

# BELETAGE

Ansichten eines Fensterputzers

Lars Nickel



## Reflections of a window cleaner

When I'm walking in the city, I see many things with the eye of a window cleaner. A recently renovated building: probably needs general cleaning. Weather-beaten windows: should be washed sometime. Mullioned windows: couldn't someone else do them? The glass expanses of Berlin's central train station: oh God, no!

My specialty is private households, from Prenzlauer Berg to Wannsee, from one end of the city to the other. In small apartments, tastefully furnished late 19th-century flats, hip townhouses and a few villas, I wash classic double casement windows, fashionable meter-long window walls, leaded windows, windows of small indoor swimming pools and all kinds of mirrors.

On 2 November 2009, the Berlin chamber of trades entered my name under Enterprise No. 105995 as building cleaner and photographer. My clients are nice; you don't have to go knocking on doors like a photographer. They are usually pleased when I remind them their windows need cleaning. 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. When I arrive, they ask me how I'm doing and wait to hear the answer. There is often coffee, sometimes cake, and if you're really lucky, lunch. Many interesting conversations that have sometimes developed into friendships. One client gave me Christmas tree balls and a Persian rug. Once I had to turn down a client's spontaneous invitation to the opera -- I didn't want to go in my work clothes. But the best gift by far was the sentence, uttered without irony at the end of a job: "You really know how to please a woman!" Sometimes I think: If I'm lucky, in twenty years I'll still be doing this. Not a bad thought.

My father and two of my uncles were also building cleaners in Berlin, so it must be in the blood. You can't choose your genes. A great-uncle of mine owned a photography studio in Bornholmer Street; everything comes together.

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 fifteen years. The panes were so evenly covered with dust they looked like frosted glass. Wonderfully muted light for portraits. After two hours, you could see through them again, you could see across the street, and in the evening you had to draw the curtains. Only once, early on, did I have to turn down a client, because I didn't think the petite lady of the house had her large attack dogs entirely under control. I could see myself cowering at the top of my ladder while the dogs growled and bared their fangs below. But the work usually doesn't have many spectacular moments, apart from the idiosyncrasies of modern architecture or the hunt for a parking space in Mitte or Prenzlauer Berg. I've seen about three hundred 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. And what do you know: Most of them were willing to have me take their portraits in their homes. 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 thirty-year-old medium-format film camera. Because I only use available light, a tripod is necessary; that's what gives the photos their stillness. Sometimes we had to wait for the sun to come out, and the shooting took two hours instead of one. The subjects choose where to stand, I direct a bit and then set up the composition on the focusing screen. Focus and don't move. I count to three and take the picture. Click! I usually shoot two to ten exposures. The subjects may smile or look serious. I don't allow slippers -- too mundane. I recommend posing in street shoes or barefoot.

The unusual thing about this camera is that it often fails to shoot the first time. No click! But I tell my clients (and remind myself) in advance, and it makes things more relaxed when you can laugh because the camera didn't work again.

It took five years from the first test photos to the final portraits in 2014. During that time, Fuji stopped making the kind of film I was using. Thanks to eBay, I was able to order more in the U.S. Once that's used up, it will probably be time for a new photo series. But I hope to take many more interesting portraits before then.

*Lars Nickel*

## **Hansgert Lambers**

### **Beletage: At home with doctors and lawyers**

*Portraits of the celebrities of the world abound, as do impressive depictions of workers, truckers and hoboes; one need only think of Richard Avedon, who photographed members of both groups to great effect. But there is little photographic record of people in the middle of society. Of course they appear in projects intended to provide an overview of a particular era, such as Christian Borchert's family portraits, which attempted to show a complete cross-section of the population and ended up revealing a surprising similarity among the different social strata of the German Democratic Republic, at least in their appearance. What is also noticeable about Borchert's group portraits is that the living environment played a role rarely seen up to that point.*

*And now Lars Nickel has presented his photos of the "upper-middle class," in which the interiors are also significant. Photographs capturing the domestic surroundings of the portrait subject are not entirely new; see Tina Barney (*The Europeans*) or Dayanita Singh (*Privacy*). But both of these works focus on members of the "upper ten thousand," as the saying goes. I would go so far as to say that Lars Nickel offers something that has never been seen before.*

*He discovered his subject for a reason not entirely unfamiliar to photographers: the need to earn a living. He didn't drive a cab, but instead took up the same career as his father: washing windows. This put him in touch with that segment of the population I have indirectly referred to and for which he has found the elegant shorthand *Beletage*. In the olden days, doctors, lawyers and senior civil servants lived in spacious rooms on the first floor above ground level, the *bel étage*, a living situation considered especially desirable. Here Lars Nickel the window cleaner was welcomed as the provider of a needed service at regular intervals. Friendly and outgoing, he was able to win his clients' trust and bring his other occupation into play, that of photographer. Many of his clients were happy to have him take their portrait within their own four walls. I have seldom seen portrait subjects who look as friendly as in Lars Nickel's photos; thanks to him, there is a hint of a smile on so many of their faces.*

*All of the portrait subjects appear relaxed and at ease, which does him particular credit. It certainly also has to do with the fact that they are portrayed in familiar surroundings. One occasionally has the sense of looking at a chamber theater where the players have entered the stage, and sometimes a clever stage manager seems to have been at work, positioning the retail manager next to a gleaming refrigerator, for example, or the office worker next to a throne-like chair. Of the many pictures on the walls, two are completely white, and one frame is empty. Sometimes the person, occupation and furnishings seem inexplicably mismatched; one is tempted to ring up and ask why. This is slow photography, not only because of the medium-format camera and the tripod. The faces and postures convey a stillness that calls for deliberate and careful observation.*

*As with all good portraits, we as viewers feel no sense of having intruded on the subjects' privacy; thanks to the photographer's artistry, we too feel like guests who are welcome to look around. One of those portrayed, a midwife, says: "My apartment, c'est moi." At the end of the book are brief texts that the subjects felt added to their portraits.*

*The book also contains still photos absent of people. They demonstrate that, although the interiors were not the main focus, they were still a significant element. They also serve as welcome pauses in the flow of portraits.*

*About 50 years ago, Sara Haffner painted a picture of a bookcase that could have been mine: Many of the same books were on my shelves, and I felt as if I'd been found out. How many will discover in the pages of Beletage their own Ikea bookcases, their tubular steel chairs, their designer light fixtures? This is another way to interpret Lars Nickel's photographs: as portraits of our own inner lives and those of our friends, parents and siblings.*

*Lars Nickel did little arranging. But one thing he insisted on was no slippers, so many of his subjects are barefoot -- how delightful!*

*Berlin, October 2014*

## **M. Flügge**

### **BELETAGE Berlin – Reflections of a window washer**

*Lars Nickel is a photographer and media designer. He studied with Arno Fischer, one of the best photographers and possibly the best teacher in Germany for many years. Lars Nickel also washes windows for a living, which means he can turn down any assignments that don't suit him. He washes windows in Berlin for people who can afford (or who have no choice but) to pay for clean glass and clarity of vision. Along with pictures taken on his extensive travels, the photographer Lars Nickel has always devoted his attention to portraits. His interest in people in the spaces that are both a reflection of and frame for their personalities is apparent in every picture he takes.*

*So it was only logical for Lars Nickel the photographer to start accompanying Lars Nickel the window washer and asking his customers – clients? – whether they would agree to being photographed in their homes. Many have, and you can see from the photos that they were pleased to do so.*

*Having a portrait made always requires trust. One lets one's guard down and wants to know what the artist will do with what has been revealed. Being photographed in one's own home is something very private – at least in Germany, where the home is still a haven, protected by law.*

*Over the years, Lars Nickel has compiled a series of pictures that say a great deal about the private lives of ordinary people. In sociological terms, they represent the middle class, most of them people earning a regular income, taxpayers.*

*But Lars Nickel is not interested in an inventory, much less an analysis, of social class. He doesn't choose his subjects; they hire a window washer and get a photographer into the bargain. That is what makes these photographs seem so wonderfully normal and down to earth. They are not driven by any voyeuristic, critical or narrative desires. They simply show who and what is behind the front door. Pictures, furniture, carpets, decorative objects – of course all these things say something about the people who live among them, but there is no attempt to promote a particular agenda, just ordinary curiosity about one's neighbors.*

*But the photographs' apparent matter-of-factness does not just happen by itself. Precisely the appearance of simplicity requires long experience and great technical skill. Light, distance, linearity – all aspects of the photographer's craft. And above all: the eye contact between photographer and photographed, the trust that neither will do anything to harm the other. This can certainly be interpreted as a rejection of the current celebration of "baring it all". In any case, I am not aware of any other contemporary portrait photography project like this one.*



**Journalist, 43; journalist, 42, Friedenau**  
 We had our photo taken in front of our kitchen wall with the motto from our wedding in large red letters: "Stets dem Leben zu" (always open to life). It's from a Blumfeld song that we loved when we met. The funny thing is that our kitchen is almost never as quiet and empty as it is in the photo. Our four children were at school or day care when the picture was taken. When everyone is home in the afternoon and evening, it's sometimes so loud at dinner that you can hardly hear yourself think. There's always a lot going on — always open to life. But, to be honest: At our wedding we never dreamed there would be this much life gathered around our kitchen table.



**Self-employed music agent, 34; child, 6 months, Mitte**  
 We've lived in this apartment for about three years. We really like living in a new building, because when we lived in an old building on Schönhauser Allee, the apartment was impossible to heat and the rain came in through the ceiling at least once a year, even though we weren't on the top floor. When we moved in here, we had no furniture of our own except for the IKEA table and my bed; our families brought over their old furniture. I didn't like that at first, but now I'm very happy in our patchwork palace.



**Adman, 30; schoolchild, 7, Prenzlauer Berg**  
 This apartment on Schönhauser Allee is our patchwork family home no. 1. As nice as it is, we will soon be moving to a brand-new home, one with a garden instead of a late-night convenience store next door.



**Physician, 44; schoolchild, 12, Prenzlauer Berg**  
 A different kind of rear building, ground-floor apartment: not cold or dark, but lots of light, large windows and garden outside. And enough room for everyone and — especially important — a place for everyone: room to live.



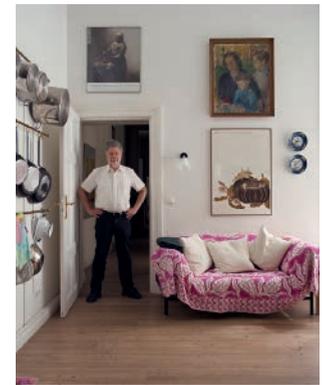
**Engineer, 79 years, Moabit**  
 Since early childhood I have been passionate about sailing boats. This is my private maritime altar: The two larger oil paintings are some hundred years old; they have been with me all my life. First they were in my grandparents' home, later at my parents' place. One shows the imperial yacht "Meteor", the other one my grandfather's sailing boat.



**Architect, 67 years; musician, 67 years, Friedenau**  
 I have lived in this apartment for almost 40 years, since 1975. First we lived here as a couple, then I stayed on my own for a while. Later I started a flat share, until finally I met Jorge. He moved in, the others moved out. We married. Antonia was born. After college, Antonia found herself her own flat. As for Jorge and me, the two of us are still here.



**Communications consultant, 48 years; historian, 45 years; children 16, 11, 6 years, Lichterfelde-West**  
 Three years can feel like an eternity. Between the photo and today there have been college exams, a house move, a serious illness, a new career, innumerable encounters, great worries and even greater hopes. A life lived to the full. We are carrying on, bearing one another's burdens, no matter where we live.



**Journalist, 70, Prenzlauer Berg**  
 The painting is of my mother, me and my little brother. It was painted by my grandmother around 1950. She showed her work together with her friend Asta Nielsen, the film star and painter. The painting shows me when I was seven years old. The summer sun is shining through the living room curtains; Mother is reading a women's magazine. Sadly, my mother has passed away; she lived to the age of 96. When she died, my brother and I were together at her side, just as we were in the painting more than 60 years ago. I hope my grandmother was there too, somewhere.



**Teacher, 55, Charlottenburg**

I teach Latin and am standing in front of my “altar” with Greek and Roman (and Buddhist, for the sake of completeness) gods on an old ceramic stove. We got this apartment in exchange for an ugly, modern one-room apartment.



**Physician, 63; physician, 59, Schöneberg**

The first time we saw this apartment in 1984, we were enthusiastic and horrified — enthusiastic about the large, high-ceilinged rooms, the floor plan, the location. Horrified at its condition — nothing had been renovated in 25 years. Everything had to be updated. We accepted the risk. It took a long time, and it’s finally finished. It has become our home. Our children grew up here and have since moved out, but it is still their nest. And we love the spacious 230 square meters, the light-filled rooms, the view out over Schöneberg and evenings on the balcony.



**Writer, 45; writer, 41, Charlottenburg**

We found out about this apartment from a handwritten note in a shop. It was the first one we looked at. The property manager didn’t have time to show it, so she just gave us the keys. After two minutes in the empty living room we knew: this is the one! We had to do a lot of renovating, but we didn’t mind. This apartment gives us room to breathe. And it has its faults, just like us. Do you know of a reliable cleaning lady?



**Physician, 61; manager, 71, Friedenau**

We left Hamburg for Berlin! At our age, we wanted to be in the center of things, with everything just around the corner (“the Kudamm out front and the Wannsee in back”) — and so we landed in our lovely Berlin neighborhood, with its leafy front gardens, inviting portals and literary heritage. We quickly felt at home here. It was actually my third try that finally worked out. We look forward to our Berlin retirement!



**Singer, 55, Friedenau**

My flat is my haven. Here, everything fits together: past and future. I sat at this round table when I was a child, my father sat at this same table when he was a child, and other children will sit here too someday. I wish the carpenter who built the table knew that. A place to live and wonder, my magic nest. A peaceful place in a peaceful neighborhood.



**Board member, 49, Wilmersdorf**

When my boyfriend and I moved in together, we both agreed on this chandelier more than on any of the other furnishings we picked out. After it was finally freed from all the packing material and hung, it took us another six hours to attach the more than 1,500 crystals. That was a wonderful day we spent together. It still makes me happy every time I look at it. And what do you think of it?



**Translator, 52, Friedenau**

I’m an American and have lived in Germany for nearly 20 years. When I first came, I had a temporary position; I didn’t know how long I would be staying and hesitated to make major purchases. This bed for example was a free hand-me-down. In 2002, I got a job in Berlin, and in 2004 I bought this apartment — the biggest purchase of my life! So I’ll probably stay here a while.



**Teacher, 46; carpenter, 49; children, 4 and 7, Friedenau**

My great-grandfather bought the building our apartment is in. I’ve lived here for more than 20 years: alone, with roommates, with my boyfriend and now with my family. It’s starting to feel a bit too small, but we love our new eat-in kitchen with its balcony, and our relatives on the third floor.



**Cosmetician, 59, Wilmersdorf**

My Heimat is wherever I have a key to an apartment, and sometimes I miss lost communities, familiar surroundings, places, events and people, like the Munich Oktoberfest, that I went to for many years, every year in a different dirndl — I have 15 of them. The Oktoberfest is a tradition, and traditions are like glue. And I embrace Berlin: this city nurtures our uniqueness and creativity, and that is a personal matter. It allows us to be emotional, intense and entirely alive.



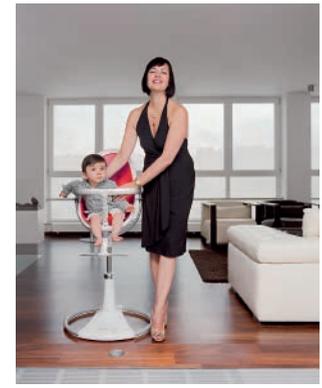
**Midwife, 49, Prenzlauer Berg**

My apartment, c'est moi! I've lived here for more than 20 years. During the first six months, we remodeled everything. It was a fixer-upper. When this was still East Germany, the ceilings were lowered to save on heating costs. The wall decoration was designed by a restoration expert, a repeat client. When I delivered her third baby, I asked if she would do the work. Do I look severe again?



**Self-employed financial controller, 44, Mitte**

I moved to the Scheunenviertel quarter in 2005, which wasn't typical for someone born and raised in West Berlin. I wanted to be right in the thick of the action in the heart of Berlin. I was also fascinated by the aesthetics and perfection of this apartment that was designed by an international architectural firm.



**Real estate agent, 44; son, eight months, Mitte**

... The view is fabulous: to the north, a landscape like Tuscany, with gently rolling hills (Humboldthain); to the south, it's like looking out over the rooftops of Florence, with church domes; in the evening, countless flickering lights reflect the energy of the city. Warm summer nights on the roof terrace, relaxing in the pool and gazing at the stars. New Year's Eve: beats, furs, champagne, loud and bright, the sky so light ... Our spaceship zooms us right to our living room, where my son has his space station; he reports to Mr. Spock ... What, you don't believe me?



**Multimedia artist (organic media art), 39, Prenzlauer Berg**

There I am in front of the kitchen, of all places — and in my little cherry-print skirt! It was too hot that day ... The kitchen is absolutely not my territory! But the cook no longer lives here, I now know how to use the pressure cooker, and there are lots of restaurants nearby, fortunately.

I love our living situation, although this area has been cleaned up a bit too much for my taste. But what do they say about people in glass houses? I'm from southern Germany, do something with media, have a child and own an apartment in Prenzlauer Berg — I certainly fit the stereotype that Berliners love to hate.

The painting is by my favorite Berlin painter, Mateo; under it is a chief's chair from Cameroon that we had at home when I was a child. The woodworm in it that used to make such funny snapping sounds must have died of old age a few years ago.



**Press and public relations officer, 48; historian, 48; drummer in training, 8, Friedenau**

Our ideal habitat was always an apartment where you can move without running into anything. We love the wide open space in this apartment. The three of us just haven't been able to agree on the lighting.



**Pianist, 42; orchestra musician, 35; children 2, 6, 12, 10, 8, Mitte**

We are a rather large family, but our apartment shouldn't mind — we've been told that a family with seven children once lived here. This place must have witnessed all kinds of things in the past hundred years, and even more beyond the windows cleaned by the photographer, where Berlin's oldest Jewish cemetery lies (with the grave of Moses Mendelssohn); through the open balcony doors you can hear the bells of the 200-year-old St. Sophia's church. We enjoy the good fortune of having a full life — filled with a rich present and a rich past.



**Translator, 44, Weissensee**

When I moved here 14 years ago, this was the first apartment I shared with a man. The man has since moved out, our two cats stayed, and I have cleared out the three large rooms. So much space — what a luxury! And two balconies, where you sit among the treetops. For a long time I didn't feel at home here on the outskirts of the city, as taxi drivers describe it. But I've grown to love the garden, which I look after with a neighbor, where birds nest and cats and foxes come and go. The craftsmen's workshops from around 1900, the legendary Jewish cemetery and the new ice cream shop make our neighborhood worth exploring. And it's only fifteen minutes by bike to my beloved. So for now, instead of thinking about moving, I'm fixing up the apartment.