



## “You must get close!”

Photographers cannot “act like surgeons who can’t handle the sight of blood,” says Morten Bo, founder of the school of art photography Fata-morgana in Copenhagen. He is a straightforward, out-of-control, warm and humorous person. And he educates young, talented photographers who will work in a business under increasing pressure.

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### Facts about Morten Bo

Born in 1945. As an artist he has worked with photography, writing and film, but he is particularly acknowledged as a photographer. In 1989 he founded the school of art photography Fatamorgana, where he is currently working as principal and as a teacher. In 2014 he received a married award from the Association of Danish Journalists for his contributions to Danish photography.



Usually he sticks out, but for once the 70-year-old Morten Bo matches his surroundings. The green trousers, blue socks and bluish grey hair fit in well with the green colours of the moving truck. Today is relocation day for the photographic art school Fatamorgana. A school founded by Morten Bo in 1989, and he has been teaching there ever since. Amongst the former students are renowned photographers Lærke Posselt, Martin Lehmann and Jacob Aue Sobol just to mention a few.

On a warm Tuesday in June, the photographer Sarah and I have been given the opportunity to follow him around. We are packing the moving truck to the brink, and the remover Hardy asks, if the photographs are sturdy enough to be packed like that. "Are you insured?" Morten Bo asks playfully and insures Hardy that "nothing's going to happen." The square in front of the building is overflowing with posters, old photographs, cleaning detergents and baking paper. And a bottle of rum. Instead of a beer to help us move, we get a shot. The building gets locked for the last time, before we roll away from Amager and head off to the new facilities in Nordvest.

### The photographer who became a teacher

Nice and easy we carry Morten Bo's exhibition from 1990, 'Røde Missiler' into his yellow, idyllic half-timbered house on Frederiksberg. The reason for our short stop is due to the school not having room for storage.

The works vary in size, some are massive and others are easy to carry. The motive is mostly people portrayed in strange, distorted colours. Morten Bo tore the negatives apart and ruined the emulsion, and the result is somewhere between

works of art and photography. Now the pictures are trapped against the wall in his gloomy, knick-knack filled living room.

He has made photo books, children's books, countless exhibitions and worked as a photo journalist. In the 1960s he was a member of Delta Photo and in the 1980s he participated in starting Ragnarok, two trendsetting Danish photo groups. In 1989 he founded Fatamorgana. And in 1992 he gave up photography.

Morten Bo realised that running a school alongside with being a self-employed artist was a bad match. He then made the decision of dedicating himself 100 percent to life as a teacher. And he doesn't miss taking photos:

"I create plenty of photos. I have 30 assistants running around doing everything you have to be able to do when you're young. Then I get to sit back and give advice to my co-workers. No, I don't bloody miss taking photos."

Furthermore it is without sadness that Morten Bo says goodbye to Fatamorgana's old facilities. Now it's time for the facilities at Bispebjerg in Nordvest to be inaugurated. At the same time he has decided that all routines, methods and traditions have to remain on Amager. He wants a revival of the pioneering spirits that marked the start up of the school in '89:

"When you get older, you lean more and more towards what you have done, and what you know. And all your students start to look alike. I know my weaknesses, and I have to be aware of them."



#### Facts about Fatamorgana

A school of art photography located in Copenhagen. To apply, you must submit a photograph or video material representing your personal work. Qualified applicants are accepted in either the spring or the autumn semester. The education is not part of the Danish student grant system, and one course costs approximately 27.500 DKK. The school is internationally renowned and serves as a platform for admission into The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, The Danish School of Media and Journalism etc. For more information, go to [www.fata.dk](http://www.fata.dk)

#### The vision of imagery

Morten Bo divides people into two groups. Those who understand the little black ones, letters in the alphabet that is. And those who possess the vision of imagery, thereby having the ability to understand and interpret an area.

"When children are born, the doctor picks them up and sticks a finger into each of their palms, and then the intention is for the child to say 'snap', Morten Bo says."

In the same sense, the vision of imagery is instinct based. Morten Bo believes that all of us thereby have the potential to become artists, and if we were allowed, the world would be full of Leonardo Da Vincis. But something is in our way.

"The thing is, when you're told ten times every single day: 'My goodness, you're a big one'. Well, then your only ambition is to get bigger. Then you end with a title and say: 'Now I'm a big one, mum and dad, aren't I?' But what happened to the vision of imagery? It was ruined by the alphabet, it was never kept, you forgot about it. It wasn't respected," Morten Bo says.

His greatest task is to find the inner child in all of his students. He sends them out into the playground to lure the vision of imagery out of them.

#### The professional pride

He speaks as if he was following a narrative structure. His tone rises and falls, he gesticulates. His face turns into a variety of grimaces. At times it almost feels like there is a 'point of no return'. At other times the room is filled with reflective silence.

The decibel level rises once the conversation turns to the professional pride, he is attempting to pass on to his students. It has always been important to Morten Bo, and it's something he has learned to prioritise as a member of the photo groups Delta Photo and Ragnarok:

"It gave me everything, it gave me a work ethic. We wanted to be in charge ourselves. We had our own price lists and we wanted to create our photos ourselves. We are not photojournalists, we are documentarists, we are reporting photographers. That's the tradition I grew up in, and it's a part of who I am."

Today that battle is a greater struggle, according to Morten Bo. The big newspapers do not give priority to photography. This year only four of the usual eight internships were offered to the students of photojournalism at The Danish School of Media and Journalism in Aarhus.

According to Morten Bo, the pressure has turned the photojournalists into pushovers. The professional pride within the business is slowly shrinking, and the photojournalists are putting up with too much. For example they let journalists write the caption. He talks about a photo of a little boy taken at a concert. Below was an explanatory text saying something like: 'The music was so loud that he had to cover his ears':

"People are told why he is covering his ears. As if they can't read the photo. That's just stupid. The poetry is lost."



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But nonetheless, there are still talented photographers:

"The last one I gave credit was Joachim Adrian at Politiken. He had portrayed the danish artist Per Kirkeby in the Sunday edition. Now, I know Per and those photographs. They were spot on. Just right. To photograph a person standing with dignity at the abyss of life, to photograph him in a wheelchair with respect to the fact that he is someone, that's extremely difficult. Joachim Adrian managed to do that. So, do we have any talented photographers? Yes, we do. They are those who say: 'I have a talent, I have professional pride, I know what's right, and I'm fighting for it,'" Morten Bo says.

#### **The bloody academic requirements**

In the new facilities there is a sofa turned upside down. The entire bottom is ragged, and the springs point in every direction.

"It's like that with some things. They're not meant to be turned upside down. Then all the ailments appear," Morten Bo says.

And there are loads of ailments. Apart from the vague professional pride, he is very upset with the academic turn in creative education. The academic truth can be measured, but in art there are several truths that can coexist, he explains:

"The art world has more to do with the world of love. One can easily say, 'Oh, I love you, I want to kill you.' or 'Stop hitting me, oh, I love when you're hitting me.' The people I love the most in this world, are the ones I hate the most."

One attempts to measure art. To be accepted as a student of photojournalism, you have to pass a comma-test. When you're studying Fine Art Photography, you have to write reports. You have to be able to write, before you're allowed to be creative. Fatamorgana goes against all of that. He points towards Sarah's camera:

"What's the truth about me? Is it found in one of your 130 photos? Is the fact that I have a spot on my nose, the truth about me? Or is the truth, what I articulate on my own? That I'm a grumpy egoist at age 70. The photo doesn't lie, but it is always the result of a choice. You choose something instead of something else."

It turns quiet. Morten Bo is smiling from ear to ear.

"We are touching on many different subjects but they are a part of a whole. Is it fun to teach? Hell yes, I can tell the students whatever I want."

#### **A palm tree in Nordvest**

The photographer Sarah carefully asks, whether Morten Bo minds her taking photos of him. The nervous inquiry is immediately acceded to.

"You have to take photos! I can't be bothered with polite inquiries. You MUST get close."

Now she is snapping away, and he doesn't mind at all, even though he sits there with a camera right in his face. Morten Bo is a straightforward person. Serious. Out-of-control. And with a sense of humour.



The apple of his eye, Fatamorgana is supposed to be a creative sandbox. All of his Fata-children must be influenced, nurtured and told off, and at some point, they are pushed over the edge. Some students perceive him as a toughie - but it's for their own good.

The students have to be industrious and open-minded. They have to be prepared for the course to get personal. The photography and the photographer are one, and when they talk about a photograph, they also talk about the one who shot it. For some people it is too much. And according to Morten Bo, that is the way it is because it is pointless for them to "act like a bunch of surgeons who can't handle the sight of blood."

"We are very serious, everything is extremely important. At the same time everything is just for the sake of fun. All the time there's an interaction. I can sit down with a student and threaten him with the most horrific things, if the person doesn't agree. But at the same time, we both know that it's just for fun. I'm just a teacher. I'm pretending to be angry. I'm pretending to be an egoist. I'm pretending to be a dictator. I'm pretending the whole thing. But I'm serious," he says.

In the centre of the new facilities there is a glorious palm tree. Brought in from Slagelse, because that's the only place in the country that sells palm trees that size. You can sit on the boxes beside it, as if in a small oasis in the middle of the snowy white and abundantly lit room.

"There's a palm tree there. That's bloody serious. But at the same time, it's a joke. My old travelling exhibition from 1976 is in those boxes. I don't know where to deposit them, so I have made a hill to sit on. It is a playground. The largest form of seriousness is combined with the largest form of fun and play."

Morten Bo looks after himself. That doesn't mean that he doesn't enjoy life, for instance he has got a tiny winery in his living room. At the end of the day, he sends us away with a bottle of wine and a warm hug. He's the type of person who sticks in every direction. But there's one thing in particular that keeps the whole thing in order:

"Fatamorgana has given me everything. Meaning. Does life have a meaning? Absolutely: assistants, students, colleagues, personal development, realisation. I get it here. But it is also my life. It's all I have."