

Since 1997, Ben Larrabee has been photographing his wife Trudie in mostly everyday situations at home and while traveling. The resulting images are a photographic homage and a sign of mutual trust.

### **The Art of Intimacy**

Harry Callahan (1912–1999) is considered one of the most innovative and influential figures in modern North American photography — owing both to his own photographs and to his work as a teacher. From 1946 to 1961 he taught at the New Bauhaus in Chicago, later renamed the Institute of Design, Chicago. There he channeled the experimental spirit of that pedagogy into his own photographic process. He often worked in an extremely graphic and reduced style, sometimes bordering on abstract, while also experimenting with photographic techniques such as double exposures and frequently combining tightly framed or cropped images with extreme contrast.

From 1961 to 1973, Callahan headed and later taught in the photography department of the Rhode Island School of Design — and it was there that graphic design student Ben Larrabee took one of his courses. He was so inspired that he changed his major and graduated in photography. A career as a designer and photographer followed, and from the 1990s onward Larrabee specialized in candid, intimate glimpses into the everyday lives of families. Alongside this, he always continued to photograph privately, following a piece of advice his former teacher Harry Callahan had given him: "Photograph what matters to you."

That advice was no coincidence: for Callahan, what mattered was, for example, his wife Eleanor, whom he photographed almost daily and in countless ways for nearly two decades — from the early 1940s to the early 1960s — nude and clothed, indoors and outdoors, in public parks and on city streets, at the beach, in a tent, in the forest, among sand dunes, and in the privacy of the family home. The result was a visual diary of a lifestyle and a relationship.

This is precisely what Ben Larrabee has done: from 1997 onward he photographed Trudie, his wife and muse, in every conceivable location, situation, and pose — in daily life and while traveling, on the beach and in the sea, doing Pilates in the bedroom, cooking in the kitchen, and putting on makeup in the bathroom. Larrabee has now published 51 of these images in a book. That might sound a little like the erotic fantasies of a now 81-year-old man — and perhaps it is that too. But not only that. The photobook is a declaration of love for his wife and their life together. A hymn to the erotic sparks that can still fly in a relationship over a long period of time. But also an expression of the mutual trust within a relationship.

After all, while nudity is something natural for Trudie — which she attributes to her Dutch roots: "I grew up with nudity" — she was nonetheless nervous when she first saw photographs of herself in an exhibition at the Rowayton Arts Center, because she "was afraid people would judge me. But the reactions were very positive. 'This is art,' people said. Besides, they are very tasteful images, and Ben presents me well. I'm proud of it. He photographs me with loving eyes."

Beyond that, the book is also a bow to the history of photography and art, and a tribute to Larrabee's role models and teachers. For alongside the already-mentioned Callahan, one can undoubtedly also detect Edward Weston and Alfred Stieglitz in the photographs: the graphic compositions, the sometimes silhouette-like cropping, the treatment of the body in space. All three studied the female form through art, and all three had their own wives serve as muses. "Photographing Trudie allowed me to explore the formal qualities of image-making: composition, line, rhythm, and texture. Much like Stieglitz, Weston, and Callahan, I developed my way of seeing and creating art by photographing someone who is very dear to me."

Many of the photographs arose spontaneously, out of the moment. Other times, Ben saw an opportunity and asked Trudie to hold a pose. A few others the two staged together — including the photograph in which Trudie floats naked in the water next to a canoe, her feet just barely holding onto the dock. "This image came to me in a dream one night. When I woke up, I told Trudie about it, and she agreed to bring the image to life right away." At the same time, it is also an unmistakable reference to Edward Weston's 1939 photograph "Nude Floating in Pool."

One minor weakness of the book is the editing — that is, the sequencing of the images — particularly in the second half, where one sometimes gets the impression of seeing more and more of the same. For "Trudie" is, at first glance, a book about nude photography. In reality, it is a book about the tender, still-enamored gaze of a man upon his wife. Yet that is precisely what occasionally gets a little lost, because the book too often focuses on the "bare facts."