

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Balthus: The Last Studies

Jessie Wender



Balthus, "Untitled" (1990-2000)/© Harumi Klossowska de Rola/Gagosian Gallery.

“Balthus: The Last Studies,” currently on view at Gagosian Gallery uptown, is a selection of polaroid photographs taken by the painter during the last eight years of his life. It is running concurrently with “Cats and Girls,” the Balthus retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum, which Peter Schjeldahl reviews in this week’s issue of the magazine. The polaroids in “The Last Studies” were culled from nearly two thousand photographs found at Balthus’s studio, in the Grand Chalet in Rossinière, Switzerland, after his death, in 2001. As Balthus aged, drawing became too difficult, and he began taking polaroids, which replaced his drawings as preliminary sketches for his paintings. The photographs themselves are beautiful—dreamlike, soft, and repetitive. “Far from being an end, the Polaroid photographs are but a means to substitute drawing in order to compose a picture,” writes the painter Setsuko Klossowska de Rola, Balthus’s widow

and the president of the Balthus Foundation. “It is quite incredible the extent to which the camera took the place of the hand and pencil. And so, to me, these photographs are the very last drawings of Balthus.”

“For more than six decades ... Balthus depicted young girls in gamy poses, attributing any perceived eroticism to viewers with unclean minds,” writes Schjeldahl in his review of “Cats and Girls.” “Was Balthus a pedophile? His interest, if not lust, didn’t stir before his subjects’ pubescence, but it waned in their late teens. The show occurs at a cultural moment that is stretched between sexualizing the young and reacting with horror and anger to the lately abundant cases of their sexual exploitation. If you can shrug off that tension at the Met, I salute your detachment. I sure can’t. Balthus puts me in two minds, attracted and repelled, in search of a third. He strains the moral impunity of high art to an elemental limit, assuring himself an august, unquiet immortality.” An interesting counterpart to this view of Balthus is a statement, included in “The Last Studies,” by Anna Wahli, who modelled for the painter from the age of eight to sixteen, and is the subject of many of his polaroids. She describes initially feeling “ill at ease” but eventually developing a familiar ritual and sense of collaboration with the artist. “The process was painfully slow,” Wahli writes. “It took such a long time to change what seemed to be a minute detail and, from my point of view, all the photographs looked alike. I wondered why I had to return, week after week. On one hand, I did realize that in addition to taking pictures, he also needed to observe me and bask in a contemplative atmosphere so as to be able to fashion a mental image, which he would then strive to render on canvas in his painting studio. Today, looking at all the positions in the photographs I am better able to appreciate the subtle differences and comprehend why he took such pains to make slight changes.”