

The pursuit of perfection has led to us thinking of normal bodies as vulgar, says **Monika Macdonald**, who explores the subject in her intimate studies of middle-aged men. Words and portrait by **Michael Grieve**



# Control





All images © Monika Macdonald.

Monika Macdonald prefers to talk about 'work' rather than 'projects'. The latter, she believes, better describes a practice that is carefully planned to achieve a particular aim, and at the initiation of a work – such as her latest, titled *Hulls* – the desire is not to know what the aim is, but to discover it.

"Hulls are the ships coming towards the shore. We see them approaching, but realise that they are just the hulls of the ship, the skeleton. Therefore they are empty," the Swedish photographer says to explain the title of a series exploring middle-age. "But while [human] bodies are not empty, paradoxically they can be empty, like statues which we see as some kind of form. I wanted to explore men as fragile and solitary and very alone with their own bodies, and so I wanted them to use their body to express something that they might not ordinarily be."

I meet Macdonald at the Place du Forum, a hive of restaurants and activity in Arles, where the 50th edition of the renowned Rencontres festival is in full swing. *Hulls*, to be published later this year by André Frère Éditions, follows *In Absence*, published by Kehrer in 2016 and exhibited at Fotografiska in Stockholm and Galerie Vu in Paris. Inspired by Macdonald's experience of motherhood, *In Absence* is an autobiographical narrative, which portrays women who have their solitary search for belonging in common. In essence, this idea carries through to *Hulls* in the way that it seeks out the subjects' yearning

for some form of love. Both works are psychological and of intimate reflection, and both works also form a part of the photographer's self-portrait, despite the gender difference. "*Hulls* is a self-portrait, as there is a frustration within myself," Macdonald explains. "I long to be out of control because it is only then that you show more of yourself to everyone around you. In many ways, Sweden is a self-controlling culture, where we have problems expressing ourselves and showing our true feelings freely, perhaps for fear of upsetting other people. We are worried to speak about certain things and afraid of how we are towards each other." Certainly, *Hulls* is not a political work and there is no intention by Macdonald to make a social commentary, but the influence of societal norms experienced by the photographer has inevitably transgressed into her expression of the human condition in her work.

Macdonald began the work two years ago after much contemplation, similar to the working methodology of the Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman, who once said of his film *Persona*, "Only someone who is well-prepared has the opportunity to improvise". The bodies the photographer refers to in her opening explanation are of her subjects – men, normally between the ages of 50 to 60, who see themselves at a vulnerable stage in their life. These men are not classically beautiful; they wear socks, they have hairy backs, with a strange aesthetic oddness that illuminates their essential base human condition, that of the body. The pursuit of perfection has degraded the body as something vulgar, but Macdonald's work asks innumerable questions, and constructs a dialogue about the polarity of

the spirit and the flesh. In Christianity, during the Holy Communion we are invited to drink the blood and consume the body of the son of man, and Western philosophical thought has grappled with the duality of the human body. "The men I choose are not perfect in terms of their physique – they have a belly perhaps, and you see the signs of ageing," she explains. "I want them to stretch the whole image of what it is to be a man, and to achieve this, because they trust me, I push them to push their own limitations to something close to an uncomfortable situation where I, as a photographer, also feel uncomfortable in this intimate environment. They reach a point when they do not really know what they are doing and they lose control."

Before they began each session, the photographer showed her subjects sketches of what she wanted them to do. The shoot would take place in an intimate space, usually her own apartment – a place where there were no limitations to their possible behaviour, and an opportunity for her subjects to enter into an induced state of being, she says. At first, some were slightly tentative, but the sincerity of the approach ultimately brought them confidence. "Some of the images come to my mind when I listen to the songs of Bruce Springsteen," she explains. "He is perceived as a very masculine man, and yet underneath he is a romantic who sings songs about longing and being lost in life. I think a lot of men are lost. I often look at the men in the audience during concerts, standing in the front waving their arms and singing to the lyrics, and I wonder who they are and how serious they are about life. When I photograph my subjects, I put Springsteen's songs on. At first they are unsure what to do, but then they turn soft, no longer hard and defensive, and begin to let go and start dancing."

The room was a place for losing self-control and so Macdonald observed and documented the ensuing spontaneous performances. She describes herself as an "amateur entomologist", a scientist who studies insect life, hence the three photographs of insects in the book, which may appear oddly juxtaposed and yet are anthropomorphic tropes signalling the fragility of men as they approach middle-age as well as figurative similarities.

The results are photographs depicting middle-aged men in a state of undress, positioned in awkward and contorted body postures. Macdonald says she was careful not to show genitalia as she wanted to avoid sexualising her subjects, and also to avoid sentimentality "as that is totally uninteresting". There is also an animistic sense to the images, as if "the man", as Macdonald prefers to call them instead of 'men', has returned to some primal state, letting go of psychological prohibitions. The question of "What is a man?" is thrown into sharp relief. Macdonald says her photographic work is "asking questions that regulate our norms, social codes, and what a sense of belonging may involve". She adds: "*Hulls* is a photographic essay about my meeting with 'the man' in a space, without limitation. An intimate room for losing self-control. I am trying to relate and investigate their search for escapism, trust, to belong, or their resistance. I want to play with romance, self-confidence, or lack of it, the vulnerable piece of body."

For Macdonald, photography is the "sense of getting close to something that has no words". One photographer she is interested in is Boris Mikhailov. "Photography-wise I look at Mikhailov a lot, particularly at his self-portraits," she says. "I am very intrigued by them as he has a lovely warmth and he is able to play with his body and allows himself to look and feel uncomfortable. Although I study my subjects, I am more of an observer."

The book was designed by Swedish art director, Greger Ulf Nilson – who is responsible for numerous others, including books by JH Engström, Margot Wallard and Martin Bogren. "I followed my intuition asking Greger to design the book," explains Macdonald. "*Hulls* has no linear narrative sequence, and at the design stage I wanted to relinquish control and hand over the responsibility to



someone else, which is also part of the project. Greger has created some kind of rhythm with the images, a beautiful song." The photographs of insects will be printed on metallic paper, in a seemingly abrupt juxtaposition, and yet clearly signifying a correlation of the surreal and awkward positions of the human form. The allusion to metal perhaps indicates the insect trapped in a human environment, removed from a natural setting and denied the nourishment that nature provides.

My time with Macdonald concludes by shooting her portrait. We leave the frenetic buzz of the town centre and wander into the night on the periphery of Arles, finding a location close to the maze of canals once painted by Vincent van Gogh. It is a hot night and mosquitoes are thick in the sticky air. Stumbling through the reeds we find our place under the bright luminosity of the crescent moon, engulfed by nature. We are outside our comfort zone, and so a photographic transaction takes place, except she is now the willing subject.

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#### In print

*Hulls* will be published by André Frère Éditions later this year.  
[andrefrereéditions.com](http://andrefrereéditions.com)



