

JOUKO LEHTOLA / Statement

However diverse Jouko Lehtola's themes may be, collected together they resemble many arms, which are all connected to the same body moving in the same direction, just in different ways. Lehtola's photographs defined the Finnish urban youth culture of the 1990's. He also raised the issues of domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and our social taboos towards sexual deviations that exist on the fringes of our society. His images walk the talk in the same way as Larry Clark's works did in the 1970's. He is not pushing an agenda, but riding with the tide of his times – each moment is its own universe.

Finland in the early 1990's was a country in a crisis on every level. The economic bubble, which had fuelled the IT and real estate markets, had burst, unemployment was in the double digits and there was a total lack of faith in the system. Young people didn't think about the future they thought about the now. A wall fell in Berlin but a generation of youth was lost there. The adolescents of Helsinki had not much to do, nowhere to go and too much time to think about it. This was a period where you drank to get drunk, sex was sport and a good fight was a measure for the evening spent. Hopeless in one sense, yet the situation bristled with a reckless sort of energy that can't be kept, only spent.

Jouko Lehtola lived this world making it his raw material for his most noted work "Young Heroes". He was always the first one there, the last one to leave – he was everywhere. These photographs resonate with a detached melancholic air to them, much like the Bruce Davidson's "Brooklyn Gang" series from 1959. Both photographers were older than their subjects lending them a position of authority. Lehtola in particular was an already established Rock 'n' Roll documentarist, which afforded him the opportunity to move within the framework of any given situation, without the fear of reprisal. He captured on film the being of nothingness. One can feel the influence of Robert Frank, Diane Arbus and William Klein; what they all share is an atmosphere of presence. Lehtola's strength is in how he balances the innocence and dignity of his subjects as they become aware of the brutality of their own awakening.

Timothy Persons