



## Val Verità, translated from Romansch, means Truth Valley. But, Val Verità itself is fictitious.

The photographs in this series are based on a real town that holds an annual horse race on a frozen lake in the Swiss Alps region where Selina Trepp grew up. They're as equally inspired by a naïve painting of a horse race she saw at a relative's house, by a painter whose name she never tried to hunt down, and from a single passage she read in a book about the painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner that she pulled off her shelf.

In an intentional departure from the contemporary idiom of research-based modes of working, Trepp decided to create this body of work without conducting any academic research. She let her art practice be her research, and her memories of home, with its snow-capped mountains and buildings clad in scraffito (the cut and dyed plaster surfaces recurring in many of the photos) be her primary source material. As a result, the location of the work, both the town and the horse race, serve more as a backdrop or setting; they provide context. The centrality of the figures, and the drama of their emotions and interpersonal relationships, is the content.

Horse races are events where high and low society mix it up. There are owners and jockeys, leisure class viewers in box seats and gamblers, drunks, and riff raff. These stereotypes obscure the very real social and class stratification that make up events like this, and therefore function similarly to the buried complexity found in Trepp's photographs, which capture some of this rich history and depict its layered matrices. Trepp turns the static self-portrait, still life and landscape inside out in her tableau vivants. Even when figures are shown in moments of suspended animation, they pose with splayed fingers, perch pertly, or fall back with legs akimbo.

Although the work is both figurative and narrative, only the photo's titles are literal (for example, *Smoke Break with Cow Shit or Horses Asses*). The images translate what they depict, filtering it through Trepp's own teasing, game-based practice. They feel like snapshots because of their whimsy and seeming ephemerality, but calling them snapshots is complicated. The term snapshot gives the impression Trepp's photographs are produced quickly with an off the cuff click of a button. Although the photographs embody the carefree feel of a snapshot, which captures a fleeting moment or feeling, they are in fact highly mitigated, painstakingly constructed images. These images are highly constructed, time, problem solving, and editing went in to making them look so effortless, fun and funny.

The final photographs often stage the small moments at the end of a day, while on break or at rest, when minds have wandered or attention is divided. Like the *Nap Animations*, works made during the block of time when Trepp's daughter is asleep, (using their shared set of felt tipped markers), these tangential pauses reflect the uneven experience of parenting. Things are unpredictable and then repetitive, hectic and then measured, busy and then lonely, joyful, trying, inspiring and draining. Only these small moments can condense all that tension and release.

Through the arrangement of mirrors and paintings, Trepp leverages flat, two-dimensional objects to create illusory three-dimensional ones that exist in deep space. Paradoxically, she also anticipates the camera's flattening out of an image, and despite the patchwork of layered planes, shifting focus, titled perspectives and the push and pull of scale, the photographic eye binds the image together, adhering its disparate component parts. Similarly, there is only one vantage point from which the installations make visual sense, and again, that's the perspective the photographic eye views it from. But the viewer still needs to take their time with the photos, let the brain put them together and the eyes read into them. Because of the materiality of the objects they de-

pict and the rawness of the space they are staged within, Trepp's work avoids the trap of being slick.

What she achieves by hand, without the aid of computer software, touch ups or corrections, is remarkable. Her work is riddled with optical illusions, surreal gestures and high performing improvisations. It's economy is multi-faceted, both in a literal and figurative sense. Over the past two years she has been following a self-imposed rule that guides her studio practice; only use what's already there to make new work with. No new materials or objects are brought in except for the clothes that she happens to be wearing that day. Because of this, she's intimately familiar with, and acutely aware of the resources at her disposal. She tells the story of finding a hidden bag of plaster one day and celebrating. Every painting has been painted over multiple times, and when a color runs out it's gone. Everything is transitory, in flux and cannibalized. Nothing is precious or tyrannically sentimental. There's a very specialized economy of gesture at work in the photos, with the mirror's reflective surface doubling halves of cow shit piles into wholes, multiplying pillars into a porch, and turning a touch into a hug. A little material goes a long way in these works.

Of course, Trepp's mandate is also economical in a monetary sense, forcing her to forgo buying things. The flipside of that is often less waste, and sure enough, Trepp has been dutifully re-using things until they're all used up. The quiet, but omnipresent political dimension that permeates the work is one of thrift, making due and zero waste. Her photographs don't make a fuss about it, they simply live by example. Because of all this, Trepp is able to position the handmade as empowering. Whatever she needs she can create, and limited resources and lack of sophisticated tools don't impede her imagination or impact her output. The limitations she has imposed on herself are productive ones.

Despite the skepticism that might attach itself to an unreal Truth Valley, honesty guides the way the works are constructed, produced, photographed and exhibited. They are anti-research, but pro-art practice. They are rehearsed, but feel fluid. They are about the interpersonal relationships between the characters they depict, but they are also shaped by the personal relationships Trepp has with her family. They're specific, particular and technical, yet playful and curious. They have a sense of humor, but they're also dogmatic— they challenge materialism and it's itinerant mass produced, machine made and store bought stuffs. In the past, Trepp has called herself a magician. Val Verità proves she has the power to turn painting, sculpture and performance into photography.

Thea Liberty Nichols is a curator and writer from Chicago. She has an exhibition opening this summer at the Comfort Station, and one scheduled for this fall at The Franklin. Her essays have recently been published by the Block Museum at Northwestern University and by Extinct Entities.

Selina Trepp (Swiss/American, b. 1973, in Zurich, Switzerland) is an artist who's work explores economy and improvisation. Her artistic output comes in a multitude of media: installation, video, drawing, painting, photography and sculpture. Additionally she developed a practice of singing combined with realtime video projection and has been performing as one half of the duo Spectralina, an audiovisual collaboration with her husband Dan Bitney. Selina Trepp's work has been exhibited internationally and has received several awards and honors including the Swiss Art Award and the Illinois Arts Council Fellowship.