

Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle

**Stephan Balkenhol, Leiko Ikemura,
Maximilian Rödel, Thomas Ruff,
Thomas Struth, Thu Van Tran**

Poetics of Nature

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Thomas Struth, Hecke, Feldberger Seenlandschaft 2021, 2024, Inkjet print, 138,2 x 182,9 cm, Edition 4/6, © Thomas Struth, 2025

We are pleased to announce the group exhibition “Poetics of Nature”. This themed exhibition focuses on various work cycles by Stephan Balkenhol, Leiko Ikemura, Maximilian Rödel, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth and Thu-Van Tran. Through diverse media and art historical traditions, the selected works converge in their sensory approach to nature. They illuminate nature’s transformative potential to reflect its inherent cyclical nature as a fundamental principle in our experienced world, re- and deconstructing nature’s character facets as an archetypal place of longing and refuge. Yet in an efficiency- and speed-driven, technoid society, nature is also increasingly exposed to interference and processes of change through the Anthropocene and the view of nature as an exploitable resource; a complex ambivalence that is also subtly made visible in the exhibition.

Thomas Struth’s artwork “Ellsworth Schist, Rockport, Maine 2021” reveals itself only through slow and contemplative observation. What initially appears abstract, painterly, even graphic, gradually assembles into a primeval rock formation with meandering, rocky lines of artificial beauty. Its shape inevitably merges with the surrounding dense fauna combining into an inseparable entity of light and shadow. This vertical, sweeping composition contrasts the horizontally conceived image “Hecke, Feldberger Seenlandschaft 2021”, which captivates with its clarity and tranquility. Towering upwards, the woody brown of the sparse hedge is juxtaposed against the clear, white freshly fallen snow and the diffuse, gleaming white winter sky. In a reduced color palette with an inverted effect black to white ratio, the two works portray nature shining as a refuge in all its contemplative magic. The work “Dreck, CERN, Saint Genis-Pouilly 2021” shows a chaotic collection of useless remnants of discarded experimental set-ups in an inner courtyard of the world-famous CERN research center in Geneva. Metal fittings, plastic fragments, cable ties of various thicknesses and colors on and in the sand refer to the experimental character and the high iteration speed of this renowned research facility. Here the substance of our being and the essence of the universe is explored and revealed through fundamental physical research. Resembling an imagined future archaeological excavation site, the work is both a poetic symbol and a memorial, revealing the incessant striving for transcendence, infinity and gaining knowledge while at the same time raising awareness of the fragility and vulnerability of our organic ecosystem. Like a future archaeological excavation, the work is both a poetic symbol and a memorial. The work reveals the incessant journey towards transcendence, infinity and the acquisition of knowledge. At the same time, the work raises awareness of the fragility and vulnerability of our organic ecosystem. With the works shown, Struth questions untouched nature as well as the benefits and consequences of humanity’s striving for progress. What promise of salvation is associated with technology and what are the consequences of the human ability to shape and transform the environment in ever more drastic ways? The sculptural quality particularly evident in the artist’s technical works is also revealed in these organic images.

Leiko Ikemura’s works live from their inherent transcendence. They freeze a moment of becoming or of transition. That which is indeterminate and ambiguous, constantly changing, condensing and dissolving, essential, organic and scenic elements seem to merge in amorphous configurations. Created since 2020, the glass sculptures seem to bundle light within themselves. They develop autonomous luminescent forces, which give the hybrid figure a unique contour and shape as well as a weightlessness. The sculpture “violet mountain” can be seen as the head of a resting figure where plant-like structures grow upwards at the ear. Yet viewed from the front, the sculpture’s cratered irregularity can also be read as a mountain range. As an expression of a process of condensation and simultaneous

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dissolution, the organic hybrid creatures seem to refer to natural cyclicity as a basic principle of our perceptible universe.

A profound interest in the Anthropocene and its effects is also evident in the historic and materially based works of the Vietnamese-French artist Thu Van Tran. In her series “colors of grey”, the Paris-based artist uses color and material allegorically. She creates cloudy or foggy configurations through complex layering and blending of pigment-lime-water mixture in white, pink, blue, green, purple and orange. The shapes are borrowed from nature. Sometimes they offer a glimpse of a landscape hidden behind a misty veil. Organic, leaf-like shapes often appear, while other images in the series capture the mood of the night. Despite its immediate absence, nature seems omnipresent in Thu Van Tran’s associative works. The bronze sculptures in the series “Novel without a title” contrast the gestural abstract paintings with solid figures that appear deceptively real. They rest on the ground like fallen tropical leaves in the process of decomposing. They allow us to immerse ourselves in the natural, all-connected life cycle of the tropical forest. Once detached from the plant, the leaf begins to decompose assisted by numerous microorganisms on the ground then to serve as nutritious soil to grow plants.

Maximilian Rödel's characteristic color abstract oil paintings exude a temporal and spatial force via their intensified atmospheric expression. On the canvas, the color diffuses; it condenses, lying like a nebulous veil over areas of the picture or sometimes unfolding into a dazzling radiance. In Rödel’s works, color itself is elevated to the picture’s central subject transcending its original role as a representational medium. The complex and multi-layered compositions trigger fundamental reflections on the Anthropocene dissolving boundaries, opening space and immersing the viewer, allowing associations and yet intangible and hidden. In art history, the classic line of American Abstract Expressionism (emerging in New York in the 1940s and 50s with its numerous sub-currents) treats the artist's canvas surfaces as a field of vision without a central focal point. The result is a transcendental act of viewing, characterized by both the immediacy of the sensory experience and the profound contemplation potential coming from it. Stemming from the history of abstraction, these characteristics are translated into contemporary and timeless paintings of dazzlingly beautiful and raw imagery.

Thomas Ruff's constellations are among his most iconic motifs. Motivated by his early fascination with astronomy and the universe, the artist's work began using external images with his series “Sterne” (1989-1992). In 1989 Thomas Ruff acquired a copy of the negative archive of the European Southern Observatory (an international research center in Chile) taken with a special telescopic lens to document the visible universe. Ruff selected sections of the negatives and enlarged them. The resulting compositions do not follow any scientific methodology. Instead, Ruff’s own visual criteria manifests an ancient search for meaning in the sky. Ruff’s series “d.o.pe.” follows this tradition and equally embodies an interest in the natural sciences – in this case mathematics. For “d.o.pe” Thomas Ruff used computer software to generate psychedelic-looking images that draw the viewer in with their richly colored fractals. The fractal – a self-similar, geometric structure consisting of scaled-down versions of itself – was first introduced as a mathematical term by Benoît Mandelbrot in the 1970s. Mandelbrot succeeded in visualizing this structure with the help of early computer representations. The series title is an acronym of Aldous Huxley's autobiographical essay “The Doors of Perception” from 1954, in which he describes his experiences of consciousness after taking mescaline to expand his mind. In his series “d.o.pe”. Thomas Ruff skillfully combines these two phenomena with the latest software of the 2020s, allowing us to immerse ourselves in seemingly endless dimensions in which the color only takes on its three-dimensional effect through the image carrier. The artificially generated images are printed on velour carpet. The velvety surface of the fabric enhances the perception of depth in these fascinating visual worlds.

People are continually at the center of Stephan Balkenhol's work. They undergo a unique transformation in his famous hybrid creatures (rabbit man, ant man, poodle lady, rooster man, lion man, and industrious mouse man) crafted as classic wawa wood sculptures. Balkenhol's work is rich with motifs and humor. A human body is typically fused to an animal face, and additional details (like a cat's tail) may be added. It almost appears as if the protagonists are wearing masks. In this group of works, the artist adeptly captures the unique expressions and human characteristics of these figures with remarkable ease. The rapid traces of his tools remain visible. The recognition value of his stereotypical women and men has been so masterfully perfected over the years that one cannot escape their presence. Their appearance is so familiar from everyday life that Balkenhol's faces are often described as a mirror reflecting our times. (Text: Y. Kaiser. Translation: J. Balton-Stier)