Outside Looking In

Lars Nickel is a Berlin-based photographer who also works as a window cleaner. For his latest series, Nickel stepped over to the other side of the glass to take portraits of the people whose windows he washes. Beginning May 15, his photos will be on display at NYU Deutsches Haus in the exhibition Beietage. Below, Nickel reflects on his double life.

"It's pleasant work. You can see what you've accomplished, and—even better—windows get dirty again all by themselves, so there is always work. Sometimes I think: If I'm lucky, in 20 years I'll still be doing this.

When clients called, I used to be uncertain—do they want the window cleaner or the photographer? But now I'm better at combining them: I clean windows and take photos. People understand that it's hard to make a living as an artist, especially if you have a large family.

Once I was cleaning windows that hadn't been touched for 15 years. The panes were so so evenly covered with dust they looked like frosted glass. Wonderfully muted light for portraits. After two hours you could see through them again.

I've seen about 300 apartments now—a photographer's dream! That quickly led to the idea of taking photographs in these homes. I knew I wouldn't have a chance like this so soon again, so I just asked my clients. I'm sure some were a bit surprised that the window cleaner also takes pictures, but few ever told me they thought it was strange.

I use a 35-year-old medium-format film camera. Because I only use available light, a tripod is necessary; that's what gives the photos their stillness. It took five years from the first test photos to the final portraits. During that time Fuji stopped making the kind of film I was using. Thanks to eBay, I was able to order more in the United States. Once that's used up, it will probably be time for a new photo series."

—Translated by Gretchen Wiesehan