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# Art Review

## Simone Gilges

**Foxy Production, New York**

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By Siona Wilson

Simone Gilges's portraits of her female friends do not reward the impatient viewer bent on the revolving-door approach to the consumption of art. These relatively small-scale analogue colour prints (measuring 50 x 40 cm) cannot be taken in with a quick eye sweep, and in more ways than scale alone they defy the expectations established by contemporary tableau photography. Gilges shoots with film rather than the more prevalent digital technology, and she prints her own work. If this is understood as a gesture towards the arcane past of Modernism – as the gallery's press release suggests – then the artistic milieu evoked in these portraits of contemporary Berliners likewise supports such historical reflections.

*Pascale* (2012) and *Andra* (2012) – the first two in the sequence – evoke the once most dominant division in the Bauhaus. Moholy-Nagy's embrace of the industrial is echoed in *Pascale*. The sitter addresses us frankly, posed in a simple mini shirtdress, and is framed by the skylights of a contemporary urban interior. This 'new woman' is a world apart from the multicoloured ethnic decor presented in *Andra*, which conjures up a monklike Johannes Itten and early Bauhaus arts and crafts. This contemporary primitivist is draped in a patterned robe and surrounded by ethnic carpets and wall hangings. Yet the solemnity of the image is punctured by another prop. *Andra* holds a tennis ball, as if it were a religious symbol in a Renaissance painting, only here its symbolism is mute. Ready to be released at any moment, it stands as a suggestion of temporal suspension, a flickering echo of a modernist past that could disappear at the drop of the ball, the click of the shutter.

Gilges seems to explore all aspects of the genre. In one subset she uses the conventions of studio portraiture with plain coloured backdrops, while other images are whimsically theatrical. For example, middle-aged Sabina (*Sabina*, 2012), 'love' and 'hate' tattooed on her knuckles and wearing a comical plaster-cast hat, poses in front of a hastily constructed drapery backdrop. Another grouping locates the subject amidst the idiosyncratic effects of a domestic interior. Leather-clad Chloe (*Chloe*, 2011) sits drinking a glass of wine before a hearth on whose mantelpiece rests an assortment of drawings and sculptures. The staging of psychological authenticity relies upon the figure's integration within an individualised space. But these well-established conventions of portraiture are in tension with the visual echoes and repetitions of the constructed image. In *Diana* (2011) the grey fur of the Persian cat held in the sitter's arms is echoed in her eye makeup and shoe colour. And likewise, the elegant cross-legged pose is repeated in the painting whose corner is just visible on the wall to the right.

Gilges borrows her female friends to catalogue approaches to photographic portraiture. But at the same time she borrows this newly revived genre to investigate the contemporary staging of a gendered artistic milieu. Each strategy runs interference for the other, and here lies the appeal: my suspension within Gilges's artistic experiment is what holds my attention before these seemingly modest works.