Left: Fosters Pond, 2000 (Writing on Water); this page: Dead Wood, Fosters Pond, 2009

Original shot for The Improper Bostonian

Back to Nature

The outdoor, unclad visions of Arno Rafael Minkkinen

By Nick Altschuller
Photographs by Arno Minkkinen

"I think we may have a picture."

On a muddy patch of earth, just a few steps from his back porch, Arno Rafael Minkkinen peers through his viewfinder at a fallen tree. Cracked and hollowed by a rusted water pump, the rotted log lends gravity to the scene, but calling it picturesque would be a stretch. Sometimes a fallen tree can be a metaphor. Sometimes it's just firewood.

But the world Minkkinen sees through his camera has little to do with his photography. It's his intuition that led him to create works for MoMA and the MFA, and for galleries from Tokyo to Torino. His faith in chance, not his eye, earned him a Knighthood from the Republic of Finland. "There's something here that might possibly be OK," Minkkinen observes. I get the feeling he says this a lot.

Bowed by the wind, a length of the trunk hovers over pine needles, and Minkkinen ducks underneath to examine the other side. He sticks his hands inside and scoops out fistfuls of crumbling pulp. He presses his palms against the wood and tests his weight. He paces, scans and ducks back under to peer through a small opening, a porthole in the tree looking toward the house. He calculates the riddle and hypothesizes: "There will be a foot right here, which will be like an eye or whatever shape it might be."

Satisfied, he kicks off his sandals. He slides off his shirt and unbuckles the 34x34 jeans hanging loose from his hips. With his dark-framed glasses and thin mop of gray hair, Minkkinen ponders the hollow one last time, like a wizard in boxer briefs deciding on a spell. And then he hauls himself up and disappears.

"This was me."

Minkkinen has taken a book of Diane Arbus's work down from a shelf in the sunny living room of his Andover home. His finger rests on the 1962 image "Child with Toy Hand Grenade." A bony blond boy stares into the lens with wide, crazed eyes. The tendons in his arms are pulled tight, his right hand holding the toy, his left clawed in anger or frustration. His lips are clenched like he's fighting off a scream or beginning a growl. He looks like he's desperately trying, through some vengeful form of alchemy, to make the toy real.

"This is what I felt like when I moved to the States," Minkkinen explains, his lips thinly veiled by a moustache and beard. "People would make fun of you, and I had the double cleft palate."

Born in 1945 to a cavalryman and a nurse who met during the Finnish Winter War, Minkkinen came to Brooklyn at age 6 and settled in an area known as Finntown. Divided into quarters, the Minkkinens lived in the Norwegian section. Across the street was the Puerto Rican community. The nexus was a Jewish area, where Minkkinen went to school. The Finnish district is where he delivered papers.

At Wagner College, Minkkinen studied writing, and it wasn't until the early '70s that he became professionally interested in photography. (There had been playful moments with a Brownie movie camera before then, including experiments in angle and scale—elements that would become trademarks of his work.

Fosters Pond Millennium, 1.1.2000

He wades in the space before the lens, tethered like a deep-sea diver.

But it also documented a game of spin-the-bottle, minus frames he snipped away before the evidence got into the wrong hands.)

While searching the want ads for copy writing jobs, Minkkinen began shooting with his father's old Linhof Technika 4x5. At a chance interview with an ad company working with Minolta, the brand name suddenly transformed into a password. "They were desperate to hire somebody, and at the end of the interview, he just said to me, 'What do you know about photography?'" Minkkinen recalls. "So I said, 'I've been tinkering around with my father's Linhof.' And his eyes lit up. They never asked me anything more, and I was hired the next day. And two, three weeks later I was brought to Minolta headquarters in New York and introduced as the 'agency expert' in photography."

His job was to write ad copy—"What Happens Inside Your Mind Can Happen Inside a Camera" is a Minkkinen original—but the position came with a supply of bodies, lenses and other perks that helped push him toward his more visually creative leanings. "I loved the equipment," he says, in a tone that reveals the feeling hasn't faded. "I fell in love with the gadgetry and the smell of the box when you open it, and so there was just this surge of pictures. All I did that first year was make pictures of pictures I had seen in magazines."

This enthusiastic, perhaps derivative, outpouring motivated Minkkinen to apply to the Rhode Island School of Design for graduate studies in photography. Lacking original work to show to the admittance board, they rejected him. So in 1971, he signed up for a summer workshop, and he went to the Museum of

Dead Horse Point, Utah, 1997

Modern Art to study the photos of the woman who was to be his instructor, Diane Arbus.

Shortly before his workshop began, Arbus killed herself in a Manhattan hotel. "Nothing about me, but you know, it's just that coincidence, kinda like a handshake that never happens?" Minkkinen supposes wistfully.

Still inspired by Arbus, he took his first nude self-portrait that summer. In the image, a dirty mirror lies on a patch of tall grass. Minkkinen stands above, his face obscured by smudge and shadow. His arms hang slack by his sides. "I was attracted to the raw honesty of her images, and in a way it was a metaphor for that," he explains. "Nothing to hide. Here I am. I thought that would be the best way to begin. It was just a hunch that that would be a starting point."

Nearly 40 years later, Minkkinen is still working on what he says, "may well be the longest self-portrait in the history of photography." It's work that has seen him bound and suspended from a ski jump, hanging from the edges of cliffs and submerged in the waters of Fosters Pond behind his home. All while naked. The nude, human form is Minkkinen's leitmotif.

"He's an adventurer and an inventor," describes Newbury Street gallery owner Robert Klein. "He stands apart, in the history of art, as a person making these kinds of pictures."

It's dangerous work, so Minkkinen sticks to shooting his family in safer settings—an image of his wife, Sandra, his arms wrapped around her thighs, his face hidden by her waist; a photo of son Daniel as a baby at Minkkinen's feet, his legs bent from above, like trees giving shade—but normally it's just Minkkinen nude and alone in the wilderness.

"I was pretty shy to ask people to do a thing like that, and so it was more convenient at first," Minkkinen says of his solo adventures. "A couple of years later, I started making pictures where life held in the balance in some sense, and if something went wrong, you could kill yourself. And so I realized I had to photograph myself. There was no way to photograph anybody else.

"I have pictures, where if anyone was to see, they'd say, 'You're crazy, what are you doing?'" Minkkinen adds, sorting through giant prints of lakes and dunes in his home studio, a study in wood and white. "I rehearse in the motel or in the canyon, and then it's just mind over matter and don't look down. It's such a fantastic rush."

The result is work that's both organic and surreal. In one 1996 image shot at Fosters Pond, Minkkinen is buried beneath the snow, his entrance hidden. With pure body heat, his hands have pushed through the surface and stretch out, eager and angled, like spring flowers searching for sun.

They seem familiar in a sense. But there's a mystery to them that severs a direct connection and leaves the mind floating into the ethereal. As novelist and MIT physicist Alan Lightman wrote in *Saga*, a retrospective on Minkkinen's work: "Inhabiting these photographs, we shed earthly limitations. We transcend boundaries between water and sky, liquid and air … All of our prior beliefs about the nature of our bodies and what they can do melt away. That is the real magic of Minkkinen's photographs."

It's a magic created by decades of counterintuitive image-making—moments of solitary masochism. He elongates the suspense of his craft, submerging himself in freezing rivers, or posing in shallow water, keeping his limbs motionless to prevent ripples from breaking the picture as he sees it in his mind—all for a frame he may not look at for weeks. He's done away with Polaroid tests. Rolls of negatives sit like Pandora's boxes in his basement, their secrets to be revealed only when Minkkinen finally chooses to switch on the red light.

"I started making pictures where life held in the balance, and if something went wrong, you could kill yourself."

"In about '84 or '85, I started shooting Polaroid quite regularly, about 10 years of that, then I put it away because I started to miss the excitement of not knowing," he recalls. "And taking the picture and hoping it would work, and facing the disappointment of coming back from Europe with ideas I have sketched in my notebook, and realizing it didn't work. It brought it to a purer process for me. The way it was in the beginning."

There's tempting fate, and then there's waving your naked butt in front of its jaws. Minkkinen's second technical quirk is working in front of his camera, not behind it. In his methodology, he creates a flat visual plane in his viewfinder, and then surveys that frame in three dimensions. With a cable release for the shutter in his hand, he wades in the space before the lens, tethered like a deep-sea diver, until it's time to hold his breath and squeeze. While most craftsmen rely on planning, Minkkinen and his camera merely set the stage, leaving the rest to intuition, chance and hope.

Fosters Pond, Massachusetts, 1996

"I'm just not as smart as reality is," Minkkinen admits in his living room, where a print of his elephantine limbs roaming a wet landscape hangs on the wall behind him. "Reality creates these magical things. The reality of the water, the way it went. The way the branch bent when I was on it. The discovery of things. I'm so limited in my imagination, but the reality, it's a team effort. It's collaboration. I'm part of it, but the camera takes over."

What is created is a curious form of portraiture, like a twisted Johnny Appleseed roaming the countryside with a sack full of Minkkinen limbs. Sprouting from the ground or hanging in the air, flesh and earth intertwine in ways that seem abnormal, but that show the natural link between man and the wild. The bend of an arm and that of a river. The curvature of a stick and of a spine. City life tends to drive a wedge between these worlds, but Minkkinen's work shocks the mind into reestablishing that connection.

"It's finding forms with the human body that say it's part of the same thing," Minkkinen explains. "And ultimately where that leads is to find comfort with death, in my mind. That tree has fallen; it's been around a long, long time. There it is. It's not in the earth yet, but to me that's the religious answer to life. It's the natural cycles. We're a magical creation, however all that happened. And I see the same thing with the tree. That's the cycle of life."

In Minkkinen's basement is an annex filled with magazines from around the world that feature his work. Prints cover the walls. The shelves hold copies of his books, often multiple copies. In his upstairs studio are the brochures for his exhibit on a Celebrity Solstice cruise and at the Cavallo Point Lodge in Sausalito, Calif.

From the beginning, in those first days with his father's Linhof, Minkkinen has seemed just as concerned with permanence as art. "It must have been the environment, and me being in that point in my youthful life, at a panic point perhaps, that what am I going to do?" he recalls. "With an ad, as soon as the price changed or the features changed, nobody was interested anymore. Maybe it won an award, but so what? It didn't have longevity."

Like all of us, Minkkinen wants to be remembered. Wants to know that the ripples he makes will someday bounce back. "Hopefully it's not just a sensory, visual pleasure or delight or experience, but it reverberates into something lasting because of how it makes you feel," he explains.

Stark nudity helps, but the pleasures are also in his outdated methods. No digital cameras, no Photoshop, no double negatives. Just the raw basics he teaches in "History of Photography" as a professor at UMass Lowell. It's a tribute to his work that gallery visitors still walk up to his prints and assume computer manipulation, until they see a date from the 1970s on the detail card.

Then there's the legacy of the puzzles his images leave behind. How did he find that angle or create that shape? Like a magician, he tricks the eye but conceals the secret.

In 1995, a Finnish television crew shot a documentary on Minkkinen's life that included a scene showing how he walks on water. At a preview, the daughter of his Paris agent was seated in the audience and whispered in her mother's ear that she always imagined Minkkinen was standing on a crocodile. "And so I wrote to the director and said you gotta cut that scene," he recalls. "I don't want to kill the crocodile."

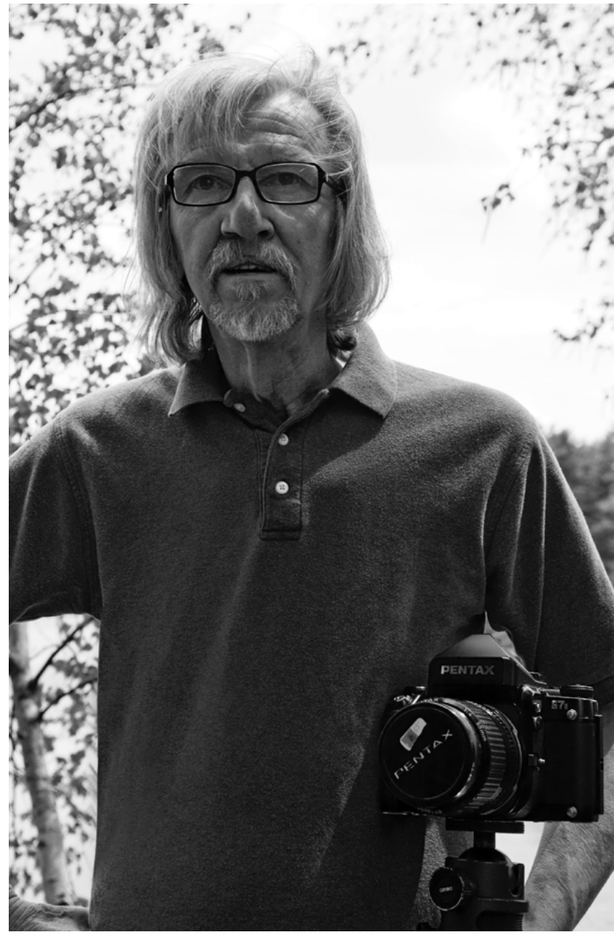
It's a memory close to the surface and a slogan he follows, the impulse embedded in his brain like the product of effective advertising. "I want to create a riddle that lasts, that has no answer," he says. And even in the quiet of his studio, within the woods of Fosters Pond, he's on guard.

"No one has been able to figure this one out," Minkkinen enthuses, pointing to another image of his legs gliding across liquid. "You have to understand how water works. A lot of it has to do with that." He points to an arching big toe, the skin just barely grazing the surface. "It doesn't really, but . . ."

And so the mysteries remain locked, and doubting Thomases around the world are given no clues to consider, just the image of a landscape that couldn't be, but somehow is.

Seeing is believing. To watch the concentration on his face and hear the gears of the camera crank a frame into place. To feel the stillness on Fosters Pond before the rapid beep of the timer and sudden snap of the shutter. The sky is gleaming, the air is warm and the smell of pine and dead leaves rises from the ground. But Minkkinen has created something different. His world is colder but alive with geometry. Burned onto the frame is a puzzle, a feeling and photograph meant to last more than a moment.

"When you look at the negative, it's all there, and that to me is where the legacy is going to be," Minkkinen states, adding, "If photography had been invented 1,000 years ago, it could have been made. If nature stays the same way it is now, and we don't mutate into something else, then that picture could be made 1,000 years from now. And so it has a timelessness." ✖✖✖



Portrait: Katie Noble