

# LOOKING OUT LOOKING IN

*Photography* Åsa Johannesson

*Text* Rosie Robertson

Åsa Johannesson uses the language of photographic portraiture to unfix traditional notions of gender and identity. Through Johannesson's work she addresses the binary male/female divide that is so pervasive in our cultural climate.

The series 'Looking Out, Looking In' (2015-2017) started with the intention of dealing with the representation of gender in portraiture, whilst simultaneously remaining ambiguous, open and meaningful to many people, regardless of their involvement or interest in the topic of gender fluidity.

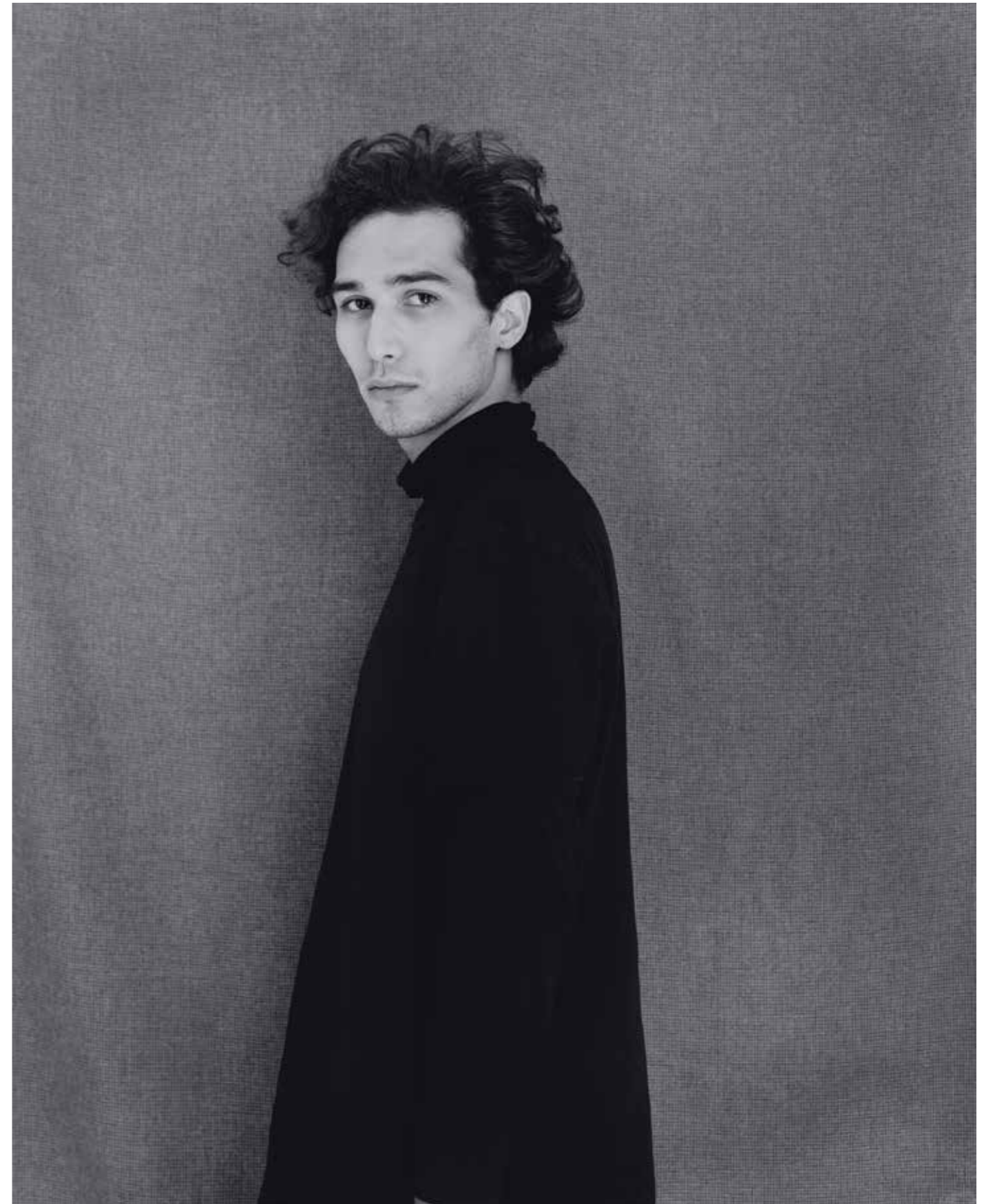
'Looking Out, Looking In' does not read simply as an examination of gender or sexuality. Johannesson instead regards the series as an examination of the photographic portrait itself. Avoiding the tropes of 'queer' photography, Johannesson has created a body of work that is ambiguous in terms of its politics whilst

simultaneously being highly affective.

Each individual portrait is intriguing and atmospheric, and when viewed in series the formal elements of the portraits create a harmonious body of work. However, unlike many of Johannesson's previous projects, there is not a distinctive unifier that clearly links each of the subjects. Interestingly, the sitters mostly sought out Johannesson which has shaped the series in a more organic way.

Although the natural growth of the series granted Johannesson a level of remove in regards to selecting her sitters, she was wary of only photographing people who

Untitled from Looking  
Out, Looking In (2017)



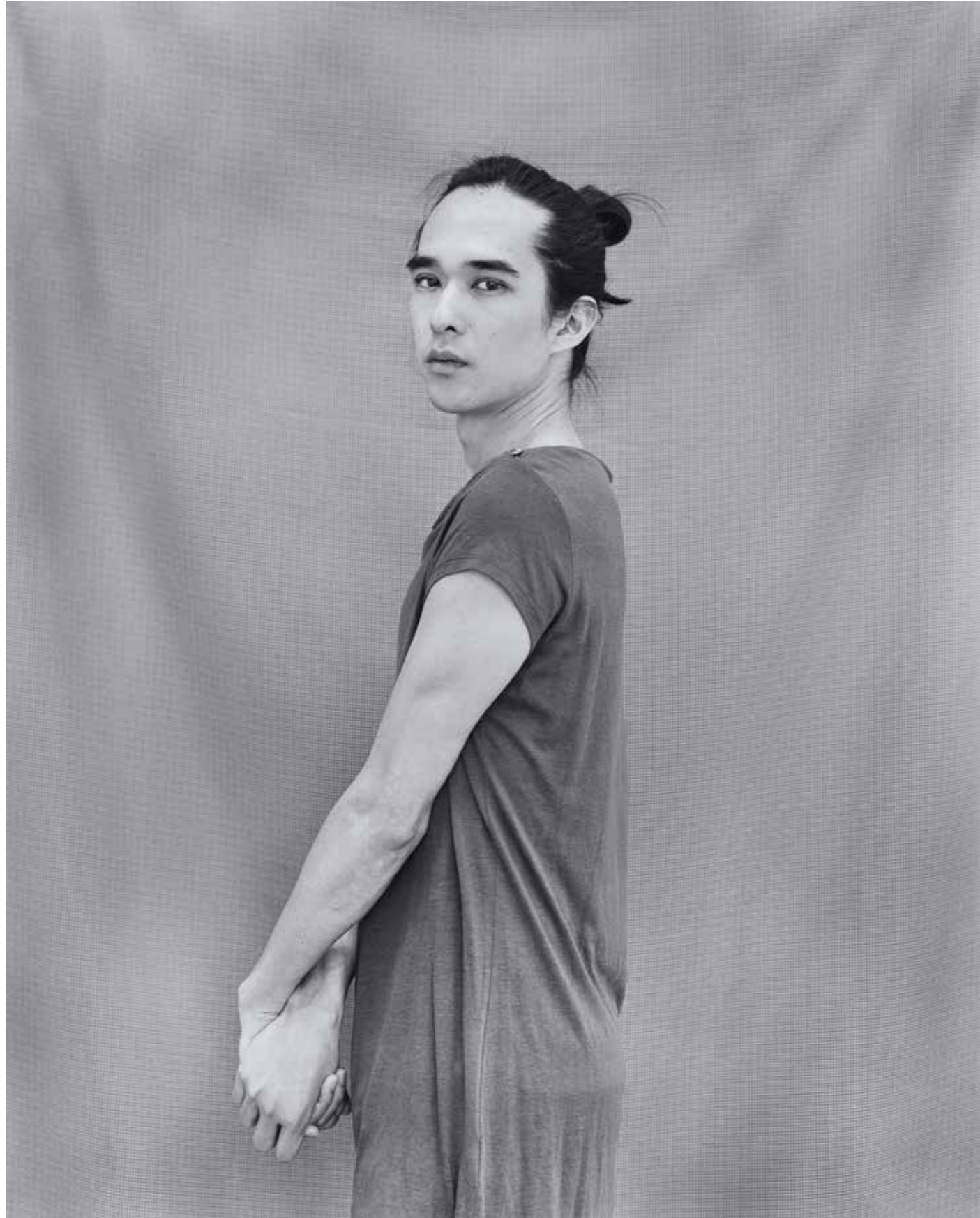
Untitled from Looking  
Out, Looking In (2017)



Untitled from Looking  
Out, Looking In (2015)

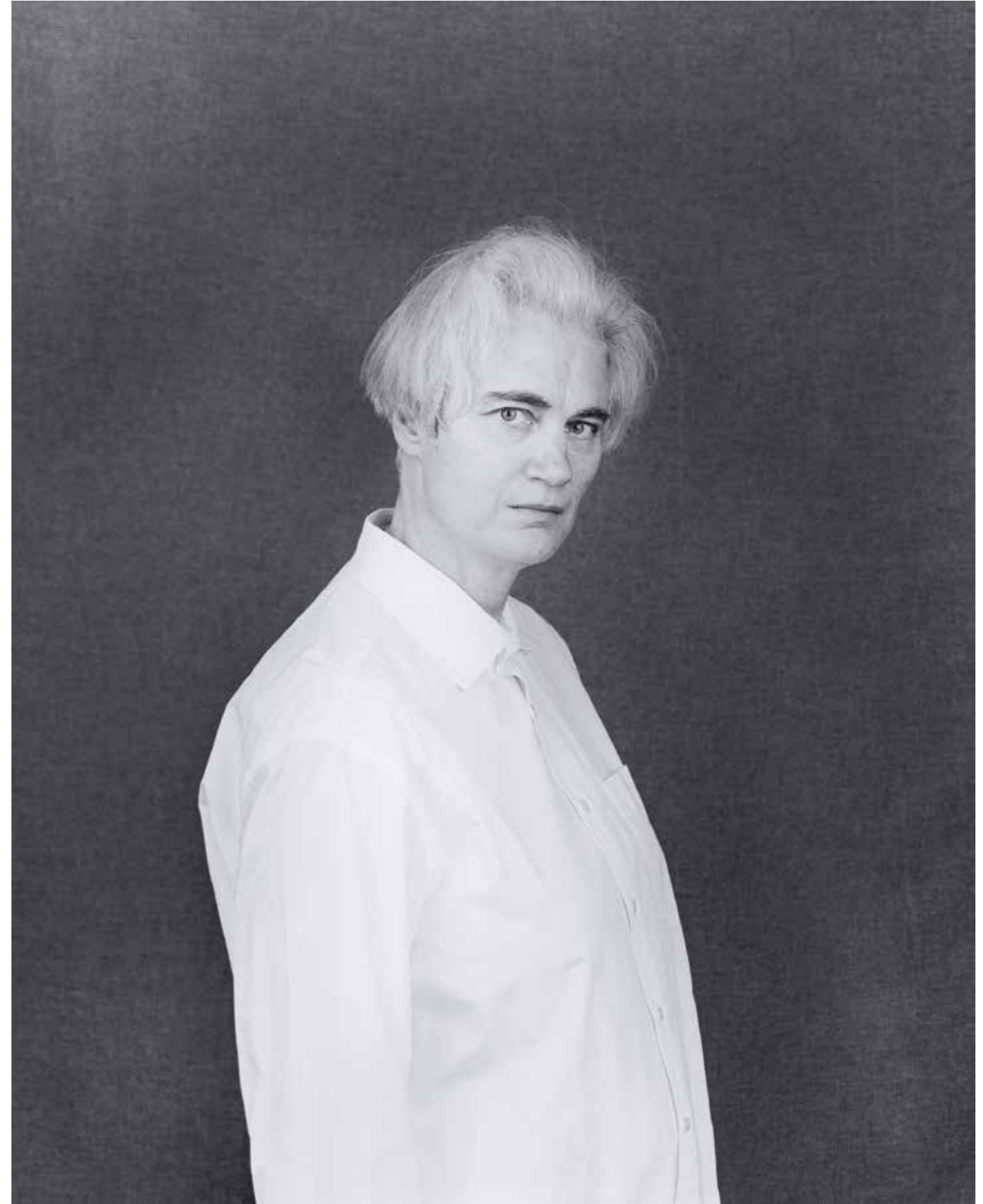
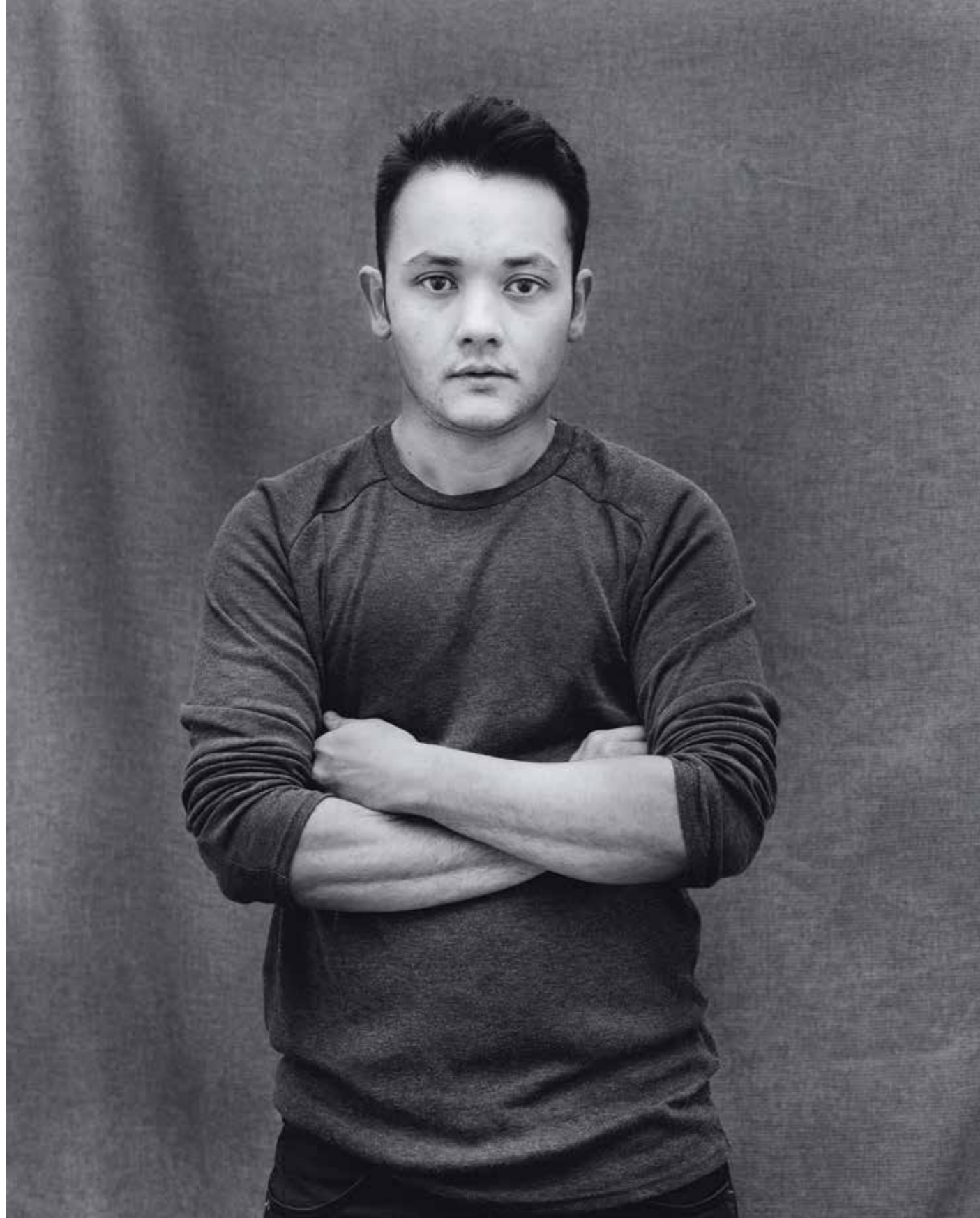


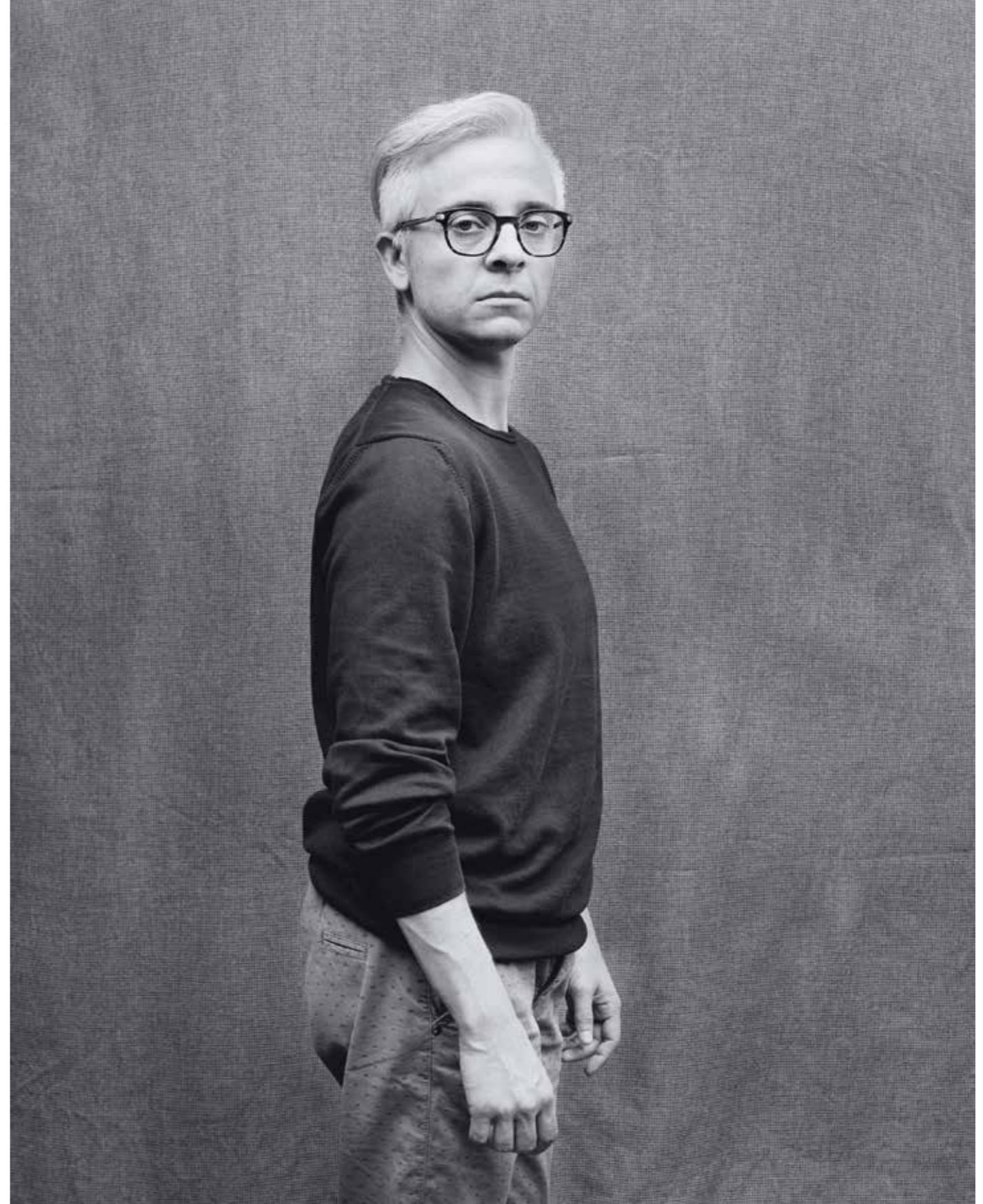
Untitled from Looking  
Out, Looking In (2015)



Untitled from Looking  
Out, Looking In (2015)









were attracted to the project for similar reasons. Johannesson was mindful to choose people who shared an open sensibility with regards to gender, so that each individual would contribute in their own way, bringing a natural complexity and diversity to the work that enhanced its multiplicity.

Multiplicity is an interesting word in relation to this project because as a concept it is inclusive and ever-evolving; multiplicity is the opposite of binary. The notion of 'queer' naturally embodies multiplicity, it is an 'and' not an 'or', which is a sentiment that Johannesson has successfully carried into this series of portraits.

'A portrait! What could be more simple and more complex, more obvious and more profound.' — Charles Baudelaire

Formally consisting of a figure against a cloth backdrop, 'Looking Out, Looking In' was photographed using large format camera. By using analogue equipment, Johannesson reveals the details and imperfections that are characteristic of old cameras and traditional printing techniques. The sitters' poses are relaxed and feel expressive of each individual, however any casual atmosphere is countered by the subjects gaze that meets that of the viewer in a direct and intense encounter.

Befitting the duality of the series' title, there are also images that show the sitter from behind. The curve of the neck, the dip of the lower back — these elegant, subtle shapes of the reverse portraits imply introspection — that of both the sitter and the viewer — a 'Looking In'.

Keen to use a backdrop that was not heavy with connotations or historical references, Johannesson used fabrics that added movement and texture to the composition without being referential. Like graphite rubbings, the cloth acts as a record of the exact moment of the photograph, whilst also forming itself effortlessly around the subject.

These works are both empty of meaning and full of meaning — at once specific and all encompassing. There is no theme that guides the viewer, no overt clues scattered throughout to hint at its meaning. Johannesson rejects any pre-judgements, negative or positive, in order to take photographs that truly represent multiplicity.

Gender is not the focus of the series, but it is nonetheless questioned within it. When understood as an examination of the photographic portrait, this body of work becomes an honest and open-ended visual record; a beautiful example of the camera's ability to transform light into not only texture and tone, but into atmosphere and emotion. The raw quality of the black and white photographs, taken in natural daylight, gives the images a human warmth and a timeless quality.

Unlike contemporary cameras, a large format camera does not have an internal mirror as part of its workings, meaning that the photographer sees the scene through the viewfinder upside down. When drawing, it is often advised to invert the object as this eliminates the artists preconceptions, which are the obstacle to true observation and accurate representation. The simple act of turning something upside down causes the viewer to see all of the things that previously went unnoticed.

By seeing the image in her viewfinder upside down, the elements in Johannesson's photographs are transformed from 'sitter' and 'background' into a landscape of shapes, forms and textures. This process makes space for dissonance or asymmetry that might otherwise be edited out, instead, for Johannesson they become quirks that are distinctive to her work and form an important part of her exploration of portraiture and of diversity.