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The Struth Santos Family, Hamburg 2021



The Heitzler Barron Family, Berlin 2021
Installation view, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2022

DESPITE EVERYTHING, SOMETHING NEW

Reflections on the new family portraits by Thomas Struth

BY STEFAN GRONERT

How durable are innovation and originality? Can artists who have had enduring success early in their career continuously produce new, if not to say radical, artworks? The veneration museums have lavished recently on some older painters—such as Gerhard Richter, Jasper Johns, and David Hockney—at least suggests as much. Can the same be said for the most recent production by German photographer Thomas Struth?

Born in the Rhineland in 1954, Struth was, after a brief stint in Gerhard Richter's class, one of Bernd Becher's first students at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. As far as artistic "success" (as a category of cultural and economic capital) can be adequately located, Struth's breakthrough happened in Europe in 1987, with exhibitions in Bern, Edinburgh and Münster, and in the United States, where he has been represented by Marian Goodman Gallery since 1993. By 2002 his solo exhibition toured from the Dallas Museum of Art to Los Angeles MOCA, to MCA Chicago, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

But does this trajectory of institutional recognition and ascent into the elite of contemporary photography correspond to a progressive development of Struth's oeuvre, based, such as it is, on a rather narrow set of series: Struth began his "Streets" in 1976; the well-known "Museum Pictures" in 1989; "Landscapes" since 1991; in 1998, he added "New Pictures from Paradise"; and in 2007, a rather open-ended series, entitled "Nature and Politics" has become the latest such category. One category omitted from this list are the many portraits, both of individuals and of families, which Struth has produced since 1985 and which, according to the artist, continue to hold the greatest interest and longevity for Struth.

How do you improve on such a narrow format without repetition? One answer would be to reject the question by pointing to the unavoidable formation of artistic identity as a formal style, while still holding on to the dream of progress. But what do the images say? When describing the works in a 2017 conversation with the artist, Okwui Enwezor classified them as a form of "social portrait photography" in the tradition of August Sander's monumental "People of the 20th Century." But I would argue that Struth's portraits must be understood as the opposite of Sander's project: they do not follow a systematic or encyclopedic structure, and their monumental scale and size, as well as their declarative orientation as public, rather places them in a historical continuity with Dutch 17th century group portraiture. In the language of amateur photography, these works represent a spatialized amplification of the (antiquated) family album, replaced by the monumental singular image. Conversely, the focus is placed on the emerging psychological tension particular to each family. These works are about human relationships, which are offered to the viewer as an invitation to "read" and imagine. Nothing is conceptually farther apart from the supposedly anonymous, large-scale, passport-style portraits by Struth's former fellow student at the academy, Thomas Ruff, which aim to negate this element of empathy but ultimately simply cross it out.

What does all this mean for Struth's most recent series of family portraits? The artist himself has reflected on the changed historical perspective, when he recognized in a spring 2020 conversation with art historian Georg Imdahl that "my family portraits have become more difficult since they have become so much more popular and the depicted are less able to simply let go when I photograph them. But I

THOMAS STRUTH ESSAY



The von Aretin Family, Berlin 2020



The Charles Family, Berlin 2021

continue to try despite everything.” In the context of a global pandemic, this “despite everything” has necessarily acquired a new dimension: Struth’s family portraits from 2020 and 2021 are limited to a German context; four out of five new works were taken in Berlin, where the artist resides. And while the fifth image wasn’t taken in close geographic proximity, it is part of the artist’s own family circle. “The Struth Santos Family, Hamburg 2021” shows the artist’s brother for the first time, after the artist’s sister had appeared—unnamed, but acknowledged to the press—in the 1989 work “Tilly Family, Cologne”. The recent work oscillates between a tense self-awareness of being photographed and a—at least in the face of the woman—recognizable joy, but it also forces a fraternal comparison with the artist: even if any comparison might appear unjust in light of a presumed necessary individualism—the semblance is striking, and yet, it is not a self-portrait.

The four Berlin portraits, in current sociological perspective, illustrate the rather current understanding that “family” is no longer a term that describes the traditional model of “father, mother, child(ren)” but accounts for multiple forms of conviviality. A good example is “The Heitzler Barron Family, Berlin 2021”. Two men look at us, both curious and happy. Similarly, migration and social identity emerge in these works, both visually and texturally. Take, for instance, the serious yet self-confident gaze of the subjects in “Charles Family, Berlin 2021” or also the “Gözüacık Family, Berlin 2021” wherein they appear to take immediate pleasure in being photographed. The same cannot be said for the “von Aretin Family, Berlin 2020”. “Large” does

not just describe the family itself, but the format of the picture. And even though the horizontal composition of figures is like other photographs, the perpendicular table creates further spatial, and ultimately also emotional, remove.

What emerges is the suggestion that images can be just like people and develop individual character. The question of artistic development, with which I began this text, thus is misleading. The quality of Thomas Struth’s family portraits is their insistence on a psychological diversity and vitality both of the individuals depicted, and by extension, of the artist himself, as all subjects are, to some extent, part of Struth’s personal context, but also of the viewer, as I implicate myself in an unavoidable network of glances. Despite Thomas Ruff’s early attempts to proclaim the demise of a genre, the newest family portraits of his erstwhile academy colleague prove the renewed relevance of the format, expressed in a defiant gesture of “despite everything.”



The Gözüacık Family, Berlin 2021

THOMAS STRUTH ESSAY



Schlichter Weg, Feldberger Seenlandschaft 2021