

# Jochen Lempert at Culturgest, Lisbon

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Oiseaux - Vögel, 1997/1999.

Seen one at a time, Jochen Lempert's black-and-white photographs of the natural world and its inhabitants do not make great claims upon a viewer. Some have artless compositions; others seem out of focus or to have no subject at all. Encountered in aggregate, however, as in *Field Work*, the first major survey of Lempert's photographs presented outside his native Germany, they possess a quietly mesmeric force. [This exhibition](#), organized by Miguel Wandschneider, was an unforeseen revelation. Its scores of images, printed at modest scale on thick paper that the artist allows to warp slightly as it dries, were presented unframed, either singly or in rows and grids according to subject. These arrangements collapsed the distinctions between documentary naturalism and lyrical Conceptualism, the two contemporary photographic genres into which one is tempted to slot Lempert's work. That Lempert's silver-gelatin prints look more like charcoal drawings than they do conventional photographs further accentuates the artist's singular achievement.

Lempert trained as a biologist before embarking upon his work as a photographer in the early 1990s, and the scientist's rigorous avidity was one of this exhibition's leitmotifs. He pursues his (mostly avian) subjects intently, finding them both in the field—whether urban or rural—and in the natural history museum. One series

of images, each printed smaller than a sheet of letter-size paper, depicts lone cormorants moving gracefully through various urban environments: one is silhouetted against the sky between an imposing skyscraper façade and the delicate filigree of tree branches; another hovers just above a river's surface at the bottom of a picture dominated by an apartment tower and a bridge. Still others register the concentric ripples set off by the birds' feet as they flap across unknown waterways, evoking Adam Fuss's tranquil studies of splashes. Several other series, arrayed in grids, depict the heads and beaks of various taxidermy specimens in a uniform style, calling to mind not only the presentations in natural-history museums but also Richard Prince's collections of women extracted from advertisements and Bernd and Hilla Becher's industrial censuses.

A vein of romanticism counterbalanced these quasi-scientific investigations—and not every photograph has as its subject a bird or birds. One series, *A Voyage on the North Sea* (2007), includes six images of roiling waves cropped so that each presents the same horizon line. The quixotic nature of the endeavor—how could one document the sea in a systematic manner?—belies the uniformity of the presentation. In another gallery, five pictures of “photosynthesis”—lovely images of sunlight streaming through trees—were juxtaposed with a photographs of fire: depictions of the production of energy were neatly counterbalanced with depictions of its consumption. Lempert's most abstruse and poetic collection of images, *Symmetry and Architecture of the Body* (1997-2005), was presented in the final gallery. Here one encountered photographs of coral, a flamingo, the back of a man's head, a goat, a goose, and a tattoo of a bat on a woman's shoulder, among other subjects. Rendered in the same unselfconscious style as many of the other photographs included here, the esoteric links between these images—they cohered visually but the logic of the juxtapositions remained elusive—further stressed what had become increasingly apparent as one moved through the show. Far from being mere “nature studies,” Lempert's photographs are evidence of an artistic sensibility compelled to wrest order from circumstance, and, through the tight control of progression, variation, focus, scale, and exposure, to make of this order something enchanting.