# NORBERT SCHOERNER SITS AND WAITS

words RACHEL WEINBERG

Geoff Cox's essay at the close of Norbert Schoerner's second monograph *Third Life* is overtly cryptic. The text, printed in the lightest of grey serif typefaces, tails a series of happenings that occur in Schoerner's photography work. Clauses include: "Two men are approaching each other from opposite poles of the vast territory"; "A skyline eroded by fungal coral"; and "the witnesses have been struck dumb by what we are never shown". In this verbosity we don't learn much of the life Schoerner lives nor the way he works. Rather, the philosophy, or attitude, in which he approaches his craft.

This monograph is one of the many books produced by the Bavarian-born photographer, but the only one that we could get our hands on in preparation for this interview. His other books were either sold out or held in a Monash University vault under the 'RARE books' section, where an appointment was required to flick through the accordion-formatted pages. While this particular search was met with disappointment, it reminded us how rare of a photographer Schoerner is. His influence is remarkable yet understated, so much so that his proponents probably don't know they are referencing his use of depth and space or even lighting, which constructs his subjects so they appear as if they have woken up to a world that is entirely their own.

The images that capture this aesthetic most explicitly are the ones produced while Schoerner was exclusively contracted to Prada between the years 1998 and 2000. These campaign images are sci-fi in palette and mood, with one featuring an auburn-haired model, teasing her plump lips with the tips of her pointer finger, dressed in nude negligee comprising of a sheer lace-trimmed bralette and boy-cut briefs. The background (here is the sci-fi part) is an arid sand dune, with mountains blanketed in a dim blue wash. The model's scale is arresting. Close-up and exaggerated, she assumes the whole composition, like Margurite sleeping in one of Henri Matisse's oil paintings.

These formal attributes can be spotted throughout Schoerner's work. They can be seen in the fashion campaigns for brands like Fendi, Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons, the car advertisements for Audi and editorials for publications such as *System*, *i-D*, *Dazed* and *The Face*; the latter offered him his first industry opportunity in 1989. These attributes can also be identified in his artistic work—the work that we soon learn Schoerner feels the most fondness for. His series *The Nature of Nature* taken near the city of Fukushima in Japan, depict studies of individual bonsai trees that assume the same amount of space as the human figures in his fashion portraits. The wire wrappings constrain tree trunks and arms manifest like the ropes on a monster restrained from his prey. In reality, these wires are but the tiniest assertions of control on a tree so small that we question its legitimacy.

Schoerner prefers slower projects like the bonsai series, ones where he can take his time and figure out the preferred and necessary steps to move forward. That is why he enjoys creating books so much; they allow him to process his thoughts and present them in a medium that encourages slow, deliberate execution: mindful turning of pages, acquired time for perusing and elongated moments of consideration. Slowness, Schoerner teaches, is something we need more of.

RACHEL WEINBERG **Hello, Norbert. How are you?**

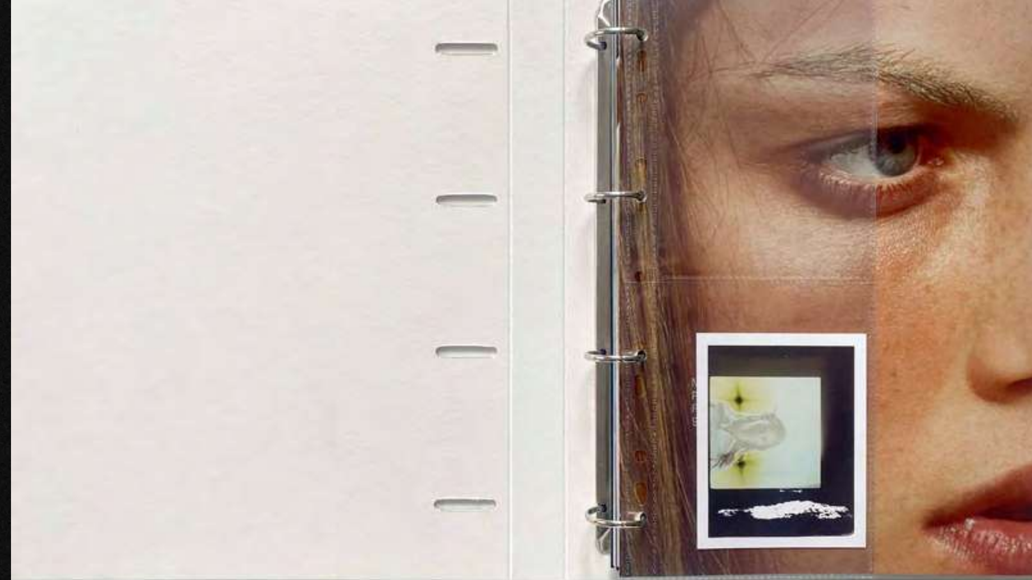
NORBERT SCHOERNER I'm really well. I've been working with the National Portrait Gallery in London on an exhibition about *The Face* magazine. It traces about twenty-four years of the magazine's photography, between 1980 and 2004. The show gives an overview of the most distinct movements which were emerging over that period.

RW **In the past you have rejected the notion of looking backward, preferring to focus on the future. Every time you have been asked about the past, you have dismissed it. Your concern seems to lie with evolution. *The Face* exhibition is interesting to me because it forces you to acknowledge the work that you've done in the past by positioning it in the present.**

NS Well, that's interesting. It's easier to look at other people's past rather than my own. It's much easier to look at a whole body of work and the culture shift that it triggered rather than what I have created. As you correctly said, I've been very much obsessed by forward movement and always questioning ideas and also engaging with the moment rather than dwelling on past achievements. But I think I've relaxed a little bit now. The Prada book was a turning point, really. It was produced with the most amazing team. Johnny Lu (the Art Director) and IDEA Books. It was a gentle exorcism, so to speak.

RW **I want to come back and talk about your interest in publishing, but first I do want to cast your mind back and ask what it was like to walk into that office in 1989. When did you first discover magazines like *The Face* and *i-D*, and what gave you the confidence to go knocking on their door? You had no formal training and, at that point, only a little experience in film.**

NS My emotional interest was always in film. When I was in high school, my idea was to go to film school or find some job as a runner in film production and work my way up. After making a short film when I was 18 and realising how tricky and expensive it was, I thought it would make more sense to work as a photographer and really learn the craft. I wanted to understand the making of images, but with a cinematic undertone. I found a job as a still life photography assistant in Munich. I was about 19. That was when I discovered *The Face* and various music magazines. *The Face* was really the one that stood out, though. It captured a very particular moment in the mid-1980s when visual language, aesthetic consciousness and style began to bridge so many facets of life. I bought a copy every month. I had to go on a 45-minute train to this one store in Munich that stocked it. Once I finished my assistant photographer's job in Munich, I thought: maybe I should move to London and try to work for them. It was a very far-reaching idea. I didn't have any friends in London. Long story short, I found a sofa that I could crash on. Luck was involved. Luck is an unquantifiable force.



Anyways, I managed to drop my portfolio of 50 black-and-white landscape pictures at *The Face* office. When I walked in, there were about thirty portfolios lined up in the reception area. When I came back a few days later to collect it, Kelly, who later became a friend, said, "Oh, wait a moment." She called Phil Bicker. He handed my book back to me and said, "I really like your work. I think it's very interesting. Do you want to do a gig for us in two weeks?" That's how it started.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the art directors weren't so literal. They could basically look at somebody's work and see potential or appreciate a certain resonance in the work. People could actually consider creative output. They were not looking for something particular. I think people are way more literal now. It's very hard to have the confidence to experiment. That's maybe the biggest difference between now and the pre-digital times. The 1990s were really the last decade before the impact of digital technology hit us.

RW **Do you think it's still feasible for photographers to pitch their portfolios to magazines, given the rise of social media and digital technology? Or has that avenue become less viable?**

NS I think it's quite difficult. But the truth is, we need to stop thinking that we, or the time that we live in, is unique. If you look back at the history of humanity and creativity, there have always been huge cultural shifts. In the end, there will always be a tipping point to create a space for something new to happen. I think you already sense a tiredness in a younger generation of creators. I have a feeling that they're tired with the regulated template that social media provides and how it essentially doesn't give you much space to explore and experiment as an individual. I have a feeling there's a subtle pushback happening already. A good example is the re-advent of analogue film in the last five, ten years. How many people shoot on film now? It has a certain authenticity. They don't sit there and shoot 500 frames anymore because they can't afford to. But they can shoot 36 frames, which they choose carefully.

RW **But I think you had a different sense of process when you were shooting in the 1990s. There's a lot of discussion on process and the people that make the image possible. Your photographs are about the character, the model, the stillness. The process is the photograph.**

NS I think you're absolutely right. The process is much more compressed. People don't really spend too much time planning. There's not really any budget for planning, so you have to do everything quickly; no one will pay for slowness. If you want to take your time, then you need to have spare money, come from a more well-off background, or try to do it with no funds at all. In fashion, I think we're in a period where the brand, personality, product and celebrity aspect are so important that it completely squelches the narrative and the storytelling; there is a certain existential

quality that images used to impugn. I used to shoot maybe four or six shots a day, maximum. If the setup allowed it, I would shoot as little as possible. Nowadays, especially if it's a commission, you're being asked to shoot ten or twenty set ups. There might be an interesting scenario where you need that spontaneity. But really, if you look around, often these images are very static, and not in an inspiring way.

My team and me, from our angle, are mainly interested in telling a story with a subtly imbued narrative. There's a lot of planning that goes into our images. But that doesn't mean we rigidly follow a structure. Often, the moment we start, we do a complete 180 and abandon the plan because something else happens. I think it's really good if you're well-prepared. I'm not saying you have to have a storyboard, but you should definitely have a mental storyboard of all the different parameters that you're planning. Look at Mark Borthwick. He never has a plan. He's a lovely photographer, and he's had a great career over the last forty years or so, but he hasn't always been a client favourite because his simplicity was seen as unconventional. It has another dimension to it. It was a completely different approach, ahead of its time. I can see the beauty in it, and I really appreciate that. My team and I try think about a certain level of image making. We try to retain a certain momentum that stays dynamic. The story telling has to pull you in. The image shouldn't just be exchangeable.

RW **That logic would apply outside of your fashion work too. I'm thinking of *The Nature of Nature* series, for instance. For those who haven't seen the images, at first glance, they seem like studies of individual pine trees standing against a barren, undulating landscape. The depth of field is grand as you manipulate the scale of the trees to seem as if they are rooted in the ground. In truth, they have been superimposed onto the images, manipulating the viewer's perception of space and scale. The images are composed, they're considered, they're slow. There is a sense of that slowness in your fashion work, especially the images for Prada, but in the bonsai series it is felt even more. How do you approach completely different subject matters, but still make them feel like your own?**

NS That's well observed. My true passion lies with making books and working on long-term projects. One project we just finished took about twelve years to complete. I truly enjoy books. Obviously, Prada is different because we have such a close relationship. Working with them never really feels like working with a client. Taking a commercial commission with any client isn't always a straightforward scenario. It's very complicated. If I'm really honest I mainly use commercial work to finance my other projects. What I really enjoy doing is sitting in front of a bonsai tree and waiting for two hours until the light is right.

The bonsai project is probably my favourite thing I've done in my career. It took about five years, and it was very, very slow. It was all down to the actual exposures. Some of the images were taken in complete darkness. Some of the images used 12-minute exposures on them. It was a very powerful process. It sounds a bit corny, but I think it was life changing.

RW **Well, it's a project about patience, which is antithetical to what we were discussing earlier: the fast pace of the industry, the pressure to take twenty photographs and pump out content. When you're waiting for a shutter to finish, you must sit there and wait, meditatively, intentionally.**

NS Very much so. Also, to be honest, it comes back to what I said about making a plan and expecting something very fluid to happen. You realise you were always meant to leave the plan behind and follow a completely different journey. Sometimes clients come to us four or five days before the shoot with the most outlandish ideas that I could never achieve meaningfully, preparation-wise, in that time. Then they ask me to shoot twenty pictures. We turn down quite a lot of work. I might be wrong here, but my instinct is that the younger generation is trying to reclaim their relationship with time.

RW **Is that where the books come into play? This desire to extend time?**

NS The big difference between a magazine and a book is that the book still has a presence a year or multiple years after the publication. Often it even grows. You can have a slow burn and sometimes you publish something that's a very small edition. But then you realise five or six years later, that it's become a bit of a cult. *Nearly Eternal* was a very small edition, but it went into second edition. And it ended up in very interesting places. It was beautiful. You don't often achieve that with a magazine. Often you have to spend your own money on the magazine shoot because there isn't enough money to produce it. Then there are restrictions with magazines: what you're supposed to do, what you're not supposed to do. Often, it doesn't even hit the shelves properly. The longevity of the book is very attractive.

RW **Is the appeal related to your work being preserved in the book, or the lasting impact of creating something with a long lifespan? Is it about your photographs in the book, the book itself, or both?**

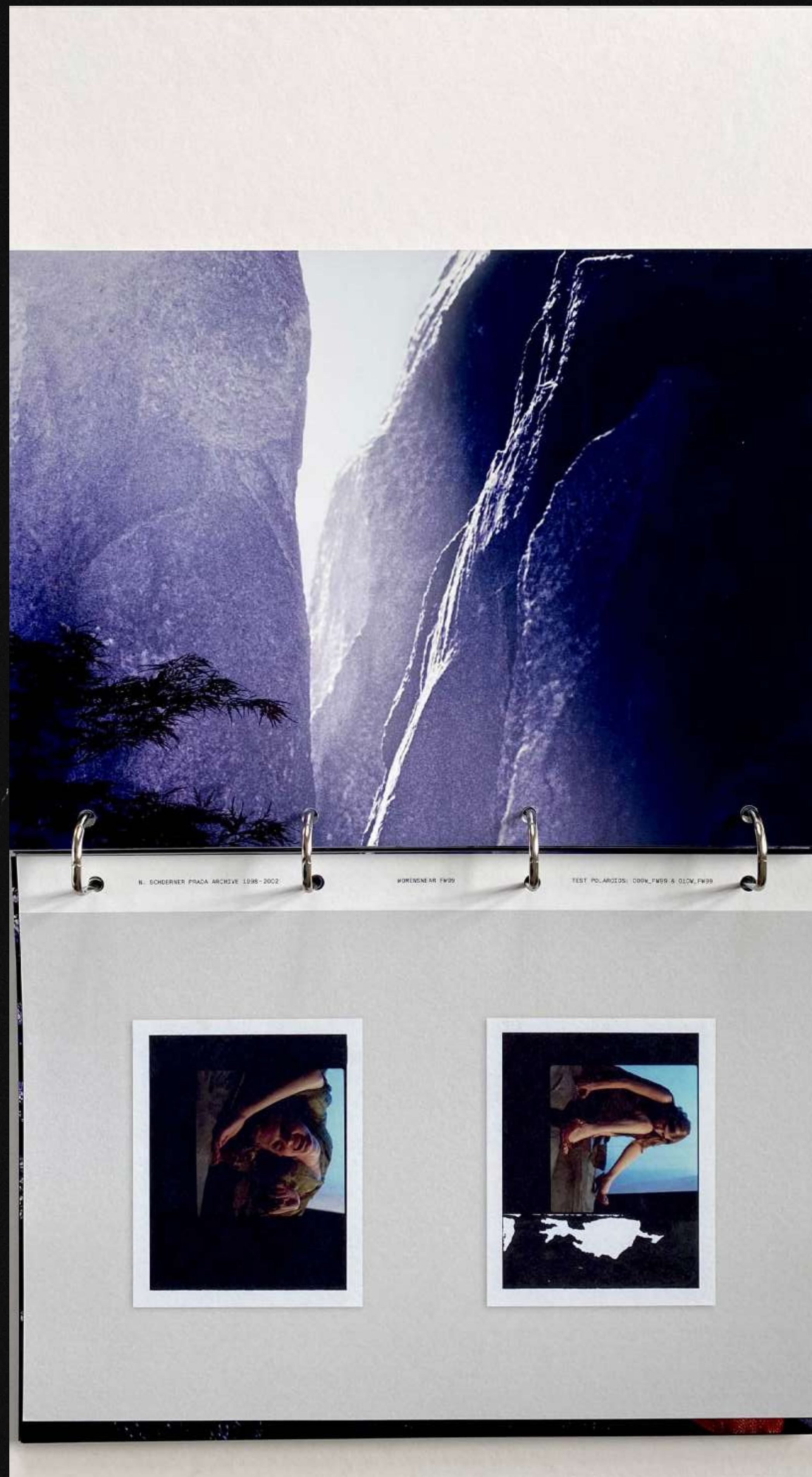
NS Both. It's part of the same process.

RW **And you obviously want to keep creating books.**

NS Yes! I'll send you a little preview of a new book we are working on called *Aura*.

RW **What does the word *Aura* mean to you?**

NS It's from the Walter Benjamin essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanic Reproduction'. In it he distinguishes, and I'm paraphrasing here, looking at the Mona Lisa in the Louvre and looking at the painting in a reproduction. He says that in the Louvre, the work is viewed with a certain aura that deeply affects your being and your soul. Obviously not nowadays because you're standing in the middle of a thousand other people, but the idea would be to see the real thing because it contains something that's hard to fathom. The moment you reproduce it as a postcard, it doesn't contain that "aura" anymore.




I started thinking about the concept of *Aura* in 2011 when I wanted to make a photobook that didn't have photos in it. I wrote a book just with descriptions of photographs, which I published as a newspaper. I was going through a stage where I questioned whether it was still meaningful to make images in a mass market environment. Then a few years later, in about 2015, we started building an artificial intelligence–based GAN.

RW **Yes, I read about this. You committed to an investigation of image-making that stripped the picture out of the picture, culminating in the 2016 publication of *Pictures I Never Took*, which was a simple printed newspaper with 54 texts that described hypothetical photographs. Gradually, the idea of a second part of the investigation took hold. You began to explore ways to generate actual images based on the text descriptions. These produced abstract, colourful works that teetered on painterly—an early adopter of story-to-image generation.**

NS Yes, that's right. It wasn't even a large language model. The photographs came back highly abstract. Again, that worked really well for me because it questioned the auto-representation. Then obviously, a year later, Midjourney and Dall-E came out, and AI became a global mass sport. For *Aura*, we decided to use the same descriptions from *Pictures I Never Took* and drop them into Midjourney and Dall-E for one year, one image a week.

RW **You said once that a computer will never be a substitute for an idea. Do you still think that, considering the proliferation of AI?**

NS It's an aggregator, isn't it? It's an incredibly sophisticated simulation of human thinking, because essentially all it does is glean from everything that's already been thought. But I think you shouldn't deny that in this abstract connection new ideas can't emerge. It's a tool. I've seen people use it really well and not in a literal way. But it takes a lot of curation and diligence to work with it meaningfully. I'm actually on the fence about AI. I see the advantages and I also see the disadvantages. I'm bored of seeing millions of people flooding the world with even more images that have no meaning or don't add anything to our cultural vocabulary. It's really uninteresting for me. That being said, AI is going to have such a deep effect on how we communicate, how we perceive our reality, and how we relate to other people, and how society sees itself—simulation rather than representation. You can already observe this in social media. I think it's going to get much worse. I'm much more worried about the wellbeing of humanity, emotionally, rather than the fact that AI is going to steal lots of jobs. Does that make sense?

RW **Yes. You are saying that AI is a tool, and we shouldn't deny the tools that we've been given. We should learn to utilise them effectively. That being said, AI doesn't have emotions, it doesn't have thoughts, and in that sense, it doesn't have humility. It takes no prisoners.**

NS I don't think it's sentient, but it's really good at making people believe that it's sentient. It makes me think of magicians. Don't you think that hypnotists and magicians succeed in creating the illusion of magic because people want to believe it's real? People are expecting it. People have a subconscious base and are open to have their expectations of magic and mystery fulfilled. That's why it works. It's the same with AI. That's why there are more and more cases where people think, oh my god, this is really sentient. It's unbelievable how sophisticated the new AI tools are.

RW **When you first started experimenting with AI, did you realise how powerful it was?**

NS Yes, very much so. The first thing I thought was, wow, this is going to have a deep impact. Its impact is subtle, though. That's the dangerous thing. Most people can imagine the end of the world in a semi-apocalyptic way, which has been helped by Hollywood films. What could happen with climate change feels very, very clear and very, very real. But what happens with technology is so subtle; it's an undercurrent that can affect people's freedom. I don't necessarily mean that in the sense of incarceration. Rather, the freedom to be or to find yourself.

RW **Does the collaborative aspect of creating images or films motivate you?**

NS Definitely! The team and the inspiration I get from collaborators is amazing. Together, we can make and tell stories that benefit other people and help them make sense of their life. Telling stories is the eternal campfire. Stories have existed for thousands of years, and they essentially haven't changed. I've never believed in the idea of autocratic leadership. I've always been a team builder. That originates to my interest in film. On a film set you have to be very disciplined. You have to be very clear about your directions in order to create a meaningful work environment. I still have people around me now that I worked with in 1998. I think that's a beautiful thing. I've formed lifelong friendships.

RW **Do you think you'll work on more films? You made *Made* in 2015, a short film exploring the double life of Minako, a young Japanese woman who works as a waitress-cum-sex worker at a maid bar.**

NS We made *Made* as a calling card to finance a feature film. We worked on that for two or three years, and there was some traction, but it didn't get enough momentum, so I decided to go back to photography. To answer your question: yes, we have a couple of ideas.

RW **What else are you working on?**

NS I'm working on two books at the moment. One is *Aura*, the other one is a project on the male gaze. I'm quite interested in what the reactions will be to that one. I'm already looking forward to the critic mix, to the haters.

RW **Why do you think it will be polemical?**

NS It's actually not polemical from my end, but it's an incendiary subject. I'm very aware that the moment I pick up a camera and point it in somebody's face, I exercise a level of power that I may not necessarily have the right to exercise. I want to question the whole process from both sides: behind the camera and from the other side of it.

RW **How do you feel about the power you have as a photographer? Holding the camera, commanding the model, directing the team.**

NS I have really struggled with power, and it's something that has always concerned me. It's different for everybody, and it depends what type of photography people pursue, what type of stories they tell, whatever the sitter's background is, whatever their gender is or their non-gender. But for me, it's never been a comfortable process because I don't necessarily feel that I have the right to exercise that power. That doesn't mean that I don't tell people what to do. But it's very complex.

**RW Have you, over time, become more comfortable with your sense of power?**

NS It has changed across different phases of my life, different chapters so to speak. It depends on so many factors. Look at the bonsai. I was very happy to exercise power over the bonsai because they were much more powerful than me.

**RW You felt comfortable to exercise power over the bonsai because they were ultimately in control. How about with other objects? I am thinking of the objects and landscapes in *The Order of Things*, for instance.**

NS In this case it's more the act of observation, which has power over me. Power is also a form of discipline. You have to be strong enough to put yourself into complex or unresolved situations.

**RW And you enjoy those complex situations?**

NS Absolutely. That's always been a part of it. There were times when we went too far, and it started affecting me or key team members. There were times when we realised that what we wanted to do was actually more complex. But in the end, we found a way. You have to have the power to not be afraid of failure because it will just hold you back. Being afraid of failure means that you often end up treading water or trying to repeat schemes that you've already explored.

**RW You have to surrender to fail.**

NS Yes, which can also yield some amazing results.

**RW Which result are you most proud of?**

NS For now, the bonsai, *The Nature of Nature*. The people that came on board, the work we did with the Abe family and Professor Shinichi Nakazawa, who wrote the exhibition text, was an outstanding experience. We'll be lifelong friends.

**RW Will you go back to Japan and see them?**

NS Yes, of course. I was there in October for three weeks. Every time I go to Japan, I visit them. The parents are getting older, so I want to see them as often as possible.

**RW How did you first meet the Abe family?**

NS In a really convoluted way. A friend of mine, maybe twelve years ago, sent me a picture of the bonsai masters' nursery. I really liked the trees. They didn't seem like traditional bonsais. There was an expressionistic feeling about them. I had the picture printed out on my desk for a few years. I thought it would be interesting to do something with it. Then around 2015 I suddenly realised I wanted to capture the idea of control over nature through the bonsai. Then I planned a trip to Japan to visit the Abe family. I introduced myself and the project. They were very nice, but they didn't really understand what I wanted to do. Then I came back six months later, and we did a quick test picture. Then they understood and became really excited.

**RW It's great to hear that you manage to balance your artistic work, which you're clearly passionate about, with your commercial work, for which you're widely recognised. You give your all to both, and together, they make you feel complete.**

NS Both are very important to me. I would say this duality defines my practice. Sometimes I oscillate in one direction and then I go in the other. Once I've concluded the next two books, I might go back and make a film. Maybe now is the time. I'm not quite sure. Maybe it's time to take a year off. I need to figure it out. Anyways, I have to go, Rachel.

**RW Thank you so much, Norbert. It was lovely to chat.**

NS Thank you. I appreciate your questions. I think they're very thoughtful and very interesting. Bye-bye. [EXEUNT]