

# Tänavafotogaafia broomõli tehnikas

## STREET PHOTOGRAPHY IN BROMOIL TECHNIQUE

Fotod / Photos: Tarmo Rätsep  
Tekst / Article: Tanel Verk

Kujutavas kunstis on meedium teose lahutamatu osa. Näiteks on skulptuur ja õlimaal oma tehnikate poolest eristavad ning vaataja tajub nende olemasolu esemetena. Õnnekostjad teadvustab nüüdiskunst ka fototeoseid füüsiliste objektide ja järgst populaarsemaks on saanud analoogfotograafia, eritehnika ning nende märkimine teose etiketil. Selleks et lugeja **Tarmo Rätsep** (1972) tööde tehnikat ja vormistust paremini mõistaks, annan põguna ülevaate bromõlitrüki ajaloost ja protsessist.

Tartus elav fotograaf ja kunstnik **Ove Maidla** (1959), kes vahepeal unustuse hõlma jää nud menetluse 1980. aastate lõpul Eestis taas ellu kutsus, on öelnud, et bromõli elab õnnelikus abielus graafika ja maaliga.<sup>1</sup> 1901. aastal esmakordselt inglase Edward J. Walli kirjeldatud bromõliprotsess on üks keerulisemaid ja kapriisemaid modernseid fotomenetlusi. Eelmine sajandi alguses kogus see populaarsust tänu kaamerate arengule ja piioreskse fotograafia populaarsusele. Nimelt, kui varasemad alternatiivsed fotoprotsessid põhinesid suuremal määral kontaktkopeerimise meetodil (see tähendab, et negatiiv ja valgustundlik materjal asetati valgustades kohakuti ja saadi ilma suurendusastmeta fotograafiline kujutis), siis bromõlitrükki võimaldab kasutada hõbezelatiinpaberile kopeeritud fotosuurendusi (köikidele teadaolevaid mustvalgeid fotosid). Protsess on sarnane, kuid veidi vanema, juba 19. sajandi keskpaigast pärit eritehnika ölitrüki edasiarendus, ka viimati nimetatud põhineb just kontaktkopeerimise meetodil.

Bromõlitrükki üldise kirjelduse kohaselt valmistatakse pimikus mustvalgele fotopaberile suurendatud ja ilmutatud fotokujutis. See pleegitatakse ning sellest saadud reljeefsele, ent peaaegu valgele fotopaberile kantakse õlivärv, mis kinnitub paberile vastavalt varem fotol olnud kujutisele. Sisuliselt vahetatakse želatiinis olev hõbe välja õlivärviga, kusjuures tegevuse käigus on võimalik tonaulust ja valguse-varju suhet reguleerida. Praktikas on bromõli kompleksne, tundlik ning aeganõudev fotomenetlus. Eesti-aegne populaarseim foto-õpik<sup>2</sup> kirjeldab seda kui väristehnikat, mille tulemusena saatutatakse ajas äärmiselt püsiv „maalitud“ fotograafiline pilt, mis sarnaneb gravüüri või litograafiaga.

Eestis võttis bromõli esimesena oma „hingeasjaks“ Eesti Foto-Klubi asutaja ning tuntuim 20. sajandi alguse kohalik

In the visual arts, the medium is an integral part of the work. Sculpture and oil painting, for example, are distinguishable in terms of their techniques. The viewer perceives their existence as objects. Fortunately, contemporary art also recognises photographic works as physical objects with analogue photography and special techniques becoming increasingly popular. For the reader to understand the technique and format of **Tarmo Rätsep's** (1972) works better, I will give a brief overview of the history and process of bromoil printing.

The photographer and artist **Ove Maidla** (1959), who lives in Tartu and who brought a forgotten technique back to life in Estonia in the late 1980s, has said that bromoil is a happy marriage between graphics and painting.<sup>1</sup> The bromoil process, first described by the Englishman Edward J. Wall in 1901, is one of the most complex and capricious modern photographic processes. At the beginning of the last century, it gained popularity due to the development of cameras and the popularity of pictorial photography. While previous alternative photographic processes were more reliant on the contact printing method (meaning that the negative and photosensitive material were placed face to face in contact and exposed to light, developing a photographic image without enlargement), bromoil printing allows photographic enlargement on silver gelatine paper (the black and white photographs known to everybody). The process is a development of a similar but slightly older technique called oil printing, which originated in the mid-nineteenth century and is also makes use of contact printing.

According to the general description of bromoil printing, an enlarged and developed photographic image is made on black and white photo paper in the darkroom. It is bleached and oil paint is applied to the embossed but almost white photo paper, adhering to the paper on the photo image. In essence, the silver contained in the gelatine is replaced by oil paint, while the tonality and the ratio of light and shadows can be adjusted. In practice, bromoil is a complex, sensitive and time-consuming photographic process. The most popular photography textbook<sup>2</sup> from the era of the first Estonian republic describes this precious technique and how it results in an extremely long-lasting ‘painted’ photographic image,



Tarmo Rätsep

fotokunstnik **Johannes Mülber** (1889–1938). Eesti Foto-Klub (1921–1933) oli esimene ühing Eestis, mis tegeles fotograafia kui kunstivormiga. Mülber osales aastail 1921–1929 broomölfotodega menukalt rahvusvahelisel näitustel Eestis, Euroopas ja Ameerikas, sai hulgaiselt auhindu ja pälvise tähelepanu. Tema monokkel-lätsega tabatud impressionistlikeks graafikaga sarnaselt vormistatud ja signeeritud tömmistel olid peamiselt stseenid tänavatelt. Kui 1966. aastal Tallinna linnamuuseumi fotokogusse vastu võetud Mülberi tervikkollektsioon<sup>3</sup> Peeter Toominga kureeritud näitustel mõöda Eestimaad reisima hakkas, märkas neid müstilisi fotosid juba eelpool mainitud kunstnik Ove Maidla. Tollal ei olnud aga korralikke retsepte ega fotomaterjale, rääkimata protsessi üksikasjalikest kirjeldustest, Maidla sisuliselt taasleutas broomöliprotsessi. Just Ove Maidla 2018. aasta töötoast sai „broomölipisiku” ka Tarmo Rätsep.

Kui Johannes Mülberi tööde vormistus on ehtgraafikalik (formaadilt väiksemad, vabalt paberile kantud meisterlikud tööd), Ove Maidlal on aga tänapäevaseid fotograafilisi võimalusi, näiteks lainurkoptikat ja infrapunafilmi ära kasutatud (formaadilt suuremad motiivid), siis Tarmo Rätsepa tööd moodustavad korrektsetes viimistluses oleva läbitöötatud tänavafotograafia seeria.

Niisisi mahub Eesti täpselt saja-aastasesse broomölipraktikasse vaid kolm eelmainitud nime: Johannes Mülber, Ove Maidla ja peatselt galeriis Positiiv näituse avav Tarmo Rätsep, kelle viimase aja loomingul me selle artikli juurde kuuluvas intervjuus lähemalt peatume.

#### **Kuidas alustad oma fotoprojekte ja kui kaua oled tegelenud broomölideeriaiga?**

Minu projektid saavad alguse mõne alternatiivse fotoprotsessi katsetamisega. Selle käigus omandan oskused ja seejärel annan tegevusele kindla suuna ja sisu. Esimesed filmirullid broomölfotode jaoks võtsin üles 2020. aasta talvel. Edasi tegelesin juba paralleelselt pildistamise ja fotode vormistamisega. Viimased broomölfotod said paberile käesoleva aasta kevadel.

#### **Millega Sinu broomölideeria räägib ja mis on inspireerinud?**

Idee sai alguse Johannes Mülberist, kes tallinlasena Tallinna oma loomingu kasutas. Olen ka ise terve elu Tallinnas elanud ja kuna Mülberi aktiivsest loometööst on mõodas ligikaudu sada aastat, siis otsustasin ka oma kodulinna broomölisse panna, pildistada seda tänapäevaselt ja vormistada samas eritehnikas. See loob justkui sideme sajanditaguste töödega.

Ehkki olen mingil määral kopeerinud tema stilist (inimesed kaadris kas puuduvad üldse, pole esiplaanil või on hoopis seljaga kaamera poole), annan edasi enda nägemust praegusest linnast. Liikusin erinevates linnaosades ja põlise tallinlasena oli mul huvitav meeutada, kuidas muidu tuttavad kohad on aja

similar to engraving or lithography.

In Estonia, **Johannes Mülber** (1889–1938), the founder of Eesti Foto-Klubi (the Estonian Photo Club) and the best-known local photographer at the beginning of the twentieth century, was the first to dedicate himself to bromoil. Eesti Foto-Klubi (1921–1933) was the first association in Estonia to approach photography as an art form. Between 1921 and 1929, Mülber successfully exhibited bromoil photographs at international exhibitions in Estonia, Europe and America, receiving numerous awards and gaining attention. His impressionist-like prints, captured with a monocle-lens and prepared similarly to graphics, were mainly scenes from the streets. When Mülber's complete collection<sup>3</sup>, which had been accepted into the photography collection of the Tallinn City Museum in 1966, began to travel around Estonia in exhibitions curated by Peeter Tooming, these mystical photographs came to the attention of the aforementioned artist Ove Maidla. Back then, however, there were no proper recipes or photographic materials, let alone detailed descriptions of the process, so Maidla essentially reinvented the bromoil process. It was in Ove Maidla's workshop in 2018 where Tarmo Rätsep caught the bromoil bug.

While the processing of Johannes Mülber's works is purely graphics-like (masterpieces smaller in size, freely printed on paper), Ove Maidla has taken advantage of contemporary photographic possibilities, such as wide-angle lenses and infrared film (larger motifs), Tarmo Rätsep's works, on the other hand, form a thorough, properly finished series of street photography.

Thus, only the three aforementioned names can fit into the exactly one-hundred-years of bromoil practice in Estonia: Johannes Mülber, Ove Maidla and Tarmo Rätsep, who will soon be opening an exhibition at Gallery Positiiv and whose recent work we will be taking a closer look at in the interview as part of this article.

#### **How do you start your photo projects and how long have you been working on the bromoil series?**

My projects start by testing some alternative photo process. During the process, I acquire the skills and then give the activity a certain direction and content. I photographed the first rolls of film for bromoil photos in the winter of 2020. I then worked on photographing and processing photos in parallel. The last bromoil photos were put on paper in the spring of this year.

#### **What is your bromoil series about and what has inspired you?**

The idea originated with Johannes Mülber who, as a Tallinner, used Tallinn in his work. I, too, have lived my whole life in Tallinn and because it's been about a hundred years since Mülber was active in his creative work, I decided to dip my hometown into bromoil too, to photograph it in the contem-

porary manner and process it using the same technique. It's as if it establishes a connection with the works of a century ago. Although I have somewhat copied his style (there are either no people in the frame, they are not in the foreground or have their backs turned to the camera), I am conveying my own vision of the contemporary city. I walked around different parts of the city, and as a native of Tallinn it was fascinating to me to remember how these familiar places have changed beyond recognition over time. It is unbelievable at times how rapid the changes have been, particularly in the last few years: buildings disappear and appear again, replaced by entire quarters. At the same time, there is always something left behind from the time before. I have also tried to capture this melding of different eras in my images.

#### **Miks oled otsustanud oma töid vormistada analoogfotograafia erinevates tehnikates ja mis sulle selle puhul kõige enam meeldib?**

Fotograafias huvitavad mind alternatiivsed võimalused fotograafilise kujutise saamiseks ja sellest tulenevate meetoditega katsetamine. Olen õppinud veelgi enam värtustama digifotograafiale eelnened analoogajastu fotograafide tööd. Hea pildi saamine oli palju keerulisem ja nõudis väga heal tasemel oskusi, tehnika tundmist ning kannatlikkust. Siiski pakub analoogfotograafia üllatusi, kõik ei ole inimese kontrolli all. Vahel nii-öelda „loodus sekkub” ja võib kõik ära rikkuda, teinekord tekib aga just tänu sellele huvitav lõppitulemus. Näiteks broomöliprotsess on tavapärasest analoogfotografiast veidi erinev ja võimaldab saada tulemusi, mida digifoto vahendeid kasutades järele teha ei saa.

#### **Mille järgi otsustad, et vormistad foto mõnes eritehnikas?**

Mulle on oma tööde vormistamine väga tähtis. Läbi möeldud ja kvaliteetselt teostatud lõppitulemus justkui „võimendab” pilti. Selles mõttes on ka pildi raam üks teose osa. Tavaliselt mõtlen juba pildistamise ajal vormistuse peale. Siin on väga palju tunnetuslikku. Aja jooksul omandatud kogemuste põhjal oskan paremini otsustada, kas mõnest kaadrist saan hea tulemuse või mitte. Näiteks võtan broomölitehnikat kui üht foto kindlat liiki järeltöötlust. Seega peab suutma ette kujutada, kas see ikka konkreetsele kaadriile sobib. Piltide vormistamine broomölitehnikas on väga aeganõudev protsess: esmalt tuleb hoolikalt kaaluda, kas just broomölitehnika annab sellele pildile õige ilme ja olemuse. Sellise valiku tegemisel aitavad kogemused ja protsessi eripärade tundmine, aga täielikku kindlust pole kunagi.

#### **Milline näeb välja Sinu tööprotsess?**

Negatiivid ma tavaliselt skaneerin, sest arvutiekraanil on neid parem vaadata ja valikut teha. Samas jääb neist alles ka digitaalne koopia – juhuks, kui negatiiviga peaks midagi juhtuma. Kui leian mõne kaadri, millega võiks edasi tegeleda, siis märgin need üles, aga ei torma kohe pimikusse nendega edasi tegelema. Mõne aja pärast vaatan need uuesti üle ja teen lõpliku valiku. Varem tegin pimikus broomölitüki jaoks paberile igast valitud kaadrist kohe paar koopiat, sest tavaliselt ei jännud ma esimese variandiga rahule. Nüüd teen esialgu ainult ühe ja kui see välja ei tule, siis alustan algusest, teise ja mõnikord ka kolmanda koopia tegemisest.

porary manner and process it using the same technique. It's as if it establishes a connection with the works of a century ago. Although I have somewhat copied his style (there are either no people in the frame, they are not in the foreground or have their backs turned to the camera), I am conveying my own vision of the contemporary city. I walked around different parts of the city, and as a native of Tallinn it was fascinating to me to remember how these familiar places have changed beyond recognition over time. It is unbelievable at times how rapid the changes have been, particularly in the last few years: buildings disappear and appear again, replaced by entire quarters. At the same time, there is always something left behind from the time before. I have also tried to capture this melding of different eras in my images.

#### **Why have you decided to use different analogue techniques, and what do you like the best about doing this?**

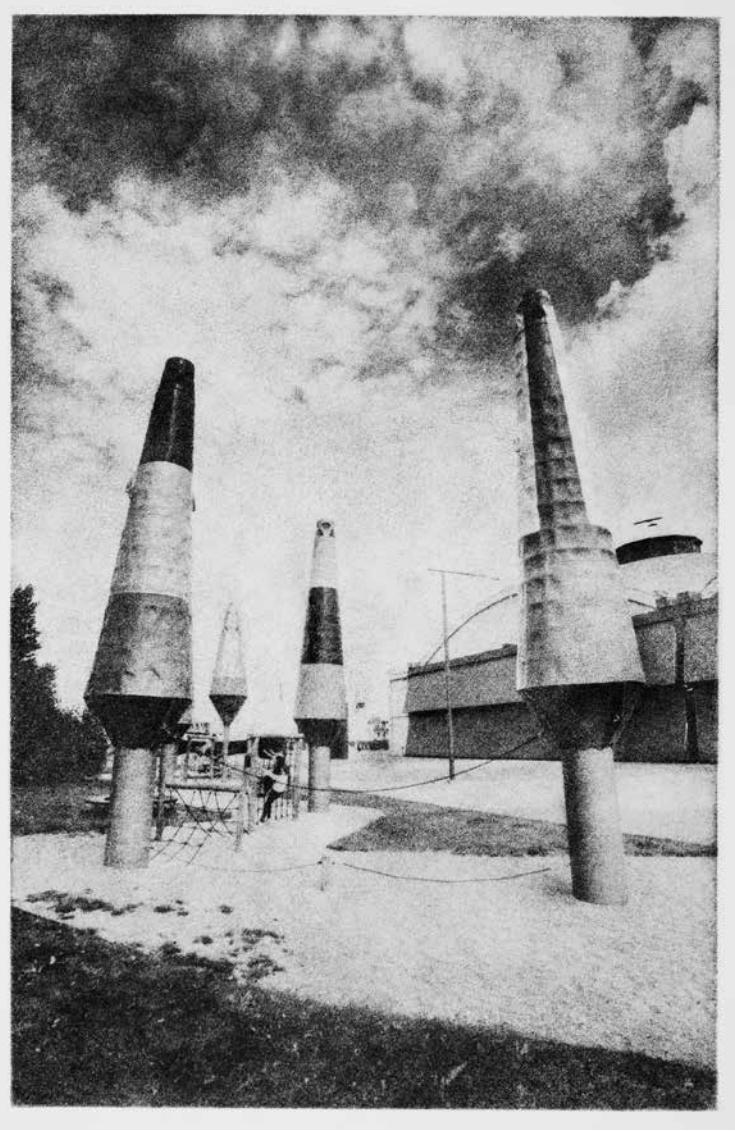
In photography, I am interested in alternative ways of obtaining a photographic image and testing out the resulting methods. I have learned to value the works of photographers of the analogue era. Getting a good photo was a lot more difficult and required excellent skills, technical knowledge, and patience. However, analogue photography offers surprises as not everything is under the photographer's control. Sometimes nature intervenes, so to speak, and can ruin everything, but other times the end result is interesting precisely because of this. The bromoil process, for example, is slightly different from conventional analogue photography and allows for results that cannot be replicated using digital tools.

#### **How do you decide to process a photo using a particular technique?**

Processing my work is very important to me. A well thought-out and high-quality end results seems to 'amplify' an image. In this sense, a picture frame is also part of the work. I usually think about processing when I'm photographing. A lot comes down to cognition, here. Based on the experience gained over time, I can better decide whether I would get a good result from a shot or not. For example, I approach bromoil as a specific type of photo editing. You have to be able to imagine if it fits with a specific shot. Processing images in the bromoil technique is a very time-consuming process: first, you need to carefully consider whether bromoil can give the image the right look and feel. Experience and knowledge of the specifics of the process help to make this choice, but you can never be completely sure.

#### **Can you describe your work process?**

I usually scan the negatives because it's better to look at them and make your selection on a computer screen. It also saves a digital copy in case something happens to the negative. When I find a shot that is worth working on further,



Tarmo Rätsep

#### Räägi palun broomõliga töötamise puhul tekkinud kitsaskohtadest.

Kuna tegemist on tänapäevaks peaegu häabunud tehnikaga, millega tegelevad terves maailmas vaid vähesed entusiastid, siis on raske hankida sobivaid vahendeid. Näiteks ei toodeta enam spetsiaalse bromoilipaberit. Õnneks on aga alternatiive. Saadaval on erinevaid hõbezelatiinfo pabereid, mille seast tuleb katsetades leida sobivad. Kahjuks jäab aga ka nende tootjaid üha vähemaks. Fotokeemiat veel ligub, aga sobivaid värv ja pintsleid pole üldse lihtne leida. Tänan Ove Maidlat, kes mind selles osas on palju aidanud.

#### Milliseid seoseid näed broomõlitrüki puhul enda, Johannes Mülberi ja Ove Maidla vahel?

Ove Maidla broomõlikursustel sain selle fotoprotsessiga tuttavaks ja omandasin vajalikud põhiteadmised. Varem ei olnud ma sellest midagi kuulnud. Edasi hakkasin katsetama ja

I note it down, but I don't rush into the darkroom to work on it. After a while, I take another look and make the final choice. In the past, I immediately made a couple of copies of each selected frame in the darkroom for bromoil printing, because I was usually never happy with the first version. Now, I make only one, and if it doesn't work out I start from the beginning and make a second and sometimes a third copy.

#### Could you talk about the problems you have faced when working with bromoil?

As it's nearly an extinct technique today practiced by only a few enthusiasts around the world, it's hard to find the right equipment. For example, special bromoil paper is no longer produced. Fortunately, there are alternatives. There are different silver gelatine photo papers, and you need to experiment to find suitable ones. Unfortunately, there are increasingly fewer manufacturers of those, too. Photo chemicals are

iseseisvalt edasi uurima. Käisin ka fotomuuseumis Johannes Mülberi originaaltöid vaatamas, et uurida, kuidas need ikkagi tegelikult paberil välja näevad. Mölemad meistrid on mulle olnud eeskujuks.

Tarmo Rätsepa näitus "Taasleitud. Tänavafotograafia bromõli tehnikas" on avatud galeriis Positiiv jaanuaris 2022.

<sup>1</sup> Eesti fotokunstnik Johannes Mülber. Tallinna Linnamuuseum, 2013

<sup>2</sup> Johs ja Peter Parikas. Fotograafia õperaamat, 1923

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Mülberi kollektsoon fotomuuseumis: TLM F 7053:1–214

<sup>1</sup> Estonian photographer Johannes Mülber. Tallinn City Museum, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes and Peter Parikas. Photography textbook, 1923.

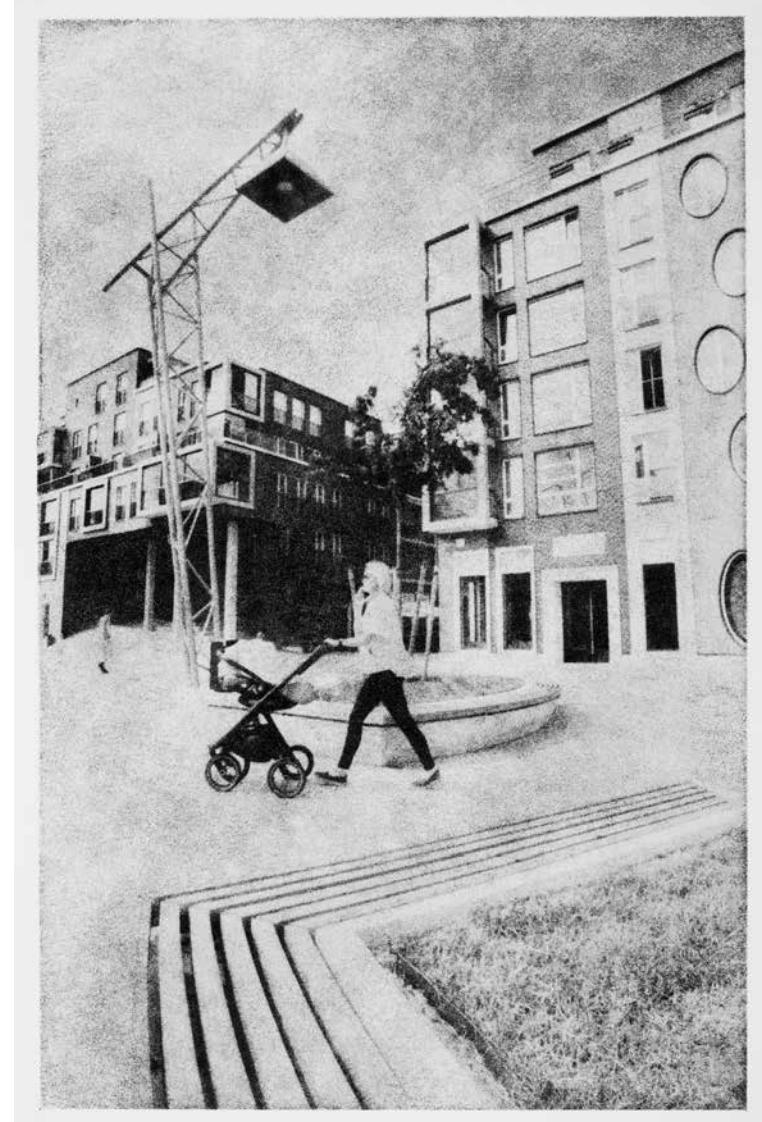
<sup>3</sup> Johannes Mülber's collection in the Museum of Photography: TLM F 7053:1–214.

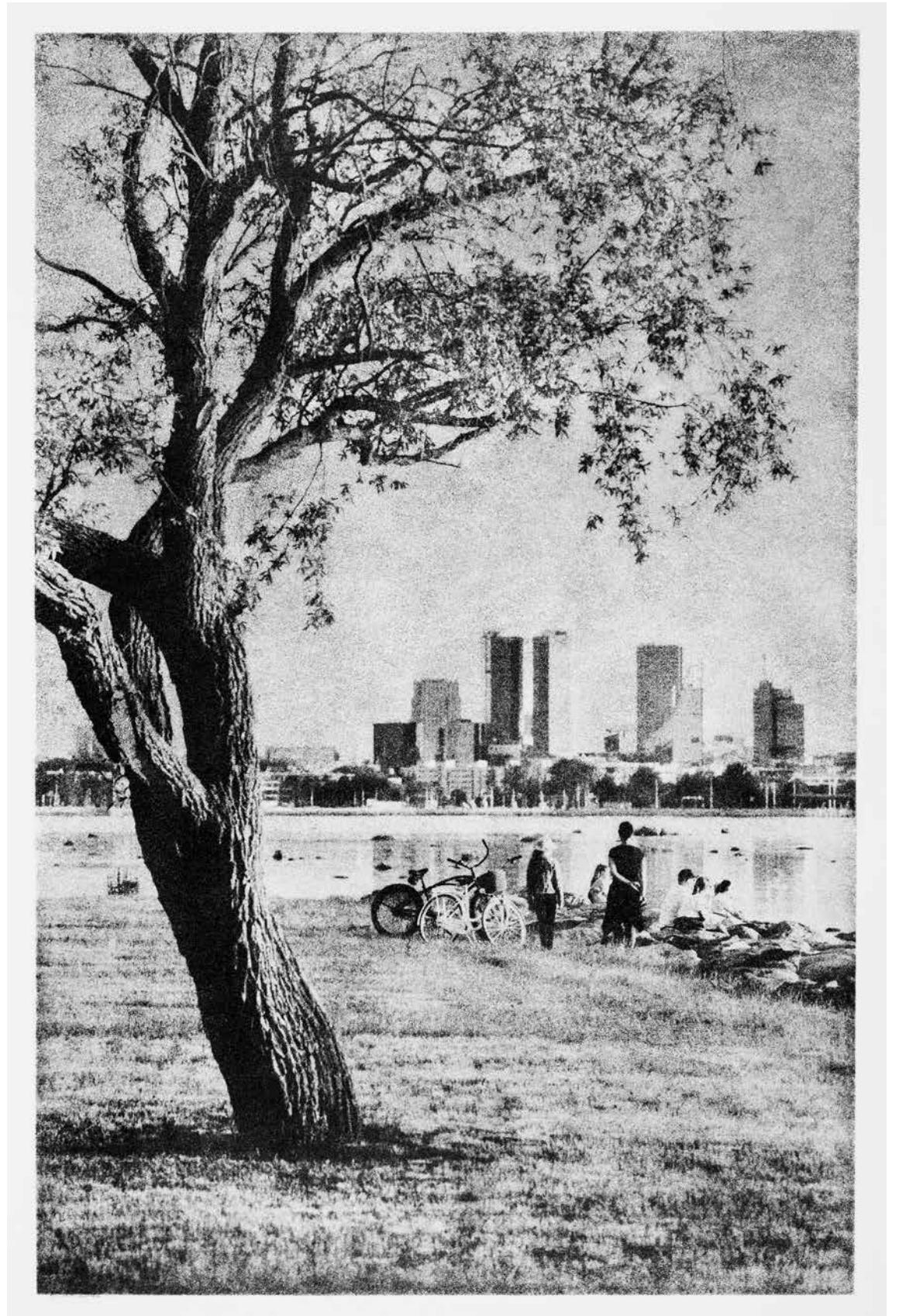
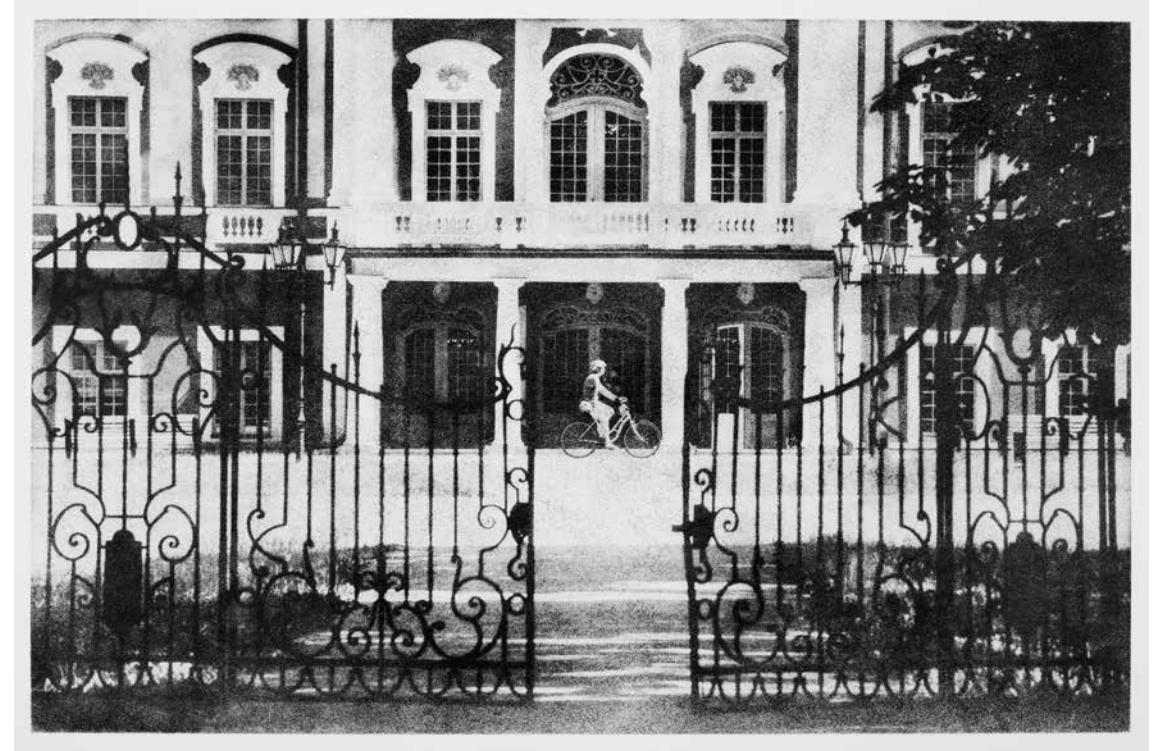
still available, but finding the right paints and brushes is not easy at all. I would like to thank Ove Maidla who has helped me a lot in this regard.

#### What connections do you see between yourself, Mülber and Maidla in terms of bromoil printing?

I became acquainted with the photo process and acquired the necessary basic knowledge on Ove Maidla's bromoil courses. I had never heard of it before. Then I started experimenting and researching on my own. I also went to see Johannes Mülber's original works in the Museum of Photography to find out what they really look like on paper. Both of these masters have set an example for me.

Tarmo Rätsep's exhibition "Rediscovered. Street Photography in Bromoil Technique" is open in the gallery Positiiv in January 2022.





Tarmo Rätsep