

On "The Roma Journeys": Joakim Eskildsen and Cia Rinne

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by Sheila Newbery

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I seldom feel the same reward from looking at images in the strange netherworld of the computer screen that I'm capable of feeling in the presence of the actual article — a book or a print. The shapes and textures of pictures — their specific physicality — have always been, and remain, a principal pleasure in looking at them. Yet thanks to this netherworld, I learned of the work of Danish photographer Joakim Eskildsen and of his project *The Roma Journeys* (Steidl, 2007), with text by Cia Rinne. The photographs seem born of a patience and immersion in the physical detail of exploration that are equally the basis for adventure or for knowledge. Eskildsen chooses both.

The making of the pictures was a 7-year-long odyssey among the Roma in 7 countries (one can read an interview with the photographer in Joerg Colberg's blog archive at [Conscientious](#)) — not the sort of adventure undertaken by the faint-hearted or socially timid: Eskildsen got about on foot, or, if speed or distance made it a necessity, on public thoroughfares and conveyances. He describes how the constant effort of being open to the people he was working among could be exhausting, predisposed though he was to goodwill and patience. Indeed, anyone who has traveled abroad and attempted to meet people on their own terms, in their own language — however modest the effort — has had a taste of this fatigue. The making of the project was also an intellectual challenge, and on this note, one of the things I find intriguing about it is its joint authorship: its ambitious scope was a shared vision that expanded the talents of both authors. Eskildsen observes that neither of them would have been singly capable of producing the book, and certainly the visual content was in many instances critically dependent on the expertise brought by Rinne: her linguistic versatility, her background in philosophy, poetry. Perhaps we can thank her presence throughout the journeys for the many arresting portraits of women in domestic interiors, portraits that reveal a sensitivity to the vulnerable, most easily destroyed aspects of social and familial identity. For his part, Eskildsen shows a remarkable, effortless-seeming versatility in producing both compelling portraits and beautifully observed landscapes. To categorize the work as 'documentary' would be perhaps to underestimate its unwavering aesthetic alertness and its understated, compositional inventiveness.

For example, a photograph of a girl walking in a red jacket with her long hair braided in plaits bound in brilliant red ribbons is not merely about her costume: she is in motion, we are behind her, following, and her head is turned slightly toward a downward-leading staircase with a wrought-iron railing that tells us we have arrived somewhere. The girl is our guide, she has dressed well for the occasion — and the photographer, in memorializing her striding figure with the two plaits bound and shining in the sun, is recognizing the importance of her role in terms she herself has suggested.

Or, consider a swaddled infant, slung up in a makeshift cradle of patterned fabrics beneath a tree in Obukhovo. It tells us more than how the Roma care for their infants in that town: the face of the child is delicately illuminated by the leaf-filtered sun and framed adroitly by the soft lines of the 'cradle'. We see the infant with the same tenderness as the mother who steals watchful glances at her child while she work. We can see in image after image that the photographer has listened acutely to the individuals, to the character of the people he walks among, and to the landscape in which their lives take shape. It's a kind of empathic attention we Americans especially could benefit from emulating, though I imagine few among us can equal Rinne and Eskildsen's magnificent results.