

# A guest reviewer: Quiet, now—three photographers (Salgado, Struth, Atget) in New York

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Three recent or current exhibitions in New York City present the work of photographers who stop time and allow us to contemplate what they see before their lens. At the International Center of Photography (ICP) there was the “Genesis” exhibition of Sebastiao Salgado, at the Metropolitan Museum we have Thomas Struth until February 16, and at the Pace/Macgill Gallery an exhibition of French photographer Eugène Atget recently closed that was aptly entitled “A Quiet Calling.”

Salgado, a Brazilian (born 1944), started taking photographs in 1973 and is now a superstar of the medium, recognized for his beautiful prints, their composition, quality and meticulous detail. Sometimes his expertise incongruously records the ugliness of our world, as in his 1993 study, “Workers,” where photographs of laboring gold miners shown in the *New York Times* caused a sensation, or the dogged paths and desperate lives of dispossessed people in “Migrations” (2000). In this recent work Salgado turned his attention to the natural environment, and its strange and precious designs.

For “Genesis,” Salgado visited remote and unpopulated regions in his quest “for the world as it was, as it was formed, as it existed for millennia before modern life accelerated.” Now ICP presents an exhibit of more than 200 oversize black and white prints of places unscarred by incursions of travelers or civilizations, where “nature reigns in silent and pristine majesty.” These beautiful prints show arches and patterns formed by winds, waves and time. From above, he finds patterns of migrating animals trekking along mountain ledges, ancient rivers marking lines in valleys. Closer, we stare into the face of an attacking

sea bird or feel the breath of sea lions massing under a frozen sky. Most of the exhibited prints appear in his book *Genesis*, published by Taschen.

Salgado preaches awareness of climate change. In 1998 he founded the Instituto Terra, turning his own land into a reforestation project. He promotes environmental issues in appearances and videos. One short video showed continually at the ICP gallery.

German photographer Thomas Struth (born 1954), who studied under painter Gerhard Richter (born 1932), has, like the latter, a close association with his country’s past. One of Struth’s chromogenic prints in the Met Museum show is the mammoth *Hot Rolling Mill* at the ThyssenKrupp (munitions makers to the World War II German army) steel mill taken in Duisburg, 2010. This relic of the Nazi era appears in meticulous detail, taken in a long exposure with a view finder camera. There are no people, only a heavy iron chain lying on the floor.

In other enormous prints Struth suggests the interaction of humans with their environment, as in a graphic photograph of a half-naked patient prepared for surgery, tilted on the table, drugged and connected by a thousand wires leading to monitors, computers, and other apparatus, the technology a great contrast to the helpless and motionless lump of flesh.

Struth was noticed first for his large chromogenic prints that showed tourists in sites such as the Pantheon in Rome (1990), tiny, yet important actors in the deep space he creates. His training as a painter is apparent in the richness of color in his prints as well as his choice of subjects from the Renaissance treasures of European museums. It is possible to get lost in Struth’s prints, since every tiny element of the surface is modeled in

his revealing, objective light, as in his print of the Milan Cathedral portal (1998), brilliantly lit in summer sunlight, a façade of endless reliefs, columns, borders and turrets. Struth has mastered the distinctive and defining qualities of photography: light and time.

Struth's early black-and-white photos of city streets, which he calls 'unconscious voices,' are empty scenes, taken from a central point of view, reaching into the faraway deep space. The city streets appear empty and alone, left with only traces of their past—a parked car, trash in the gutters, dirty windows—just the random, grimy residue of human passage.

In those works Struth followed the originator of street photography, Eugene Atget (1857-1927), whose work was recently on display at Pace/Macgill. Atget set out to document Old Paris before it disappeared through modernization and he did so in hundreds of black-and-white photos. The gentle, softly lit, broad avenues of Paris are artfully composed. Atget locates his camera carefully so trees lean into the hazy avenue, perspective emphasized by arches of framing buildings, or by small objects in the middle distance. A photographer of historic importance, Atget chose to document the *allée*s of the park, the window display, the organ grinder, the ancient door and the doorway. He might be said to have created the myth of the Parisian atmosphere.

At the Museum of Modern Art buses are lining up to deliver loads of visitors to the exhibit "The Cut-Outs." These are the end-of-life works of the French Modern master Henri Matisse (1869-1954). With scissors he cut abstract shapes out of colored paper, mostly resembling stars, leaves, hands. The valuable and popular show is sponsored by the Bank of America.

The Metropolitan Museum is also currently hosting an exhibition of 81 Cubist works by Georges Braque (French, 1882-1963), Juan Gris Spanish, 1887-1927), Fernand Léger (French, 1881-1955) and Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881-1973), part of the collection promised to the museum by cosmetic billionaire Leonard Lauder. The collection will be a matchless source of study in the future.

The best of the Cubist best, this collection is evidence of the accomplishment of the goals of Modernism. Modernism, for better or worse, rejected all figuration or representation, it abjured tonal values gained through traditional modeling techniques of light and dark, and it abhorred the traditional illusion of space, shown

through perspective. Instead, it worked toward flatness, the honest or the essential quality of painting on a canvas in a rectangular frame, according to Clement Greenberg, accepted authority of Modernism. It is flatness that Modernism, for example, aimed for and achieved, nowhere more successfully than in the paper cutouts of Matisse.

These two exhibitions of Matisse and Cubism wrap up Modernism nicely and survive in protected environments as landmarks of Modernist goals. Sotheby's New York auctions of Modern and Impressionist art in November confirm their stature: \$422 million in sales. A Matisse *Odalisque* is expected to bring £9-12 million in London in February.

What we call Modern is over a century old and so is the society it came out of. Contemporary exhibits of photographers—like Struth and Salgado particularly—say so. They direct us to a view of our world as it is today.



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