

SEBASTIAAN BREMER  
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SENSE OF WONDER - Naivety - A Life in Pictures

## A Life in Pictures

*When looking at family holiday photographs we are taken into a captured personal moment of time. The image is laced with nostalgia, innocence and a sense of abandonment. Sebastiaan Bremer uses the emotive nature of these images and reworks them adding layers of paint and meaning. Here along side some of my own favorite moments and places in the world, Bremer invites us into his world giving us insight into his work and process.*

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### Sebastiaan Bremer

All these works are about Joy and being in a perfect place - heaven. The titles themselves are lines from the Ode to Joy by Schiller, whose poem was set to music by Beethoven. These works were a struggle and an anomaly. I usually work by making smaller marks on photographs that are meaningful, but perhaps not as visually dominant in the final work.

In the case of this series, Schoener Goetterfunken (which roughly translates as Joyful Spark of the Gods) the images were so beautiful and strong, and the people (my parents and siblings) seemed so blissful. They were in a perfect place and seemed to be conscious of it. I started researching the history of art about Joy and there is not so much of it, really. This search led me to the beginning of the Romantic era, and the work of Schiller and Beethoven. I started playing the music loud, and



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then found a way of working on the pictures, perhaps in a way related to Kandinsky's painting

The original photos of my newest exhibition, *Egmont Revisited*, were shot in the mid- and late forties of the last century, so they are in black and white. They are of my father who, during boarding school, took a drama class. As part of this class they had lessons in how to perform poetry. Later, one of the teachers made a book about this subject, and used his students as models for photographic illustrations, including my 12 year old father. Seeing him in all these states was wonderful, leading me to a whole series of connections that ended up with me using him, my own children, and myself, acting out all states of expression from 'Heavenly Joy' to 'Deadly Sorrow'.

This subject matter came to me via Brassai's writing about Henry Miller, who stated that he was always in those two states and this led me, again, to the origins of Romantic thought, specifically Goethe's play *Egmont*, in which the character Klarchen utters the line: "Himmelhoch jauchzend, zu(m) Tode betrübt" (heavenly joy, deadly sorrow) which has become a proverb often quoted by European intellectuals as characteristic of the Romantic soul:

Freudvoll und leidvoll, gedankenvoll sein;  
Langen und bangen in schwebender Pein;  
Himmelhoch jauchzend, zum Tode betrübt;  
Glücklich allein ist die Seele, die liebt.

I felt a response to these words and they became the tread of my show -making the works one united piece. I made them all in black and white, even though some works are shot in the middle of the



*Egmont Revisited*  
Courtesy the Artist and  
Hales Gallery, London  
[halesgallery.com](http://halesgallery.com)

20th and others in the beginning of the 21st century. Most works do have a touch of color to pull it more into the 'present' reality, if you will.

I have never used photographs that I just found for my works (yet). There is always a strong personal connection to the underlying photo. Usually I have taken the photograph. If that is not the case, I am in the photograph myself, or it's from my close circle of friends and family.

We have, in general, a huge amount of images of our lives on holiday and of childhood. We carry cameras on holidays, not so much in our daily life. Regular life is less represented in our photo albums, as are our teenage years. Perhaps this helps us to keep us going? I think this might be changing, due to the ever-present iPhone cameras.

I found the negatives of the holiday photographs in a drawer in my father's house and they were in such perfect condition. They were shot on negative, which was an unusual format for my family and because most people used slide film. It seemed like a weird perfect slice of life: never before seen and to top it off, I was not in the images! I was a toddler at the time and not able to accompany them on the trip. When I printed them I was strongly drawn to it and, in a way, wanted to join in.

The way my family looks in these images is utterly blissful and they seem in heaven, and act like they are. The sun shines, they are healthy looking, they seem at ease, the glaciers are full, and the clothing is brand free and clean. My mother and father shot the images. Neither are professional photographers and there is not a bad picture

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among them. The photos are perfectly lit, framed and it seems as if they were almost styled. I did not want to critique the imagery, or interfere with their innate power. Before I printed contact sheets from the negatives, I had never seen them printed.

I did not want to create a barrier between the images and the viewer. I wanted to add to that displayed reality, amplify it. I worked in this way, adding my marks and the larger spheres of color by hand on the print so that the orbs seem to float in the reality of the photograph, 'seen' by the protagonists in the images. Or at least that is what it



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seems like. This illusion works, even though upon closer inspection they are clearly handmade marks on the surface of the print.

This series seems to depict a time (the 1970's) that for the majority of people alive seems the pure and happy past. Most of us were either young, or infant. The realities of global warming etc. are not a factor in these works. It's funny how much of life in retrospect is always positively seen, while in the moment itself life is usually not experienced as carefree as that. Just read the newspapers of those days: the early seventies were filled with wars and violence and pollution. Still, seeing these images, that is not apparent at all. I think we all look at family photos and see the holidays and birthdays, and know the stories behind the smiles. Still, there are some wonderful moments and sometimes they were captured on film.

*Sebastiaan Bremer is an Amsterdam-born artist now based in New York. Sebastiaan uses hand-painted acrylics and inks on chromogenic prints. [sebastiaanbremer.com](http://sebastiaanbremer.com)*