

Karen Irvine

FORM UNDER CONSTRUCTION

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As a portrait of a city, Oliver Godow's (German, b. 1968) photographs of Oslo bewilder us. Although a few key photographs — of street signs and the Norwegian flag, for example — signal location, most of his images eschew indicators of place in favor of details that reveal something more elusive. Characterized by an interplay of line, color, texture, and light, Godow's photographs are often dynamic compositions that pulsate with graphic form. In many of them, details of construction materials are abstracted to varying degrees, revealing urban transformation through minutiae. Urban change fascinates Godow. He made the photographs from 2014 to 2019, at the height of a prolonged building boom in Oslo. One of the richest and most technologically advanced cities in the world, Oslo has experienced a radical transformation in the past decade. Its wealth comes from oil — since the discovery of North Sea oil and gas reserves in the 1960s, Norway has become one of the world's largest exporters of crude oil and natural gas. Yet the country's relationship to oil is complicated. With a population that leans very green and national policies that lead the world in lowering carbon emissions within its own borders, Norway is nonetheless effectively promoting the opposite abroad as one of the world's largest oil and natural gas exporters.

In 2005 and 2006, Godow spent some time in Oslo, intrigued by its massive urban development. Then, in 2013, he heard that two new museums were to be built in the center of the city — the Munch Museum and the National Museum (both still under construction today), and he decided to return there to work. After his seven-year absence, Godow barely recognized Oslo. Likening it to a sleeping beauty awakened by the building of the monumental opera house designed by Snøhetta in 2008, Godow saw a city completely changed. He was now shocked and fascinated by the continuous and omnipresent development, noting that there was “almost no street, no public building not being affected by the upheaval.”¹

¹ Oliver Godow, email correspondence with the author, June 16, 2019.

But how to represent such a broad transformation? Godow wandered through the city with his camera, drawn to its distinctive hues, patterns, and materials. His close-ups of ripped posters, painted walls, and various construction materials edge toward abstraction in the spirit of mid-twentieth-century photographers Aaron Siskind (American, 1903–1991) and Harry Callahan (American, 1912–1999), who reveled in photography’s ability to flatten and partially abstract a scene. Other images recall the work of Luigi Ghirri (Italian, 1943–1992), who in the 1970s created colorful, dream-like pictures of quotidian scenes and ephemeral architecture. In Godow’s work, similarly captivating images such as an air-filled pink jacket or a giant blue umbrella next to an amorphous plastic bundle suggest sculpture and transform the banal scenes into something more mysterious.

Godow’s sequencing underscores his images’ formal connections. Indeed, he uses repetition as a conceptual tool — colors and shapes and motifs repeat multiple times throughout the project, adding a layer of formal order to otherwise messy scenes. Sometimes his sequencing creates moments of humor or evokes anthropomorphism, such as a photograph of a poster depicting a werewolf followed by an image of a badly scratched surface. In one image, scraps of drywall cut into rectangles, triangles, and circles resemble a children’s game. Such moments of levity and playfulness convey an optimism that Godow has witnessed in the new Oslo — a society shaken by the terrorist attacks of 2011 that remains determined to build a greener, more technologically advanced, and more democratic society.²

Provocatively, Godow steers clear of the recently built museums and developments designed by fancy architects, and instead refers to them obliquely. Rather than creating photographs of the new Bjørvika — the “Barcode”-development, a hip mixed-use complex named for the shape it forms with narrow buildings lined up side-by-side, Godow documents just one of its tram stops. He tightly frames the structure: its glowing orange, partially frosted glass obscures our view of the development behind, shifting our attention to the graffiti and trash that have already blemished the stop. In this and other images, Godow’s focus on details removes context and underscores the generic, universal quality of materials, suggesting that well-funded urban renewal leads to well-funded sameness. In other images Godow probes cultural stereotypes by depicting a shiny purple ski mask or two ice skaters printed in cyan, one wearing a sweater emblazoned with a skull. In another diptych he captures different, partial views of a historical black-and-white photograph mysteriously taped to a new, paper-covered window pane smattered with neon paint. Like Godow’s depiction of bent signs directing visitors to Oslo’s oldest monuments, this pair of images suggests that history itself is being somewhat disregarded.

Godow makes images that expose order and chaos, design and spontaneity. He specializes in injecting surprise and delight into the depiction of inanimate materials until his photographs activate us to consider a location through its less celebrated details, to use intriguing information to envisage a city transformed. Although Godow occasionally suggests dark undercurrents beneath the glittering facades, ultimately his dynamic images provide a distinctly optimistic view of Oslo — a city bathed in northern light.

² Oliver Godow, email correspondence with the author, July 16, 2019.



