

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE  TIMES

Revealing the serene beauty of Thomas Ruff's photographic negatives

Nancy Durrant



*An exhibit from Thomas Ruff's nature morte
August 21 2015 Thomas Ruff/ Gagosian Gallery*

Thomas Ruff is obsessed with photography. Not surprising for a photographer, you might think, but Ruff, who for more than 30 years has been exploring and excavating the form, is more obsessed than most. He more or less abandoned straight picture-taking in the 1990s, and has been digging into photography itself, pulling apart the process (which over his lifetime has shifted from chemical to digital), turning it inside out, upside down and peering at it.

Ruff has always worked in series — his first, in 1984, was of blank-faced images of friends, which he eventually blew up to huge size (seven feet by five) to emphasise their status as objects — that they were “pictures” first, rather than portraits of specific individuals. In the Nineties he began to vary his approach, using found images for his *Sterne* (Stars) series, in which he chose small details in pictures of the night sky from the European Southern Observatory in Chile’s catalogue, and enlarged them to a vast scale.

His *Nacht* (Night) series employed technology developed for military use in the Gulf war to photograph suburban Düsseldorf, where he lives. His interest is always what is going on within the photograph itself, rather than in the picture.

His new series, at Gagosian Gallery in central London, focuses on negatives, continuing this obsession and illustrating Ruff's interest, and possibly alarm, at the suddenness with which this basic element of photography has become a relic.

“Because of digital photography, the negative, which I have used nearly every day for more than 25 years, has almost disappeared,” he says. “If I ask my daughters what a negative is, they look at me wide-eyed. They’ve never seen or used one. The negative was actually never considered for itself, it was always only a means to an end. It was the ‘master’ from which the photographic print was made, and I think it is worth looking at these ‘masters’.”

As is often the case with Ruff's work, the results are stunning. He has again appropriated found images — some fairly well-known — and used digital techniques to transform sepia-toned prints of flowers, leaves and other botanical forms, some in still-life arrangements (photobuffs will spot a still life of a hydrangea by Baron Adolph de Meyer from 1907, or a delphinium by Karl Blossfeldt from 1928), making them resemble negatives. The scale (always important for Ruff) is close to that of the glass plates used in large cameras in the 19th century.

The effect is to create something oddly sculptural in these neatly presented, cool-toned images. Forms and textures you might miss in colour (or in sepia) are brought to the fore, almost as if the subjects were placed under a microscope.

A twig, almost entirely white against a dark indigo background, appears painted, each tiny nodule and ridge painstakingly reproduced. Leaves look heavy, carved from stone or wood, or cut from a sheet of thin paper. A single frond appears hairy and dense, as if made out of thick, squashy felt. It's as if, the bright signifier of colour being removed, somehow their vegetable nature is more evident.

Oddly, a bunch of roses creates one of the least interesting images, the baby-soft petals allowing little in terms of texture or contrast, though their reflection on the polished surface of the table is pleasingly ghostly.

Ruff has been inspired by Man Ray, who printed photographs as negatives, and has himself experimented with the photogram, a form of cameraless photography that Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy used. For me, there are also faint echoes of Garry Fabian Miller's work from the 1980s, which also harked back to early 19th-century photography, using natural forms as transparencies to create cameraless photographs. Both artists are fascinated by their medium and have pushed it to its limits.

Ruff has explored most photographic genres — nudes, portraits, architecture and so on — and these still lifes, or still ghosts, continue that. I'd love to see him do cat pictures, the quintessential genre of the internet age, but I'm not sure he's one for humour. These images are, however, also absolutely of their time — the idea was formed when he inverted historic

photographs to look like negatives on his computer and was struck by the gorgeous cyan blue in which they appeared. They couldn't exist at any other point in photographic history, so dependent are they on cutting-edge technologies.

It's interesting to consider how the younger generation (such as Ruff's daughters) might view these images — having never seen a negative and possibly having no understanding of what it might be for. For them, these are just pictures. That immediate recognition of the mechanical connection, unavoidable for those of us who have wielded a film camera, must be absent. The beauty and serenity of these works, however, should be evident to anyone.

Thomas Ruff: nature morte is at Gagosian Gallery, W1 (gagosian.com), until Sep 26