

BARCELONA

HONTORIA, J.-*Artforum*, march 2015

Jochen Lempert

PROJECTESD

Jochen Lempert's photography is unmistakably black-and-white, mostly printed in small and medium formats, and invariably unframed. Just as constant has been his disinterest in the dazzling enticements of contemporary urban life. Instead, the Hamburg-based artist has been impelled—throughout a career now spanning some two decades—by a deeply rooted fascination with fauna, flora, and the slow and seemingly elusive drift of natural phenomena. In many cases, air itself plays the leading role, its apparent emptiness stretching right across the image to unfold as tangibly as the insects, plants, or animals it seizes. In the dense and porous atmospheres of Lempert's work, such motifs might be just barely perceptible.

For Lempert, the printed photograph has only a little to do with what was captured by the camera; he is a tenacious advocate of analog photography and does much of his work in the darkroom, where the image undergoes decisive formal transformations. It is also difficult to make out what the final presentation will be, because the artist is keen on creating synergistic groups of images that focus on a common formal or conceptual concern, though one that is often difficult to discern. These families of images are subsequently pinned up in meticulous compositions. Seen globally, his presentations look open and organic, somehow evoking the iconographies they embrace. An exhibition by Lempert, or one of his books, can be thought of as a breathing creature.

Lempert's art is as rich in linguistic propositions as it is visually moving. His background is in science, but his relation with truth is somewhat complicated. In his practice, reality is systematically undermined by the poetry of chance, and the will to rigorously classify or to catalogue the world's species is shown as merely indulgent. *Salvia*, 2013, for instance, is a pair of close-ups of vividly sunlit sage plants. We might



Jochen Lempert,
Untitled (Feathers),
2014, gelatin silver
print, 20 × 15¾".

spark unforeseeable connections. Conceptual and formal analogies slide across their surfaces, unchecked by frames, creating connections that grow in space. In one of the best moments of the show, *Salvia* hung near another close-up, *Untitled (Feathers)*, 2014. In this piece, the bridge between signifier and signified could not have been more eloquent, as the dense texture of the subject's surface brought it closer to the realm of the tactile than of the visual—one felt the feathers might be blown by the slightest breeze. Next to them was *Poppy Flowers*, 2012, a beautiful triptych of abstract photograms, as ethereal as the neighboring image of a cup of steamy tea (*Untitled [Green Tea]*, 2014). Here, green was a notion inhabiting some corner of our consciousness, a colorless concept succinctly evoked by a vaporous trail—like almost everything in Lempert's suggestive work.

—Javier Hontoria

wonder why Lempert made a diptych out of this shot until we notice, on looking more closely, the tiny bug that must have landed unexpectedly on one of the herb's leaves right after the first shot. Knowing that the artist is also a biologist, one is hard-pressed not to see his practice as flirting with the boundaries between the scientific and the artistic. From the perspective of modernity, both fall into a sea of deception as they turn hesitant about their own assumptions and defiant toward their own rules. Lempert's subversion of the severity of science seems clear enough, but how does he transcend the restrictions of photographic language—he, the great apologist of its traditional analog method?

Lempert's photographs are associative. When they coexist in pairs, triptychs, or larger ensembles, they