

# **Julia Hetta – Crafting Emotive, Painterly Worlds Through Photography**



-Julia Hetta - Photo: Bjorn Weidinger

Julia Hetta is a Swedish fashion and art photographer celebrated for her serene, painterly compositions and her ability to evoke emotion through imagery. From her early days experimenting in her father's darkroom, alongside drawing and painting, to photographing her younger brother, Hennes Hetta, her journey has been shaped by a deep reverence for light, mood, and the poetic possibilities of photographic storytelling.



Julia Hetta, *Hedvig Palm*, Acne Paper, 2011

## From Darkroom Beginnings to a Dream in Photography

Hetta's fascination with photography began in childhood, nurtured by a creative environment at home. *"My father had a darkroom in the basement, and I thought it was such a magical way of creating pictures,"* she recalls. As a teenager she started printing her own photos in that darkroom, captivated by how the camera could **capture reality and transform it into something else**. This hands-on introduction instilled in her a sense of wonder: *"From the very first moment I tried photography, I just wanted to continue exploring it further,"* says Hetta. Though she dabbled in drawing and painting (and even dreamed of being a dancer or horse rider when very young), photography quickly became her primary passion. *"I was so amazed by it and wanted to do something creative. It was just a dream way of living – working with a camera and making images,"* she explains of her early ambitions.



Julia Hetta, *Young Was the Day*  
Stockholm New, 2012



Julia Hetta

*Anna Cleveland*

*Of Fish and Flowers*

AnOther Magazine, 2016

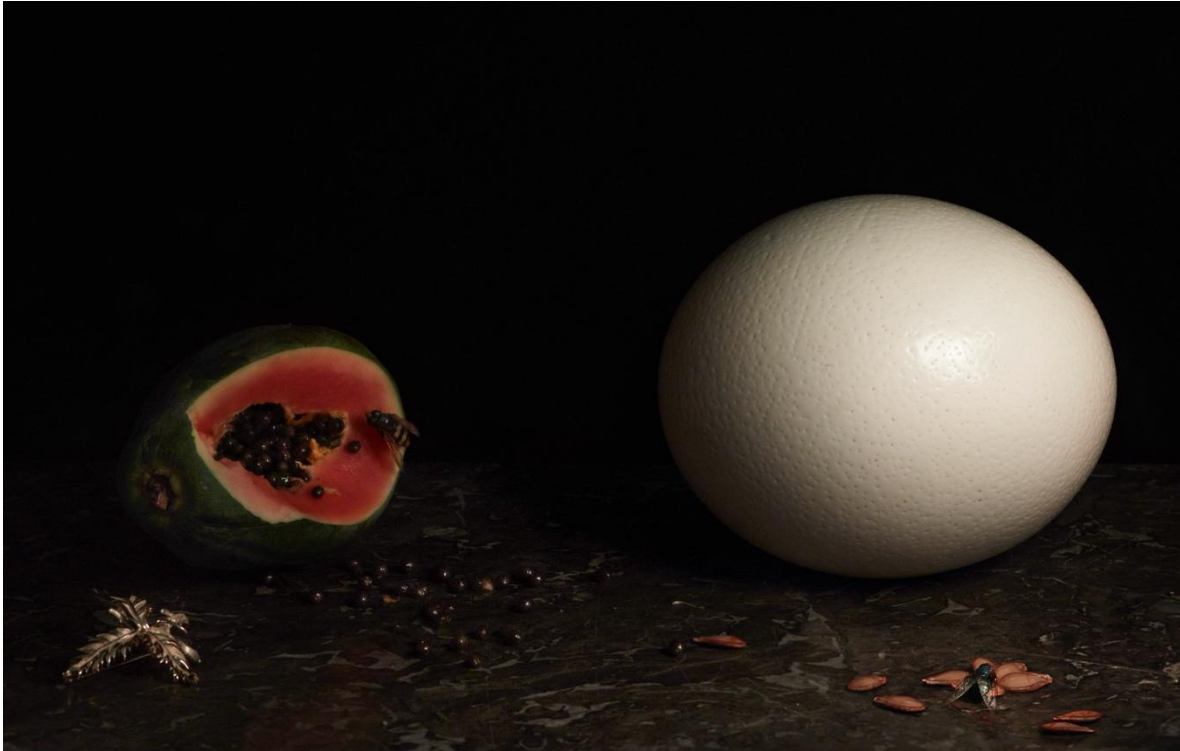


Julia Hetta

*Light*

SSAW Magazine, 2012

Determined to turn that dream into a career, Hetta pursued formal education in the medium. She studied photography in **Stockholm and Paris**, and ultimately graduated from the renowned Gerrit Rietveld Art Academy in Amsterdam . *“I liked studying to get more knowledge of the history of photography,”* she notes, *“and I was never so interested in the technical aspects – more the stories and studying different photographers.”* This art-historical perspective, combined with training in painting, informed her distinctive style. (In fact, Hetta cites photographer **Francesca Woodman** as an early inspiration, known for her poetic, introspective imagery.) By analyzing the work of others and **practicing classical art fundamentals** – light, shadow, composition – Hetta honed an approach deeply rooted in visual storytelling rather than gadgetry. It’s a sensibility that would set her apart in the fashion photography world.



Julia Hetta

*Datum*

M Le Monde, 2013

## Developing a Signature Style: Light and Mystery

From the outset, Julia Hetta's photographs have been recognized for their "quiet yet powerful" atmosphere — an intensity that does not announce itself loudly, but lingers. Central to this signature is her nuanced use of natural light, shaped by a deep fascination with shadow and tonal contrast.

"I realized early on that light — the tension between darkness and light — was really important to me," she says.



Julia Hetta

*Valerija Kelava, Surreal*

Double Magazine, 2013

Critics have frequently noted how Hetta channels the compositional restraint and chiaroscuro sensibility of Old Master paintings. Rather than imitating historical aesthetics, she translates them — allowing classical light to breathe within contemporary photography. The result is a softness that feels timeless, imbued with a distinctly Nordic melancholia. Her interiors and portraits recall the contemplative stillness of Vilhelm Hammershøi, where light becomes both presence and absence.

Hetta traces this sensitivity back to her early art education. “I was taught the importance of looking at light and shadows — how light can sculpt,” she explains. In her work, illumination is never merely functional; it is structural. Light shapes emotion, not just form.



Julia Hetta

*Love Is Different*

Re-Edition Magazine, 2015

Yet atmosphere alone does not define her voice. Equally essential is the emotional ambiguity she cultivates. Rather than presenting fashion with descriptive precision, Hetta constructs images that suggest narrative tension.



Julia Hetta

*Cate Blanchett*

So It Goes Magazine, 2017

In one portrait collaboration with Cate Blanchett, the composition was spare — a woman positioned beside a wall and table, hands gently intertwined. The setting was minimal, but the emotional charge was not. Through subtle gesture and carefully controlled chiaroscuro, the portrait implied a story beyond the frame.

“It’s just very small ingredients,” Hetta says, “but I hope people start to wonder what’s happening.”



Julia Hetta

*Love Is Different*

Re-Edition Magazine, 2015

The placement of hands — inspired by classical painted portraiture — carries unspoken feeling. This restraint is deliberate. “It doesn’t matter so much to show every detail; the essential thing is the feeling you get.”

She often compares her process to writing poetry or composing music: suggestion over explanation, resonance over clarity. Even within fashion editorials, where garments are expected to be seen, she privileges atmosphere. “The emotions are what’s important.”



Julia Hetta

*Cushion Volume Down Constrict*

AnOther Magazine, 2015



Julia Hetta  
*Of Fish and Flowers*  
AnOther Magazine, 2016



Julia Hetta  
*The Cool Breeze Twisted and Crooked, Then Came Here*  
Pleasure Garden, 2019

Many of Hetta's images possess a dreamlike, melancholic quality. Figures may blur in motion or dissolve into shadow, allowing space for the viewer's imagination. "You recreate reality," she explains, "but take objects, a room, or a landscape and make it into something else."

This philosophy distinguishes her within contemporary fashion photography. Instead of glossy perfection, she offers stillness and narrative possibility. The clarity of her vision was evident from the beginning. "From the start, my style was quite clear," she notes.

Her younger brother, stylist Hannes Hetta, recognized that clarity early on and played a pivotal role in situating her aesthetic within the fashion industry. Together, they established a visual language defined by mysterious light, emotional restraint, and quiet intensity — a space where fashion becomes less about display and more about atmosphere.



Julia Hetta

*The Cool Breeze Twisted and Crooked, Then Came Here*

Pleasure Garden, 2019



Julia Hetta

*Lust at Large*

Carcy Magazine, 2020

## Breakthrough with Acne Paper and Global Recognition

Julia Hetta's breakout moment came through the pages of the revered art-fashion journal **Acne Paper**. In the late 2000s, she was commissioned by Acne Paper's editor Thomas Persson and stylist Mattias Karlsson (a friend of Hannes) to shoot an editorial series. The results were striking portraits that perfectly encapsulated Hetta's DNA: dramatic lighting, timeless mood, and a touch of the fantastical. **One particularly famed story was** "Jungfrukällan" becoming a talking point among art directors and magazines around the world.



Julia Hetta  
*Andrea Boutin*

Luncheon Magazine, 2016

*“That series went everywhere,”* Hetta recalls of her early Acne Paper work. *“It became like a signal of my work’s DNA.”* Off the back of that success, opportunities flooded in. She was soon shooting for top-tier publications such as **Vogue Italia, Dazed & Confused, AnOther Magazine**, and all drawn to her **immediately recognizable visual language**. Luxury fashion houses also sought her eye: Hetta has since created images for **Gucci, Christian Dior, Jil Sander, Alexander McQueen** and others. In 2023, she was even commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute to photograph designs for the “Karl Lagerfeld: A Line of Beauty” exhibition catalogue – a prestigious nod to her standing in the field.



Julia Hetta

*Dazzling Black*

Dior Magazine, 2019

Despite this acclaim, Hetta remains thoughtful and somewhat modest about her growing influence. She notes that being a successful fashion photographer comes with responsibilities: *“When working with fashion models – human beings – you have a responsibility in how you treat them and communicate,”* she says. Often working with very young models, she prioritizes creating a **respectful, positive atmosphere on set**. *“It’s important for me to have a very nice team around, to treat the models really well,”* Hetta emphasizes. This nurturing approach ensures that the vulnerable energy of her subjects translates into authentic, soulful images – and it highlights her belief that **empathy is as crucial as creativity** in her profession.



Julia Hetta

*Asa Stenerhag*

*Faro*

Union Magazine, 2021

## The Creative Process: Emotion over Perfection

Hetta's process in executing her vision balances careful preparation with openness to serendipity. She typically works with a trusted team (including her stylist brother and skilled lighting technicians) but keeps the focus on artistic intuition rather than technical fuss. *"Some ingredients have to be from reality," she says, "but you make it into something else."* Interestingly, while her images appear meticulously composed, she admits to not obsessing over perfection. In fact, one of the reasons she enjoys shooting fashion editorials and commercial projects is the **built-in deadline**: *"You have to finish within that one day or time frame. You do your best in that time – and then it's done,"* Hetta notes. She finds it *"very satisfying and important"* to put a clear end to a project, whereas with purely personal art she might tweak indefinitely. This philosophy ensures her work maintains a fresh, unforced quality. *"There's something relieving about putting an end to something and knowing you've done your best for that moment,"* she says.

In Hetta's imagery, **mood outweighs minutiae**, allowing blur or shadow to obscure details – a deliberate trade-off to capture an **atmospheric feeling**. For example, rather than sharply freezing a dress in motion, she might let it blur to convey a sense of the model's next movement and the garment's flow. *"In fashion photography, it doesn't have to be about showing every detail of the clothes,"* Julia explains. *"By leaving some blur or darkness, you create a feeling – you leave space for the viewer's imagination."* Her aim is that each photograph *"starts a story"* in the viewer's mind. This approach stands in contrast to much of today's hyper-detailed digital imagery and underscores her almost old-fashioned commitment to **poetry over precision**.



Julia Hetta  
Union Magazine No. 19  
2025

## Collaboration, Family, and Personal Projects

Although Julia Hetta often works in the context of fashion, she continually engages in personal art projects that feed her creativity. Notably, she frequently collaborates with people close to her. Her brother Hannes has styled many of her shoots since the very beginning, creating a shared visual language between clothing and image. *“My brother was a big help,”* she says. *“He could see my signature very early on and helped place it in a commercial world.”* This sibling synergy has undoubtedly amplified Hetta’s distinctive voice across projects.

Hetta also finds inspiration in working with fellow artists. A beautiful example is her project **“Island,”** created in collaboration with her childhood friend, artist **Åsa Stenerhag**. In 2020–21, during the pandemic, the two traveled repeatedly to Fårö – a remote Swedish island famous for its stark landscapes – and produced a series of haunting black-and-white photographs. Stenerhag appears in the images almost

like a living sculpture amid windblown trees and ancient rocks. The resulting photobook *Island* (published 2023) is a “*cinematic project*” imbued with stillness and power . Its pages juxtapose textured studies of nature with human presence, reflecting on fragility and resilience. Critics noted that the work aligns with the Japanese aesthetic concept of **wabi-sabi** – finding beauty in imperfection and transience – as it depicts “*fragility, transience, strength, and the rhythm of repeating waves*” in the landscape . The *Island* series was exhibited alongside Stenerhag’s sculptures, enriching the dialogue between image and object, and underscoring Hetta’s fascination with blending mediums. “*We worked very freely, and she was like a sculpture in the landscape,*” Hetta says of photographing her friend. This close collaboration sparked new ideas and kept her passion for image-making alive during a slow period for fashion work.

Hetta is open to more such partnerships. She muses that collaborating directly with **another photographer** is something she’d love to try in the future – imagining how two different eyes might interpret the same scene or subject in unique ways. “*It’s a brilliant idea, actually,*” she says. “*What is so magic with photography is that you can take whichever object or scene and everyone will do it differently.*” This openness to experimentation illustrates how, despite her signature style, Julia Hetta remains intellectually curious and unafraid of evolution.

## Cross-Cultural Inspiration: Japan and Sweden

In recent years, Julia Hetta has developed a profound connection with **Japanese culture**, which has subtly influenced her work. She began traveling to Japan frequently around 2022 and found herself inspired by the aesthetics and philosophy she encountered. “*I find Japanese culture and society so interesting,*” she says. “*There’s an Asian way of relating to beauty and balance, another way of looking at the world and life, compared to the Western way.*” Hetta senses an almost spiritual kinship between **Japan and her native Sweden**: “*We have a lot in common – an aesthetic, a calmness – even though we are so far apart. It’s something on a deeper level.*” This cultural symmetry has encouraged her to pursue projects bridging the two worlds.



*Songen* (book cover)

Published by Sigma Foundation, November 2025

Text: Shin Yatagai

Edited & sequenced by Greger Ulf Nilson (GunLab)

Text editing: Lars Forsberg

Design: GunLab

Executive producer: Stockholm Design Lab



**Figure:** A photograph from Julia Hetta's **Songen** series (2025), shot in Fukushima, Japan. Her use of natural light and shadow creates a quiet, poetic atmosphere, inviting the viewer's imagination. (*Photo © Julia Hetta, from **Songen***)

One direct outcome was the photobook “**Songen**,” published in late 2025 as part of the inaugural Sigma Foundation project . For **Songen**, Hetta embarked on a residency in rural **Aizu, Fukushima Prefecture** – the site of Sigma’s camera factory – and collaborated with a young Japanese man (a former assistant of hers) as the subject of a series of images. The work weaves together Swedish and Japanese sensibilities: through Hetta’s lens, the **Japanese landscape and her subject** are rendered with the same painterly, contemplative mood she applies to a Nordic forest. “**Songen**” (a title suggesting “**dignity**” or respect in Japanese) combines Hetta’s photographs with written reflections by her collaborator, photographer Shin Yatagai, creating a poetic East-meets-West narrative. The project was showcased at the Tokyo Art Book Fair, alongside another Sigma book by photographer Sølve Sundsbø . It’s clear that Japan has become a wellspring of

ideas for Hetta. *“I absolutely want to continue collaborating in Japan – with brands, magazines, workshops, anything,”* she says. In 2023, she even led a special workshop in Tokyo that brought together Japanese and Swedish photography students. Over three days, she lectured on her work and guided students in creating still-life images. *“I always try to encourage students to find their own visual language,”* Hetta notes, reflecting her belief in personal expression. The cross-cultural exchange proved enriching: *“As soon as I talk with someone from Japan, it feels like we have a lot in common,”* she says. This mutual fascination is paving the way for more creative ventures blending **Scandinavian and Japanese art** in the future.

## Vision and Philosophy: Highlighting Life Through Art

After two decades behind the camera, Julia Hetta’s fundamental relationship with photography remains one of passion and curiosity. *“I’m still very amazed by photography,”* she shares. If anything, experience has given her confidence in her craft – *“I can say now that I know the medium, that I am a photographer”* – and perhaps eased the self-doubt that many young artists face. However, she insists the learning never stops. Every project is a new exploration in light, emotion, and storytelling. This perpetual growth mindset is central to her philosophy.

What ultimately drives Hetta is the desire to **give something meaningful to the viewer**. She sees her role not just as a documentarian of fashion, but as an *“art maker”* who uses photography to *“highlight life itself.”* By that she means uncovering the beauty and mystery in everyday existence and offering it back to the audience in a form they can feel. *“I want to create emotions and give that to people,”* Julia says of her future goals. Whether it’s a commercial assignment or a personal art series, her aim is to make images that *“make you start to wonder, that inspire you or give you a feeling... something that makes you see life in a wider range.”* In today’s image-saturated society, where photographs shape so much of our information and experience, Hetta believes photographers have a powerful role. They can either reinforce the mundane or, as she strives to do, reveal the magic in the mundane. Her photographs, rich in atmosphere, serve as **portals to alternate worlds** – ones that reflect our reality but also transcend it.

It’s telling that when asked what she would be if not a photographer, Hetta’s answer is a **gardener**. She laughs at the contrast, but there is a thematic

connection: *“I love my garden. I love the creative aspect of gardening – seeing a garden in different seasons, the beauty and wisdom in that.”* In a way, tending a garden and crafting an image are similar acts – both require patience, vision, and a nurturing touch to bloom. Julia Hetta brings that same organic, attentive sensibility to her photography, cultivating images that grow quietly on the viewer, revealing new details and evoking feelings over time.

## Advice for the Next Generation

As someone who turned a *“secret dream”* into an international career, Julia Hetta generously offers guidance to emerging photographers. Her chief advice is to **find and hold onto your personal voice**. *“Dig in your soul and try to be as personal as possible,”* she urges. In an industry flooded with trends and temptations to imitate, she believes authenticity is key: *“Even if you work with big clients or in fashion or portraits or whatever, try to stay true to yourself and what you want to say.”* She emphasizes developing *“your own alphabet”* in photography – a visual language that is uniquely yours and communicates what you care about. This might mean embracing what makes you different (as she did with her love of darkness and old paintings) rather than trying to replicate someone else’s formula.

Hetta also highlights the importance of **respect and professionalism**. The way you treat your collaborators, subjects, and team will directly influence the art you create. A supportive environment can bring out the best in everyone involved. Finally, she suggests maintaining a spirit of curiosity. Never feel that you’ve *“learned enough”* – instead, approach each project as an opportunity to discover something new about the world or about your craft.

In an era of instantaneous digital imagery, Julia Hetta stands out for her **timeless, soulful approach** to photography. Her images remind us that a photograph can be more than a surface depiction – it can be an invitation to dream, to feel, and to ponder the deeper questions of beauty and existence. Through her unique vision, Hetta continues to expand the poetic possibilities of fashion photography, one quietly powerful frame at a time.

## Sources

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