

How 'Eyes as Big as Plates' Defines Nature Through Ageless Curiosity

Inspired by Nordic folklore, artists Riitta Ikonen and Karoline Hjorth explore nature and how age is irrelevant to adventure.

Led by artists Riitta Ikonen and Karoline Hjorth, the decade-long project 'Eyes as Big as Plates' takes audiences on a cross-border journey to understand how people define their relationship with their natural surroundings.

Are you nature or is nature something different from you?

That's the question asked by Finnish-Norwegian duo Riitta Ikonen and Karoline Hjorth throughout their long-running project, Eyes as Big as Plates. Releasing their second printed volume in early 2022, featuring 50 portraits of older collaborators immersed in natural surroundings, the project has evolved considerably since its start in 2011.



The series initially sought to explore the contemporary role of Nordic folklore and how people throughout history have used whimsical stories to explain natural phenomena. At first, the pair tried to explain these tales by interviewing older people about their present-day relationship with age-old allegories.

Yet as they discussed the topic with more people, they soon discovered that just because someone is a little longer in the tooth, it doesn't mean they have any great interest in fanciful stories. Instead, the duo learned how people felt connected to the environment through diverse experiences that range from the pragmatic to the imaginative.

"The age factor in our early work has been busted many times," says Riitta before Karoline adds, "Now we really enjoy showing people how wild and capable their fellow human beings can be, regardless of their age or other traits."

This desire to explore stereotypes about older people, and the various ways humans connect with the land, has seen them capture portraits across 16 countries, with their collaborators including farmers, anglers, cosmologists and opera singers. Surprisingly, the pair's earthen portraits aren't the work of long-term planning, but serendipitous encounters and spontaneous jaunts.







To date, the duo have met most of their collaborators by chance, introducing themselves whether they're in the swimming pool, eating at a restaurant or wandering down the street. Now with about 130 people in their so-called "adventure club," each portrait is informed by a need to get to know each person on a personal level.

"We can't get around the fact that we both have an above-average interest in strangers," laughs Karoline. "So if someone looks interesting and charismatic, we're always tempted to go up and ask: 'Hello, who are you?'"

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— RIITTA IKONEN

Part of the project's appeal for Riitta and Karoline is how it challenges the view that older people lack a sense of adventure or curiosity. In their case, simply asking someone where they're from and how they relate to the environment quickly leads to fascinating discussions about their life's journey. Before long, their daring new friends are standing for portraits in tepid waters, muddy bogs or anywhere that holds a personal significance.



Each collaborator plays an active role in their portrait's conception, which collectively explores whether humans or nature is the protagonist in our ecological dynamic. "They decide what they share about themselves," says Riitta. "The focus, where we are and what they're camouflaged in. It's like a portrait of them in their surroundings as a wholesome picture – one single existence."

Using natural light and a Mamiya medium-format film camera, shooting analogue only elevates the free-roaming and unpredictable philosophy behind *Eyes as Big as Plates*. Restricted to just a few shots of each person, the duo must work slowly and deliberately as they decorate their collaborator and capture the perfect moment.



“People act very differently in front of a medium-format, slow-working camera,” explains Karoline. “[The process] definitely ties into the project’s themes, as it takes considerable time to produce an analogue photograph.”

From the beginning, the project’s climatic edge has been illustrated through striking wearable sculptures inspired by conversations with each collaborator and made from materials collected in the surrounding landscape. While these organic artworks mirror certain folk characters, they also highlight the unique quality of each setting and depict our intertwined existence with the earth.

However, as the project has progressed, it has increasingly focused on humankind’s position within the environment. Telling the story behind each portrait, the *Eyes as Big as Plates* books feature detailed field notes and behind-the-scenes images that connect viewers with each collaborator’s experiences. Meanwhile, the second volume added written perspectives from “poets, anthropologists, artists and curators” about humanity’s role in the climate crisis.



“We’re learning every time we do this,” says Karoline, explaining how the duo has already completed about 20 percent of volume three. “Now we’re trying to collaborate with more indigenous groups while moving closer to research-based and science-based ideas.” As this new direction takes shape, Riitta and Karoline are using their expressive art to enhance the reach of scholarly studies. By reflecting work by researchers and “people using complicated climate data” through their eco-conscious photography, they believe their sizable platform can help crystallise environmental issues around the globe. “We can join two languages when we collaborate this way,” says Riitta about the combined power of art and science. “We feel like we have to use this voice in the best way we can.”







Although the pair have worked on the project for over a decade, they remain as excited as ever to expand their adventure club and document their journey. With the project's title referencing two Scandinavian folktales about creatures with saucer-like eyes, Riitta and Karoline still carry this uninhibited mindset into every collaboration and creative experience. "Eyes as Big as Plates is about having wide eyes that allow you to connect with your surroundings and the environment with an open-minded attitude," explains Riitta. "It's about hopping on a train where you don't know the destination. It could be fun, so take the chance."