

This exhibition explores the 2018 FotoFocus Biennial *Open Archive* topic by bringing the photographic work of contemporary German artist Thomas Ruff (b. 1958) into conversation with a remarkable historic exhibition held at the innovative Warren Gallery in London in 1929. It united plant photographs by Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932) with light abstractions by Francis Bruguière (1879–1945). This unusual pairing of biomorphic and geometric shapes matches two of Ruff's series: *Photograms* and *Negatives*. In his *Photograms*, Ruff reconsiders the abstract imagery of Modernist, cameraless photography now in digital form. With the *Negatives* series, Ruff reprints historic motifs, including the legendary plant images by Karl Blossfeldt. A closer look reveals that there are many parallels and surprising connections between the three famous artists. In their relentless search for small formal modifications all three photographers show an interest in the variant—but their works are also clearly variations on each other.

Curated by Ulrike Meyer Stump

This exhibition is organized in collaboration with the Ann and Jürgen Wilde Foundation/Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich. With the generous support of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

Thomas Ruff (German, b. 1958)

Photograms

Ruff's *Photograms* are a contemporary reconsideration of the Modernist technique of placing objects onto a sheet of photographic paper and recording their shadows, as practiced by Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, or Arthur Siegel. Thomas Ruff, a leading figure of the Düsseldorf school, has been interested in the history of photography for years, focusing especially on 1920s experimental Modernism. Contrary to his predecessors, Ruff uses a virtual darkroom. He positions various transparent or opaque virtual objects onto virtual paper and illuminates them with colored light. To render the minute details of these large format images, Ruff makes use of a supercomputer in Jülich, Germany. The highly aesthetic shapes of reflected and refracted light recall Francis Bruguière's small-scale abstract light designs, although technically as images of handmade paper cuts these are the opposite of Ruff's high-tech *Photograms*.

All images are chromogenic prints from 2012–2014

Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong

Thomas Ruff (German, b. 1958)

Negatives

In his *Negatives*, Ruff explores the now obsolete technique of the photographic negative as a variant of the positive. Long seen as an intermediary in the photographic process, Ruff elevates the negative into a fully realized work of art. He has tried out all the classical genres like the nude, architecture, the portrait, still-life, and science images. Here, two series of this ongoing project are on display: the Blossfeldt motifs that are part of the *Still-life* series and the *Proton* series relating to scientific visualizations. Ruff has always been a great admirer of Blossfeldt's work and has paid homage to his oeuvre on other occasions. Blossfeldt's sculptural plants lose their object-like presence in Ruff's revisions and take on a mysterious, ethereal glow. Blossfeldt's microview is pushed to the limits of matter in the *Proton* images, where minute particles are recorded spiraling apart after they collide in a bubble chamber. These traces form visual patterns astonishingly similar to the spiraling shapes of Blossfeldt's pumpkin tendrils.

All images are chromogenic prints from 2015

Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong

Karl Blossfeldt (German, 1865–1932)

Art Forms in Nature

Karl Blossfeldt photographed thousands of plants as teaching materials for his decorative arts courses.

A trained sculptor, he taught *Modeling after Living Plants* at the School of Applied Arts in Berlin from 1898 to 1930.

In 1926, shortly before Blossfeldt retired as professor, the gallerist Karl Nierendorf discovered his photographs.

He published them in an elegantly printed volume titled *Urformen der Kunst* (1928) or *Art Forms in Nature* (1929).

Exhibited internationally, Blossfeldt's teaching materials came to be highly celebrated as contemporary art works.

Their sober, sculptural look suited Modernist aesthetics.

Blossfeldt, however, never understood his sudden fame.

In 1929, Dorothy Warren showed 102 vegetal motifs from *Art Forms in Nature* at her small gallery in London, alongside photographic designs by Francis Bruguière.

Here Henry Moore, Paul Nash, and other young artists studied them as biomorphic abstractions of nature.

The works in this exhibition are vintage gelatin silver prints from the Karl Blossfeldt Archive/Ann and Jürgen Wilde Foundation, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich.

The Warren Gallery exhibition featured photogravures from an unbound edition of Blossfeldt's Art Forms in Nature.

Francis Bruguière (American, 1879–1945)

Photographic Designs

The San Francisco photographer Francis Bruguière worked for the New York Theater Guild (1919–1927), becoming familiar with the art of stage lighting and with photographing small-scale stage models. His personal experiments include multiple exposures of figurative subjects reminiscent of early silent film, and photographs of cut, bent, and twisted paper dramatically lit from different angles with a spot lamp. In 1927, Bruguière left the U.S. and moved to London with his partner, the British actress Rosalinde Fuller. He met many members of the British avant-garde, and, in 1929, initiated the show at the Warren Gallery with Karl Blossfeldt's works from *Art Forms in Nature*. It was to celebrate the launch of *Beyond This Point*, a book written by author Lance Sieveking (1896–1972) and illustrated with twenty-four of Bruguière's designs.

Dorothy Warren showed thirty-five gelatin silver prints: fourteen from Beyond This Point and fourteen "Light Designs," all unspecified, as well as seven stills from an unrealized film, The Way (1924–1925), not represented here. This selection unites some of Bruguière's finest vintage prints from the collections of the George Eastman Museum, Rochester, and the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Francis Bruguière and Oswell Blakeston *Light Rhythms (1930)*

In the winter of 1929–1930, while Bruguière’s photographs were on exhibition at the Warren Gallery in London, the young British film critic Oswell Blakeston (1907–1985) helped Bruguière convert his light experiments into a film. The impression of movement was created by a spot light wandering over a sequence of paper-cut abstractions. Superimpositions, dissolves, and fade-in techniques smoothing the transition of one still image to the next show Bruguière’s and Blakeston’s innovative spirit. The young Australian composer Jack Ellitt (1902–2001) wrote variations for solo piano to accompany the film. *Light Rhythms* premiered at the London Avenue Pavilion in February 1930 as part of a series of recent short films, making history as the first abstract movie in England.

*35mm motion picture film transferred to digital file,
black and white, silent, 5 minutes*

Original music score 1930 by Jack Ellitt

Arranged 1989 by William Moritz

Realized and performed on piano 2005 by Donald Sosin

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