

This is Tomorrow
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GAGOSIAN GALLERY
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Thomas Ruff: nature morte

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Artist : Thomas Ruff

Title : neg<>stil_02, 2015. C-Print. 23.4 x 27.4 cm. Edition 1 of 8

Website : www.gagosian.com

Credit : Copyright Thomas Ruff. Image courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery

There is a rare atmosphere of warmth and modesty in the new Thomas Ruff show at the Gagosian's West London gallery. Until late September, fourteen medium-scale photographs in varnished wooden frames will hang along the gallery walls, depicting a variety of botanical still-lives.

Titled 'nauture morte', Ruff used found photographs of either floral still-lives or enlarged plant specimens. They were then scanned and digitally reversed before being printed into cyan-and-white c-type prints. As with his earlier 'Negatives' series for which he similarly manipulated nineteenth-century female nude portraits, Ruff transforms discarded vernacular photography into high-contrast digital negatives. The effect is to show how an image of a subject as seemingly banal as a botanical specimen can become intricate, eschewing any attempt to pin down the ways in which it was produced.

How might the resulting image be defined? Is it a negative transferred onto paper? An imprint's positive? Or is it just a photograph of a found image? In this confusion Ruff starts his mischievous playfulness: one begins to realise that his intention is not to draw attention to his subject but, instead, to photography's various processes and techniques.

Small in scale and low in resolution, this series bears no relation to the likes of Andreas Gursky or anybody else from Ruff's generation at the Dusseldorf School - within which Ruff made his name in the early 1990s. Instead it forms part of his more recent output devoted to his endeavour to break all of photography's rules, becoming a kind of artistic trademark. Over the past two decades Ruff has been pushing the boundaries of the medium, exploring genres from portraiture to abstraction and photographic techniques from straight shooting to camera-less processes.

To fully interpret the layers of meaning and connotation at play in this series, the viewer must also be au fait with history; simple, systematic and detached, this series carries the allure and dynamism of photography's past. Anna Atkins's nineteenth-century cyanotype studies of seaweed and Karl Blossfeldt's modernist silver-gelatin images of plants converge here. Using a technology that both Atkins and Blossfeldt could only have dreamt of, Ruff appropriates pre-existing images reminiscent of their own work. By doing so, Ruff turns the photographic discourse around. In his hands, photography ceases being a mere recording tool; it becomes his actual subject. More than blurring the strict lines between photography's diverse processes, Ruff's images echo the medium's own histories. It is precisely to this element that his 'nature morte' owes its greatest depth. Not only is it on a par with his usual work, deconstructing photography and exploring its potential, but it is also a series that looks back to the medium's history in an innovative and compelling way.