

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

A Visionary Photographer Reaches a Career Pinnacle

With his largest, most revealing retrospective and a major traveling exhibition, German photographer Thomas Struth's continuing evolution is on display

By Carol Kino (October 6, 2017)



FOCAL POINT The photographer Thomas Struth at his studio in Berlin.
PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Among people who know him well, the German photographer Thomas Struth is renowned for the intense focus he brings to every detail of his work, starting with the way he creates a single photograph. In some cases, he waits for hours under the hood of a large-format camera for the right moment to take a shot, then sits there longer still for the next right moments. Later, he carefully examines each image and, before making his selects, often ventures to the site to shoot again. He's likely to have spent weeks beforehand studying visual and art historical source material.

Recently Struth has taken a similarly obsessive approach to his exhibitions, designing the architecture and refining each hanging in situ. When he walks into his career survey, which opened in May at Munich's Haus der Kunst, he immediately begins talking about the building's disquieting origins. Although the gallery has been an avant-garde stronghold for decades, it was initially constructed to promote Adolf Hitler's vision of great Teutonic art, opening in 1937 the day before the infamous Degenerate Art exhibition, which was just down the street. As a 62-year-old German artist, Struth needed to make sure his show had "a correct relationship to German history," he explains. "Everybody says, 'This space has really good proportions.' I think, Yeah, that's true, but is that the first thing you would say about the atmosphere?"

Struth could have opened the show with one of the lush, monumenally sized museum photographs for which he's best known. Made between 1989 and 2005, they depict visitors gathering before artworks in

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the halls of the Louvre, London's National Gallery and other major institutions. He considered using one of his newer, wowinducing science pictures, taken in nuclear fusion laboratories, factories, hospitals and the like, shot in such intensely rendered detail that it's hard to figure out exactly what you're seeing. He also experimented with something more playful: a gorgeous portrait of adults and children clustered before a giant aquarium full of fish. Instead, Struth opened with something far grittier: the urban streetscapes that he first began making in the 1970s as a student at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and has continued in cities around the world for four decades. Shot with a large-format camera placed squarely in the center of the street, they aim to convey something essential about each locale. Struth calls the series *Unconscious Places*, because of his belief, he explains, in "the undercurrent of a shared, unconscious energy that evokes some kind of atmosphere in the architecture."

When viewers enter the Munich show, they're confronted with a row of East Berlin streetscapes, captured soon after the wall came down . In his blunt fashion, Struth says, "In a way, what you see is what you got because of this," nodding toward the gallery's spare, neoclassically proportioned central hallway, where Hitler once spoke before rapt crowds. As for the main gallery, he bisected it with a different sort of wall: a vitrine filled with selections from his personal archives, like the big band records he obsessed over as a teenager, when he played alto sax in his high school jazz band, and the surrealistic paintings and oil stick drawings he made before turning to photography in his early 20s. He also includes the long-ago project that unconsciously steered him toward his well-known series of intimate family portraits: a 1982 collaboration with a Düsseldorf psychoanalyst who used family photos in treatment. "I hope it expresses the reasons for my work," Struth says of the archive. "And also a bit of vulnerability."

One of Germany's most highly regarded photographers, Struth can afford to be somewhat vulnerable: He's at the peak of his career--and at a new stage in his life. Ten years ago, he married the Hawaii-born writer Tara Bray Smith, and soon after they moved away from Düsseldorf, the place where Struth spent much of his childhood and later made his career, to build a life together in Berlin. They now have a child, Alexej, who's 7. Struth works from a glorious Berlin studio, and his career has clearly reached a new level. The Munich show, Thomas Struth: *Figure Ground*, which is his largest survey to date, has been extended through January 7--and it's just one highlight of several current and upcoming Struth shows.

On November 5, his exhibition *Nature & Politics* opens at the Saint Louis Art Museum, the final leg of a tour that began in March 2016 at Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany, and traveled to Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau, Atlanta's High Museum of Art and Houston's Moody Center for the Arts, all in very different configurations that Struth designed himself.

"Thomas constructed the architecture, which meant he also constructed the narrative," says Tobia Bezzola, the Folkwang's director. "He had a lot of fun creating various juxtapositions and confrontations."

Nature & Politics focuses on Struth's science photographs, made over the past decade or so, which touch on society's many uses for technology, whether it be energy production, robotics or the machines that keep bodies tethered to life during surgery. Alongside urban landscapes shot in places like Israel, South Korea and Argentina, and fantasy landscapes shot in Disneyland, the pictures seem to explore the reach and limits of human progress.

"He's navigating this delicate line between the chaotic nature of the subject matter and what looks good as a beautiful, precise, meticulously composed photograph," Eric Lutz, a photography curator at Saint Louis, says of the science photos. Every time you look, Lutz adds, you see something different: "I think that's a courageous thing for a photographer to do, not to want to define the meaning of a photograph." Struth is also in a reflective mood, judging from the work in his upcoming New York solo show, opening

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November 14 at Marian Goodman Gallery, which has represented him since 1989. As well as showing new science photos, of subjects like a Siemens switchgear plant, captured from a perspective that suggests a giant, ominous playground, he will unveil a brand-new series that owes a clear debt to Renaissance painting: still lifes of deceased animals, including a ram, a tiny wildcat and a group of birds. Shot in available light in a way that brings out the soft drifts of feathers and tender tufts of fur, the creatures seem halfway between death and life, reminiscent of medieval memento mori while also appearing strangely new.

A few days after visiting the Munich exhibition, Struth shows off these pictures in his Berlin studio, a sunny space overlooking the Spree, and speaks of his desire to depict the creatures in a beautiful, dignified fashion. "I'm interested in the idea of surrender," he says. "Once you die, all the circus that you proactively design, the theater, comes to a full stop."

In some sense, when Struth speaks of the circus, he's referring to his own life. Over the past 10 years, the number of shows he's been asked to participate in has tripled, and his studio staff has grown to keep up with the demands on his time, as well as his constantly expanding range of interests. "He's always been led by his curiosity," says gallerist Marian Goodman, who has known Struth for nearly three decades. "He doesn't have the desire to do the same thing over and over again." As Struth's installations have grown more elaborate, so have his catalogs, and he has recently begun doing all but his largest prints in-house. ("That's the fun part," says his longtime studio manager, Anne Caroline Müller.) Yet to make an artwork, Struth often says, one must stop the carousel and sit still. "That's when you see or hear something."

In this way and in others, the memento mori are clearly somewhat personal. Struth's parents died some years ago-- his father, a lawyer, judge and bank manager, in 2003 and his mother, a potter, in 2009--and he finds himself reflecting upon them frequently, especially now that he has a child himself. "It becomes clearer what they were for me," he says.

Struth has also been considering his own mortality. "Once the [Marian Goodman] exhibition opens, I will be 63," he says later, while going through the new pictures on his computer. "I will be in the last quarter of my life." As he talks about the images, it's clear that he is thinking of the memento mori's traditional roots: as a reminder of death that encourages one to savor life. Struth intends the pictures to be "like punches," he says. "Death as a wake-up call."

Together with Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer and Thomas Ruff, Struth is considered a protégé of the photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, known for their pictures of German industrial architecture. In fact, he was part of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf's first official photography class, which the Bechers taught. Okwui Enwezor, director of Munich's Haus der Kunst, feels that Struth diverges from his cohort in a crucial sense. "He's different from, say, Thomas Ruff or Andreas Gursky, in his analytical approach to image making," he says. "In some ways he comes closer to the Bechers but also goes much further away from them."

The first photographs Struth became known for were his Manhattan streetscapes, shot during a 1978 residency at P.S. 1. Because of this work, he has something of a reputation in architectural circles, too.

British architect David Chipperfield, a good friend, says he used Struth's Unconscious Places series in his lectures long before they met. And he is now designing a four-building compound for Struth and his family, in the countryside outside Berlin. "Architecture is always about spectacular single buildings," Chipperfield says, "but Thomas's photography is about the qualities that come out of the normal streets and normal buildings and places where we live."

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Struth actually entered the Kunstakademie in 1973 intent on becoming a painter. His first teacher there was Gerhard Richter , and some point to that legacy in his work today. (Although the two aren't especially close, Struth has photographed Richter's family twice.) "Richter was the other crucial early influence," says Bezzola, who also co-curated Struth's last retrospective, which toured Europe for three years. "Each of Thomas's photographs is very much about the construction of the image, about design, about drawing. It's more like an old master painting." That's obvious when Struth sits down at his computer to explain how he creates the memento mori. He arrived at the subject through his science photographs, when a contact at a Berlin hospital introduced him to a zoological institute that examines dead animals. Now Struth is notified whenever a creature arrives there. He usually has a few hours to take photographs before the autopsy starts.

To prepare for the series, which he began last fall, Struth researched the subject intensively, combing the internet to see "what pictorial material exists already," he says, asking himself, "Is that the sort of picture that I would like to make or work with? Then I reject it and say, This would appear in a veterinary magazine. This is something I've seen already."

Illustrating his point, Struth flips through a vast number of images on his monitor: X-rays, MRIs, old master paintings, BBC nature photographs. His interest in the subject may have been sparked, he says, by an Albrecht Dürer watercolor of a bird's wing he saw at Madrid's Museo del Prado in 2005. "It was very small but so extremely arresting," he recalls. "It says something about respect, for the animal and for life, about spending the time to make this and studying this phenomenon."

Although Struth often uses large-format cameras and film, about five years ago he switched to medium-format digital cameras for more intimate situations, which means he can study the images he takes on a monitor. When using film, he makes his selection with contact sheets, choosing which pictures to print and then picking one to be used and numbered for his catalogue raisonné. He keeps banks of file drawers filled with these images, all listed by category--"portraits," "landscapes," "museums" and so on.

The day after showing off the photos in his studio, Struth and one of his assistants, Vanessa Enders, pay one of their periodic visits to the zoological institute to work out details for the next shoot. They need to figure out how to handle larger animals and revisit how best to work within the parameters of the space and its lighting. It's hard to believe that the white-tiled, wet-floored autopsy room, lit with overhead halogen lights and lined with white rubber robes on hooks, could produce any image that wasn't depressingly clinical. But Struth's eyes see it differently.

"That's the best natural light," he says, indicating the long windows unobstructed by trees at the far end of the room, likening their effect to a softbox, a photographic lighting device that creates a diffuse glow. "You can see the shadows are not sharp," he explains. He and Enders decide to shoot there next time. Then, just as he's leaving, Struth pulls out his iPhone to capture that light. As he gestures Enders to the side and scoots a bucket out of the way, the room turns quiet. In that instant, it's clear that this is the key ingredient Struth requires to make a photograph: slowing down the circus of the world long enough to find that perfect moment of stillness. There's a click, and he smiles broadly. "Gut," he says. "Danke schön."