No film in the camera
Also by Hanne Bramness

In English
  Salt on the eye: Selected Poems

In Norwegian
  Korrespondanse
  I sin tid
  Nattens kontinent
  Revolusjonselegier
  Regnet i Buenos Aires
  Salt på øyet
  Det står ulver i din drøm
  Uten film i kamaraet

For children
  Kyset
  Trollmåne
  Lynettes reise
  Solfinger

Also by Frances Presley

  The Sex of Art
  Hula Hoop
  Linocut
  Neither the One nor the Other (with Elizabeth James)
  Automatic cross stitch (with Irma Irsara)
  Somerset letters
  Paravane
  Myne – new and selected poems & prose 1975-2006
  Lines of sight
  Stone settings (with Tilla Brading)
  An Alphabet for Alina (with Peterjon Skelt)
No film in the camera

TRANSLATED BY
FRANCES PRESLEY
& HANNE BRAMNESS

Shearsman Books
No film in the camera
One morning a bird sings in the top corner of a window on a branch high above the winter ground. On the sill a small conch lies in shiny sandwich paper and pipes in the draught. A catch has gnawed a wet groove, curled foil serves as a bowl for light. The paint is peeling off. Pools of dew swell with the coming of spring but it will soon freeze, because there is a sense of loss.
She is bending her head backwards so that half her forehead is outside the frame, her luminous breasts point straight up. She is singing or screaming. Dressed only in white winter skin, shoulders covered with hair that is electric. A folded umbrella and a lonely shoe by the door point in her direction, want to remind her that there is a world outside. The floor is partially erased by the light, it is still possible to set out and get across. It is still possible to pull back, run home and put an end to this experiment.
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She has brought some props with her, a shabby shawl, a tortoise, a conch the size of a head. She has placed a worn sofa against a wall, hung up some transparent stockings, put a black feather and a thin knife on the sill outside the picture frame, stuffed a doll’s suitcase too full, but still put it out. Things to aid her memory. Then she lies down with her back turned. Her face would have been wiped out anyway by the memory of pain.
Her slim figures are both sharp and unfocused. Figures in motion, whether they are hiding in a bathtub, floating under the ceiling, lying undressed on the sofa, or sitting in a particularly awkward position in a fireplace. The motion reveals stagnation, the feeling of confinement. The pictures are of her and they are not of her, they are attempts to tear the body out of degradation, but its effect lingers on.
The figures are birds stretched out across the entire picture surface, even when they are standing in a corner. The rooms they move around in are hysterically cold, as if at any moment it could start snowing. When the steam from a bathtub draws such precise patterns in the air it reveals how cold it must be.
Although he has been lying in the yellow bathtub for several hours it doesn’t matter because the water is still just warm, steam rising from it. Like a firm grip around the body, a body-glove, not too tight, but comforting. The water reaches up to the neck, liquid amber the same colour as the tub. Only the heated head with thin hair is visible in the picture.
The women in Rue Asselin are mostly out on the street, fully dressed. They have frocks, but the patterned fabric is hardly distinguishable from the flecked walls, the white stockings look like holes in the house façade. Pearl necklaces seem insistent, indecent like Christmas decorations in mid or late summer. The light reveals that the sun is going down. The sweat on their brows has dried out as if the photographer’s presence has a cooling effect, their mouths are not smiling. Looking directly into the camera they are still turning away.
The smiling women on the tile floor in Alicante are twisting their naked sun bleached thighs, they keep wriggling one foot with a pointed shoe, without knickers or else ones that are too tight, stockings which gnaw at the hollow of their knees, bras that cut into their shoulders and give them two sets of breasts each, back and front. They are not only defiant and self-absorbed, but have already left.
The beach of Orissa, where Gandhi finally won the battle over salt, is perhaps the setting for this picture of newly dyed saris. They lie stretched out in an uneven check pattern. The fabrics seem heavier, much more durable than the women guarding them, as if it's the women who might rise and fly off to another beach in a gust of wind. Or perhaps they never quite landed? The same can be said of the boys in the white sunlight in Arsila. The shadows of the anchors in the sand, frayed ropes, dried fish offal, even their own shadows are not as elusive as they are.
In Rome the hairdresser is caught at the moment he rubs his almost hairless skull in the window of his salon. Suddenly part of his display, but as a health warning! He looks around, on his left the bleached curls of an open mouthed doll. But there is no tension in the picture, the focus is on the afternoon light, a matter of fact, mild light caught at the right moment.
If you wait for something to pass you do not wait in vain. For in the meantime there is a kind of peace, or so it would seem. Some rely on it so much they keep their secrets until they die. The surface becomes an idol for their sacrifice, love must be sacrificed for a picture of love. Photographers do not spend their whole lives taking photos in order to recall surfaces, but what has happened just before or long before, and what will happen immediately afterwards.
Most of the girls have plaits, some long, some short, like tiny plucked feathers. Some have one plait, some two, but it’s best to have two joined into one, with a pastel bow that rubs against the gymslip. Whoever makes that sound becomes light-footed, straight-backed as a pine marten on two legs. It will soon be Christmas, the gym is reflected in ever darker windows. The girls with plaits wet from the snow are allowed to stand nearest to infinity and warm their thighs on the radiator. All pictures are equally precise.
There is such clarity in the photos that when the light falls obliquely you can see what a child observes reflected in his eye. That is when it becomes intimate.
In the Christmas photos light and stars catch the eye, a green reflection in black and white. Shaking their heads very fast the hair becomes a halo. When they danced around the Christmas tree she clasped the child’s hand just hard enough that his face would not crumple and dissolve into tears. It doesn’t matter that the child looks surprised, but why wasn’t he beaming?