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The Mind-Boggling 2-D (or 3-D?) Art Photographer

By **Julie Ma**



Photo: Bela Borsodi

For **Bela Borsodi** (<http://www.belaborsodi.com/biography>), a photographer known for injecting craftiness into his fashion and still-life work, the field in which he gained prominence was not necessarily his first choice. "I never woke up one morning and said, 'I want to be a photographer,'" he told the Cut. "Still, up to today, it's just circumstance that it was photography." But considering that his grandfather was, according to Borsodi, the man who brought color film into Austria in the fifties, it appears photography was in his blood.

The Austrian native spent his childhood and early adulthood reared by artist parents who fostered creativity. In college, he initially dabbled in graphic design (at first to separate himself from his parents' generation of artists), majored in fine arts, and realized in his twenties that photography would be a viable career. But it wasn't until he moved to Switzerland in 1999 with the sole purpose of learning how to shoot still life that he commanded the fashion world's attention. Ever since, he's been merging reality with fantasy within the framework of a single photo, merging cartoons, acclaimed works of art, erotic anime, and sexual fantasies (*or nightmares*) along with models and luxe goods. He also literally builds

his sets by hand, using foam boards, wood, strings, balloons, printers, Sharpie pens, and sometimes his whole apartment, so as to take a figment of his imagination and immortalize it in a photo."Photography's all about cheating," he said to the Cut. "You invent things, even if you claim that they're real, realistic, that there's a real experience with it, but in the end, it's a photograph. It's the documentation, the proof of an actual experience." The Cut sat down with Borsodi to talk about his creative process and delve deeper into his layered understanding of the medium. Click through the slideshow for Borsodi's own commentary on a selection of his works, including one photo that sparked feminist rage.

You mentioned that photography was always part of your life growing up, but it wasn't necessarily a career you considered. Would you say it was a hobby then?

I wouldn't say it was a hobby. It was something I grew up with. It's the most natural thing for me and also to think in photographs and also to see how photographs relate to anything else. Is a photograph, the entity in itself, what it expresses? Or is it the tool to express something else? Can you paint over a photograph and it's not a photograph anymore?

So, tell me about photography. Did you get into it in your twenties then?

Yeah, initially my idea was to naturally evolve into a fine artist, whatever that is. I was into Duchamp or whatever was happening at the time. I just loved this idea of this craziness, touching with your hands everything and molding things around and using weird colors. [With photography], there was the idea of that being a job and also a need. You don't take a photograph for a magazine unless somebody needs it. They need to express this or that, and I realized for myself that my initiative to do something is based on the need. I did not have this blank-canvas situation that some artists have. Also, every project is different. I know some photographers follow a certain pattern, the search for one particular idea for what they do and make it coherent with most of their work. For me, everything I start, I want to start from scratch.

Are there other passions greater to you than photography?

Photography, the way that I do it, gives me the opportunity to explore anything else that I do or have interest in as long as I can take a picture of it. Anything I craft, if I take a picture of it, that's photography. That excited me so much because I have different moods, different days. That is the framework of what it is that I actually do. So if people refer to me as actually being a photographer, then yes, they are right because that is what I do. But if you think more about the idea of what a photographer is or how a photographer is conceived in that world, I would say that I don't fulfill the principal personality or character.

Right, a lot of your photos blend reality with cartoons. How do you merge these elements? Do you think in the third dimension or in the second?

I'm going between different dimensions all the time, but I like to think in multiple layers and sometimes contradict myself. I have strong ideas and need to execute them, but my mind, I'm very playful, I like to bridge things over. I'm just one of those people where if I see one thing, I imagine the opposite. If I see a beautiful sunset, I think, *What if it was raining right now?* It's not that I do this out

of a necessity. If I'm happy, I think, *Well, how would it be to be sad right now?* I'm just exploring, touching, putting everything into proportion.

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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Light-Painted Face, 1988

"I decided to experiment a lot with lights out of circumstance. I had a camera that had three frames left and I had to process this film, so I took this camera, turned off the lights in the room with a little flashlight that I had there, pointed it at me, and flashed it around, just to kill three frames. Then I processed the film and was fucking *amazed*. This was one of my first-ever light painted photos in that sense. So I started to experiment nonstop."





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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Early Days In NY, 1994

"I shot Tony Ward for *Paper Magazine* using light paint. This was in Central Park, and that was about 40 minutes of exposure time."





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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Wad Magazine #39, Alphabets

"This magazine in Paris asked me to come up with a project for them, and the whole magazine is dedicated to alphabets and letters. I was struggling a lot with this whole idea and then decided to take it by the words, literally. If the theme is the alphabet, I'll shoot the alphabet. I had ten pages, and in five days, we crafted that in my apartment. It was so well received. It has so much to do with this: If I don't have fun, I don't do it. If I've seen it before, I don't do it. It's new or promising to be fun and interesting, then I'm on it."

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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Annabelle, Prada

"This was for a Swiss magazine, and you know, [these shoes] are called a pencil heel. And I just thought, 'Pencil, pencil, heel.'"





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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Esquire U.K., Art And Craft

"I was so attracted to underground comics, to crude, harsh things, like ugly feet and smelly stuff. I thought, *How genius would this be to bring this whole Robert Crumb world into context with high-fashion because the most expensive bag now has a dripping nose and smelly feet?* Crumb didn't allow me to use his works, but I came across a lot of different artists I wanted to use. This one is Marc Bell. The story is that a purse can also be in a stinky, fucked-up world."





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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

S Magazine #7, Cat Flaps

"I was very attracted to cartoon characters because they have this very amazing thing about them where they're allowed to do anything and everything that you're not allowed to do. They represent absolute freedom because they can fly, cut themselves in half, make out with anybody that they want, etc. This magazine comes from Denmark, and they cater a lot to sexual photography. I thought, *What if there's a girl who makes out with a cartoon character?* This character isn't just *any* character, but it's her cat. Then I thought, *What if this cartoon character actually takes over power?* The model was so amazing. She was actually in love with the cat."

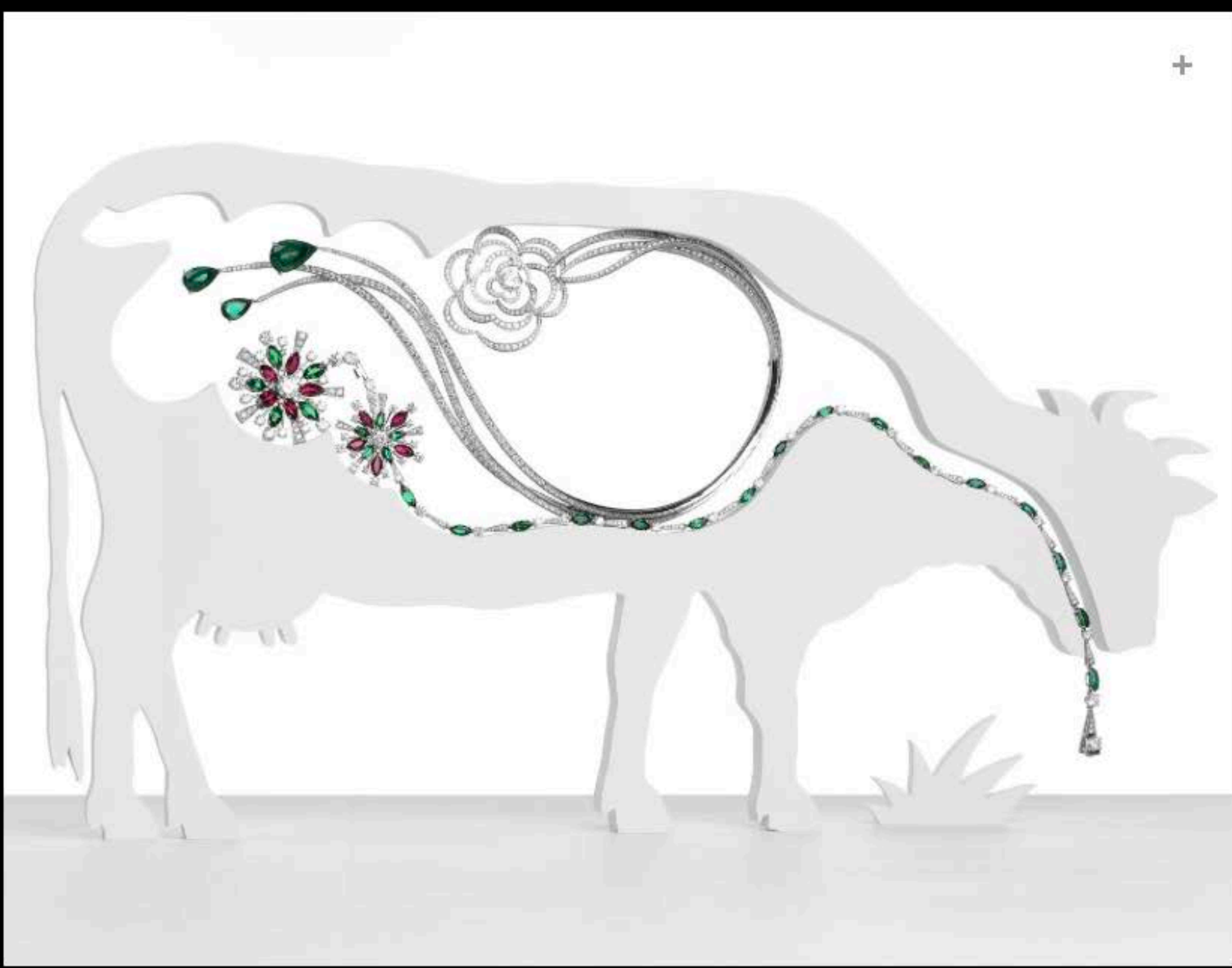




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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Stern #46, Delikatessen

"I have a whole collection of medical books, and some of them are about veterinarians. I always loved this idea of 'this is what a pig looks like on the inside,' 'this is how a cow digests.' The idea came to me: What if I just shove the most expensive jewelry into an animal and they eat it? They eat the most precious gems that you can get. A cow now eats all that stuff. I did research, derived figures, and I had to make these drawings before I knew what they could eat. This was made with an actual piece of wood painted white with nylon strings attached [to the jewelry]."





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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Document #2, Double Visions

"I always had this idea that when I look at a magazine, it's not just an accumulation of images, but a 3-D object. I always thought that if I see a photograph on one side [of a page] and I turn it around, it's almost like a translucent thing and I can see the other side of what's on the picture, what's behind the image. The concept behind this shoot was to [show the front and back sides of the same image]."





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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Details Magazine

"I'm a big fan of manga and Japanese eroticism. The original illustrator is someone who I found earlier in manga collection books, Hiroyuki Utatane. I was always interested in his drawings, so for this project, I proposed eight images of men's accessories being stuck on manga girls. This was before I had a printer, so I projected [the drawings] on foamboard and I Sharpied the outlines."





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Tatler #33, The Expendables

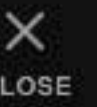
"This [editorial] was females with big balloon boobs. I just wanted to make these busty girl characters being awkward, funny, weird. The balloons did pop, and they popped in inappropriate moments — or one breast got smaller, the other got bigger — but I liked the experience of it. I like risk and danger because that opens more doors."





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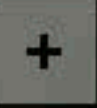
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V Magazine #48, Foot Fetish

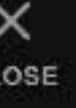
"The magazine had to pull these photos off their website and write letters of apology. I had used these French cartoons and shoved women into shoes, and the only thing I would change from the cartoons was using real photographs of girls. They were totally up for that; everyone loved it. Then the magazine runs, and Jesus Christ, the next day, the magazine called me. They received thousands of letters threatening to boycott them. I was quite shell-shocked that they had to pull them off the Internet right away. What did I do here? What is a high-heel shoe? It sexualizes the woman who wears it, otherwise she'd wear Uggs. It's about changing the posture of the woman. I did nothing else, I modified and resculpted the female shape. That's what the shoe does in reality."





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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Livraison #2, Hidden Objects

"The theme of the whole issue was objects. I very much love language, words, abstract thinking, and I always thought, *How can I compare visual language with the actual word? Can a word be visualized?* This [photo] is self-reflection and identity. It's my own finger that I casted for my girlfriend a long time ago. One [was] filled with chocolate, another with wax, and another from plaster that I molded. This was a test finger."





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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Kid's Wear #25, Out Of This World

"This was for a kid's magazine, and I wanted to create a replica of children's nightmares, something that resembles creatures that steal their stuff at night. I molded them out of clay."





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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Tatler #3, Roleplay

"I was interested in showing a girl in connection with someone that you don't see. Is it a wall? A guy? She's sort of making out with the imagination of the man that she wants to engage with. The guys are never shown."





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Tatler #19, Separation

"This came from a very simple fact that at some point, I realized a craft trick. I can cut a shape into a surface that 100 percent fits a 3-D object. What's more interesting than putting a human in [a wall]? I just cut a plane through her."



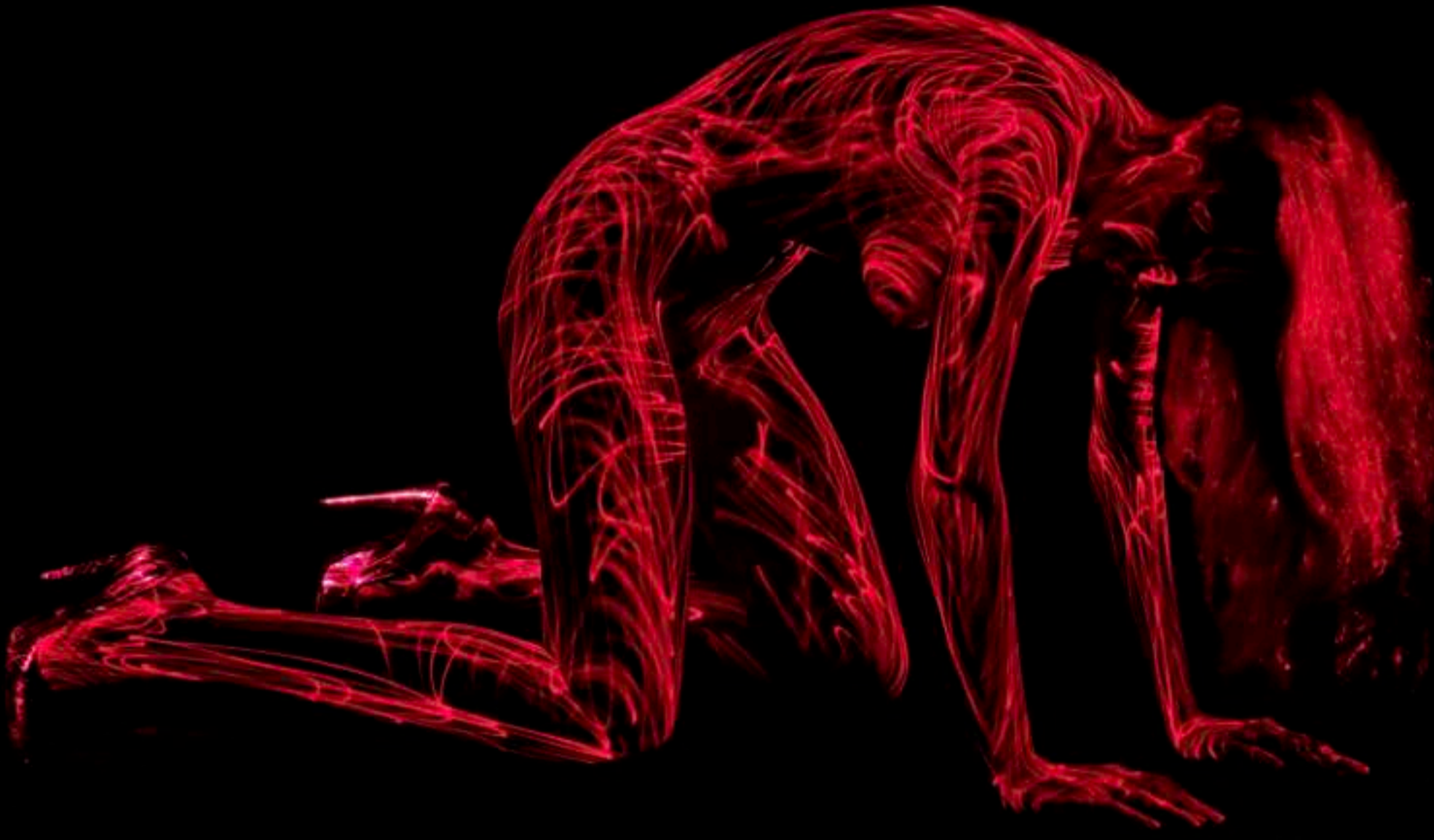


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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

S Magazine #11, Skin Flicker

"I always wanted to revisit [light painting], because I never got a gig out of the whole light painting career. I was sort of reminiscing [with this shoot]. Technique-wise, you have a black room, have a model in there, and you open the camera, use a laser, and draw this thing. But only the camera remembers where you pointed. There's no proof or evidence. You have to think for the camera. It's like drawing, drawing blindly. Is it a photograph or a drawing? It's both and neither."





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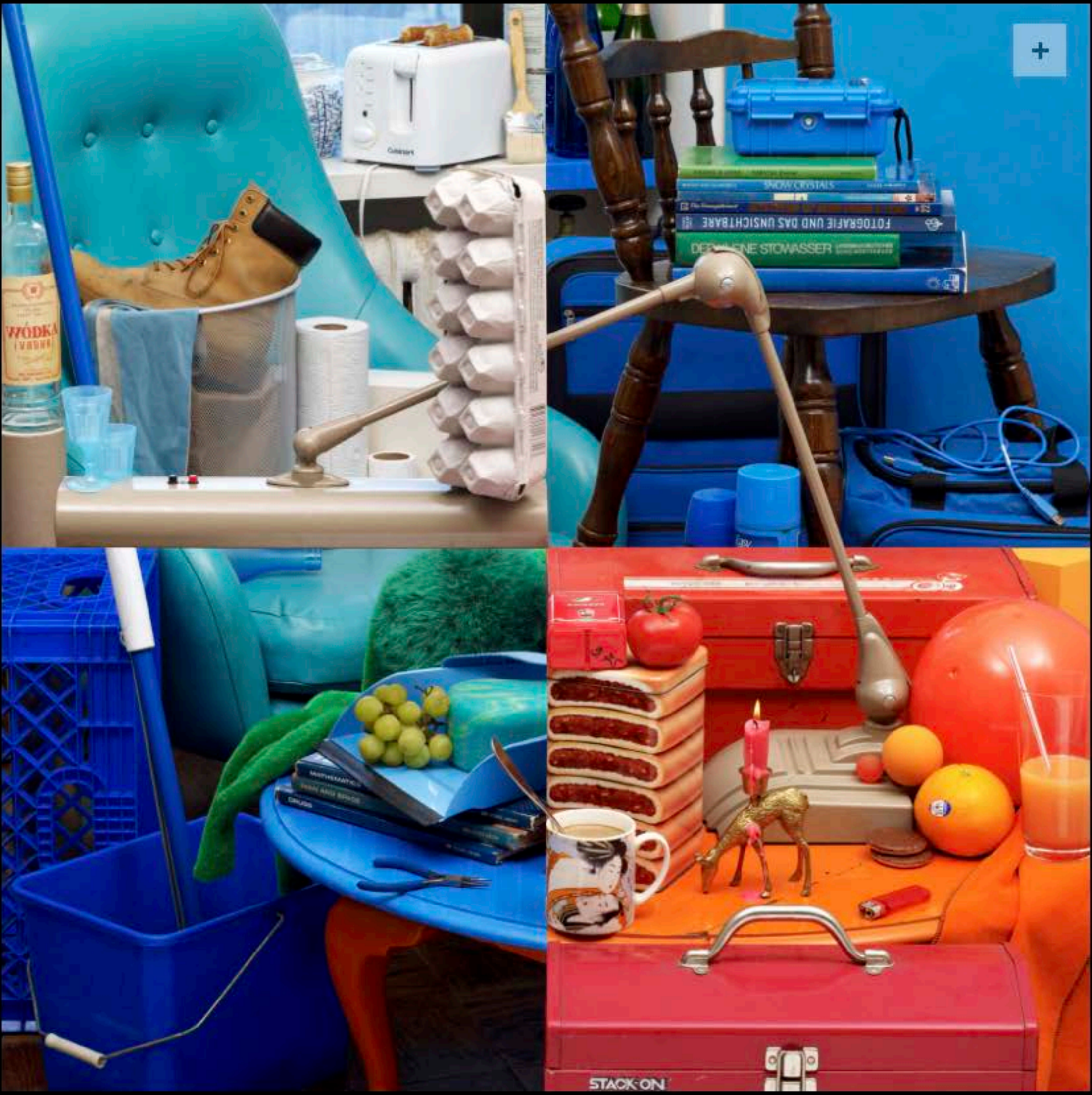
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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Document #1, Unconscious Affair

"The idea behind this is about two worlds meeting and now they [interact]. I kind of found it disappointing that if you look at high art, like the Met, and you see these great paintings, it's framed on a wall. You can admire them, but you can never engage with them. My biggest desire is to physically lick a painting. I wanted to give this opportunity [for life and art] to merge, to make them live again."

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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

VLP Terrain

"This is all one shot. I arranged everything in my room over two days so that it splits exactly into four squares. It was supposed to be the cover of my friend's CD. I just used random stuff in my apartment and grouped everything together."





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DEPTH OF FIELD: BELA BORSODI

Tenmen #20, Ten Very Nice Things

"The concept came from the magazine. Every issue, they had a section on ten things, and the concept was that you have to work with what they supply you. [In this case, they sent us the images of the products only.] The whole idea for this project was to make an image of the *photographs* of the products and not the products themselves."

