film and one consistent chemical process for film development and silver gelatin printing. Analog photography and darkroom printing are a dangerous quagmire of tests and experiments. I think I have found a satisfying way across.

***What other ways of printing have you experimented with? For example, have you felt the desire to try printing your work in platinum/palladium or another "alternative" process?***

I have barely any hands-on experience with alternative processes. By the time I completed building a dedicated darkroom space, I had already committed to a single look. I consciously prioritize cultivating artistic vocabulary over experimenting with methods.

***What attracts you to an image? When viewing your work, I see humanity in different forms and our relationship to nature and textures, lots of beautiful textures.***

At first, I sense the mood. I enjoy photographs with a calm and a sense of suspended time, images that one can stare at and become lost in.

My work revolves around the themes of presence and absence and the experience of, "outsiderhood". I study these ideas literally and poetically and both within the subject matter and in the photographer's gaze. Reflecting on such human themes is not a project but an underlying reason for pressing the shutter.

I am also attracted to the visual beauty and the compositional structures of images. Recently I have explored the idea of meaningful negative space and the effect of displacement to reveal the active gaze.

Finally, I think of photographs as beautiful handmade objects. The idea of a photo takes me back to the '1-hour photos' of my youth. My pictures are only slightly bigger by design. Small size gets the viewer close and creates intimacy.

**THM:** *When do you feel like an image is finished? There's so much left outside of the composition but is still somehow integral to the story. What's left out of the frame is just as important as what's left in.*

MS: Laborious printmaking comes with the risk of losing sight of artistic expression. As a solution, I think of isolated roles: I cultivate gaze and composition with the camera. Months later, I study contact sheets analytically to discover images that align with my themes and vocabulary. By the time I am exposing paper, I am exclusively a printer: the image's idea must already be firmly in place.

The goal of recognizing the potential in an image spans the entire process from shooting to printing. I revisit a photo several times before making my mind about it. Often an image has all the aesthetic qualities but fails to evoke the right mind. It takes discipline to leave such an image behind.

The final stage, easily overlooked but core to photography involves making multiples. By completing an edition in small batches over time, I allow incremental improvements to set in. This way of working, unique to handmade printing, keeps me motivated. Is the image ever finished?

**When describing your artwork, you mention that you resist work that creates a narrative. What do you hope the viewer takes away when viewing your work?**

I consciously remove the who, where, and when from my photographs. Such narrative elements are a burden for photography and can cause the image to be approached as documentary. I need the viewer to see my work in expressive and poetic terms.

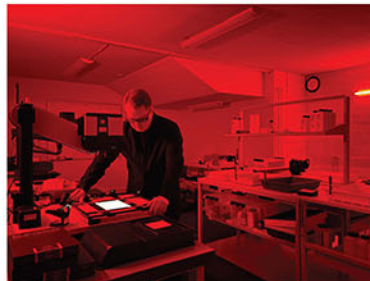
Sometimes it's not clear to me why a particular image works. I may find myself wanting to look at it again. I hope my viewer will feel the same: looking at the image in calm contemplation while trying to "put the finger on it". If that happens, I think I will have achieved something.

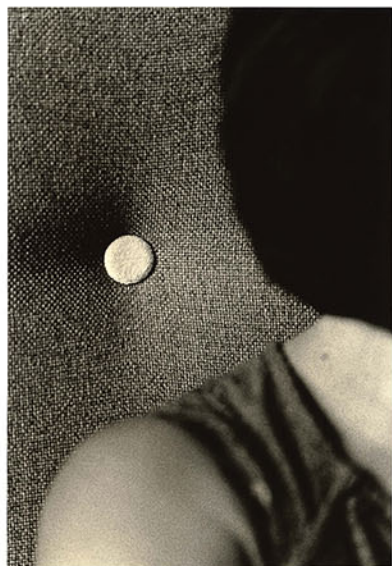


*Untitled (Madrid, 2020)*

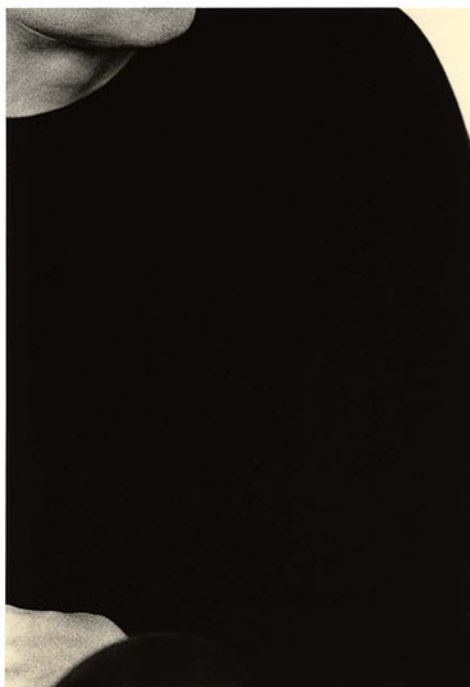


*Siirilä in his darkroom*





*Untitled (Göteborg, 2020)*



*Untitled (Helsinki, 2020)*

***You seem to have a Zen-like or meditative attitude to making images. Are you like that in the rest of your life? Do you think there is a spiritual aspect to your artistic practice?***

I would gladly paint that picture, but no. I lack the discipline for a reduced and spiritual lifestyle. However, the darkroom is undoubtedly a meditative and spiritual space. There I am detached from the rest of the world, contemplating images while immersed in an inner dialogue, and working hands-on with tangible materials. Every session feels soul-nourishing.

***Who are some of your favorite artists?***

My art preferences change, but icons such as Giacometti, Hammershøi, Morandi, Hopper, Gormley, and Kapoor will probably never leave the list. Saul Leiter, Luigi Ghirri, Masao Yamamoto, Ralph Gibson, and Renato D'Agostin have undoubtedly influenced my photographic vocabulary.



*Untitled (Helsinki, 2020)*



*Untitled (Turku, 2020)*

***What is your studio space like? Is it cluttered and chaotic? I have a feeling it is very organized and clean! Do you listen to music or do you like quiet when you print?***

My darkroom is organized and clean out of necessity more than psychology. I have directed considerable effort into dust-free and uncontaminated prints, and general cleanliness is vital. Useful tip: child labor. I have kids from the extended family to thank for valuable deep-cleaning and organizing sessions. Hence a lovely caricature of me with a developing tray on the whiteboard.

The darkroom is ideal for listening to music, audiobooks, or podcasts, certainly when printing multiples. Large noise-canceling headphones filter out the running water. Add a track by Nils Frahm; the darkroom becomes a concert hall. I will not admit to dancing shamelessly in the dark.

***What other kinds of activities do you enjoy to relax or for fun? Are you a movie or music buff, a gardener, do you enjoy athletics? What else are you interested in and does that inform your work at all?***

As this interview takes place during a global pandemic traveling is on hold. Visiting museums, art exhibitions, and historical venues with my family have been the most important single source of inspiration for my photography. I work in design and digital media as an entrepreneur and find a contemporary digital life equally captivating as the nostalgia of the darkroom. I am absolutely a lover of cinema.

***Are there any events – shows or publishing – or any new projects that we should look out for in the near future?***

I belong to the wave of artists that considers social media a legitimate platform for showing work and establishing personal relationships with patrons. Consequently, I feel no urgency to exhibit. However, my first photobook is gradually taking shape.

***Well, thank you for sharing your work and talking with us.***

You can follow Mikael's work at his website: [www.mikaelsiirila.fi](http://www.mikaelsiirila.fi), and on Instagram @mikaelsiirila