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CULTURE

From 'The Skins of Alca impennis' (1990–2016) | © JOCHEN LEMPERT. COURTESY BQ, BERLIN AND PROJECTESD, BARCELONA

ART

Jochen Lempert: The photographic seer

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Jochen Lempert's exhibition "Fieldwork" at the Izu Photo Museum has an ageless feel to it. The intentionally low contrast pictures of wildlife and natural phenomena almost look like they could be archive photos unearthed from the mid-19th century. However, they also have the cool nonchalance of 1970s conceptual art. This ability to straddle and connect the seemingly disparate is a key point in Lempert's work, and is possible through a careful attention to the details of presentation.

The British inventor of photography William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-77) titled the world's first commercial book of photographs "The Pencil of Nature," and this could also describe the unifying muted gray tones and subdued authorial voice that Lempert uses to encourage us to consider what is being looked at and why, rather than focusing on the aesthetics or drama of individual prints.

The behavior and qualities of leaf-cutter ants, deer, migrating birds, water, air and occasionally people are observed and juxtaposed in imagery that draws on the Lempert's background in biology and his investigation of life and matter.

In one photograph Lempert's presents a cyanotype of an algae specimen by British botanist and photographer Anna Atkins (1799-1871). Lempert shows the originally white-and-blue silhouette — created by exposing a botanical sample on a sheet of sensitized paper to sunlight — being displayed on a computer monitor. Lempert's image is in black and white, back-to-front, and reversed tonally, thus showing Atkins' algae as a positive image. It's a sotto voce jump across time and technology similar to, but less operatic than Stanley Kubrick's famous match cut of a femur turning into a space satellite in "2001: A Space Odyssey."

Allusions to evolution abound throughout the exhibition, and these are not limited to biological development, but also to the changing practices of photography. As well as looking back to the 19th century, Lempert references the early 20th-century work of the German new objectivity movement, particularly the plant images of Karl Blossfeldt, as well as the postwar rigorous typological format of Bernd and Hilla Becher. By unambiguously quoting other artists, Lempert takes us up to the self-referentiality of late 20th to early 21st-century postmodernism. As an exercise in the observation of evolution and correspondence, the form of Lempert's exhibition neatly follows function.

Fluency in the language of photography can add to the enjoyment of "Fieldwork," but it's not essential. The exhibition works on an intuitive and sensorial level, too. It's possible to skim through the exhibition without being drawn in deeply by any single photo but notice, for example, that a starfish has five appendages like Japanese finger socks, that the bi-coloration of a salamander's feet can be seen on the handgrip of a bicycle or that the pattern of the concrete wall of the 1929 Barcelona Pavilion by Mies Van Der Rohe resembles the structure of a spider's web. There may or may not be a deep significance to these observations, which vary in their degree of subtlety and to some extent are free-floating associations, but there is pleasure in the discovery.

The esoteric art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) pioneered the investigation of images with images in his "Mnemosyne Atlas," and Lempert's work, with its purely pictorial discourse, was used to help celebrate Warburg's 150th birthday anniversary in 2016 when it was included in a commemorative exhibition at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe. Warburg compared paintings, sculpture and photographic documentation from across history and cultures in order to gain a greater understanding of the passions and fears of the human animal. Lempert extends this form of research to all animals, and this is a particularly interesting proposition to consider in Japan, where the pantheism of Shinto has trickled down through the centuries to become the often-repeated narrative that "Japanese people love nature."

"Fieldwork," in part, uses photography to highlight the fact that human vision and the cognitive process of visual perception are not the same thing. In the context of looking at animal behavior and the forms and patterns of nature, Lempert suggests that there is much to be gained by considering our surroundings without assuming the pre-eminence of human consciousness.

However, while there may be a love of nature on Lempert's part — his series on the great auk, "The Skins of *Alca impennis* (1990-2016)," shows that he's willing to scour the globe for his obsession — the calm neutrality of his work's presentation seems to indicate that he understands that nature has no compunction to love us back.

The cool, contemplative and usually underpopulated space of the Izu Photo Museum is especially suited to Lempert’s work; they are both restrained and orderly in design, but sympathetically and humanly scaled — that is to say, not oversized for the sake of shock and awe. “Fieldwork” suggests the hope of transcendence and a desire to step outside quotidian human perception. Lempert’s accomplishment is that he shows it’s not necessary to leave the realms of scientific reason or the materiality of the perceivable world in order to do that.

“Jochen Lempert: Fieldwork” at Izu Photo Museum runs until April 2; Jan. 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m.; Feb.-March until 5 p.m.; April until 6 p.m. ¥800. Closed Wed. www.izuphoto-museum.jp (<http://www.izuphoto-museum.jp>)

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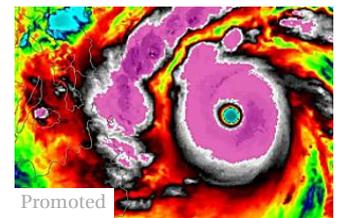
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