

Balthasar Burkhard

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by Lynn Kost

Photographs capture moments. A glimpse is extracted from the flow of time and preserved. Temporality attaches to the photograph, however. Viewers instinctively seek to participate in the moment depicted; they reconstruct a before and an after, a narrative without a context. In a certain way their imagination re-starts the flow of time frozen in the image. Balthasar Burkhard's photos are different. The use of black and white is their only structural device. Motifs, objects and scenes emerge from the darkness, as if the photographer had placed them in front of a neutral backdrop. Burkhard manages to "compose" still lifes without staging them. Our focus is wholly absorbed by the motifs, which seem to appear naturally, without forcing themselves on the viewer. Even a complex sprawl such as the rainforest on the Rio Negro, its complexity doubled by its reflection in the river, appears like a careful composition that directs our gaze. Burkhard's photographs do not capture a moment, referring to a time before and after; this is a photography of the timeless image. It emerges even more clearly in the photographs Normandie (1995) and Japan (Kumano) (2005). Sea surf and waterfalls are symbols of change. Unlike the objects in a still life they cannot be arranged into an ideal image that takes on a symbolic meaning outside time and space. Moving waters will not hold still for that – yet, in Burkhard's photographs, they seem to do so. The sea surf becomes a painting that extends time, not capturing the dynamic movement of the sea, but setting it free. Looking at this image, we are not interested in time, place, or photographic technique. Photography, here, is pure energy; it becomes something akin to action painting. The waterfall in turn becomes a sculpture. Places, histories, contexts, before and after – it all seems irrelevant when looking at these pictures. Completely timeless, these photographs' motifs are encountered in categories such as silence and solitude, movement and monumentality. They replace our investigative and comparative gaze with contemplation.

Born December 24th 1944 in Bern, died 16th April 2010 in Bern