



Nature Studies:

Gregory Crewdson

Adam Fuss

Hiroshi Sugimoto

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Nature Studies

It has become increasingly clear as we pass through the mid-1990s that “smart art,” which has forsaken visual tantalization for the dreariness of pedagogical posturing, has run its course. Audiences fed up with reams of text or arch arrangements of didactic props presented under the guise of art have begun to resent the harangues that are all-too-common in institutional installations. Yet these same viewers, products of a critical culture that is not easily hoodwinked by thoughtless artifice, want a retinal experience that can be as intellectually engaging as it is beautiful. The most successful art today must be both smart and sexy, engaging equally the senses

and the cerebellum in order to stretch restlessly short attention spans.

The three photographers grouped together in *Nature Studies* make exactly this type of effort, luring viewers into a challenging space of inquiry with arresting, impeccably crafted pictures. With the natural world as their material and conceptual launching pad, Gregory Crewdson, Adam Fuss and Hiroshi Sugimoto probe in their photographs the mystery, majesty and menace of nature, but also its mediation by the far-reaching controls of culture.

Whereas many photographers of the past turned their lenses toward the unbuilt and organic environment with the naive pretense of documentarian objectivity, Crewdson, Fuss and Sugimoto

recognize the various levels of contingency and control that govern photographic interpretations of nature. Crewdson cues viewers to the fact that his photographs are undoubtedly products of his own imagination through the use of stagy props and backdrops for his “natural” tableaux. Fuss’ subjects are often immediately recognizable as organic and familiar, but, like Crewdson’s, framed within the subjective space of studio practice. Sugimoto’s elegant black-and-white prints at first appear to be skillful recordings of exotic animal behavior, but once one learns they have been taken within the safe confines of natural history museums, their artificiality becomes unavoidably unsettling. In each case, human culture assumes an obvious position of power in the presentation of that archetypically free and wild portion of our world labeled Nature.

For Crewdson, one has to look no further than the backyard to find the boundless energies of the animal and insect kingdoms at work. Usually placed within eyeshot of suburban dwellings and their accompanying extensions of manicured lawns and neat fences, Crewdson’s central subjects are fantastical rituals carried out by nonhuman species. Scenarios that have a convincing civility show intelligent birds convening a religious ceremony that could be a fertility rite or metaphysical divination, or a chipmunk assembling a proper burial for a deceased aviary friend. The insect community in Crewdson’s photographs is usually characterized by a more violent, gang-oriented mentality, whether it is represented by beetles launching a strategic attack on a stalactitic cactus or butterflies piled into an orgiastic heap of scintillating color. In either instance, cherished prejudices about birds, bugs and other critters are reiterated and played out in cinematic settings that dramatize our biases to a seemingly vertical extent. Worms are as disgusting and slovenly as we ever imagined them to be in Crewdson’s image of a group of annelids ravenously devouring a mucousy gourd. In another picture, moths mindlessly congregate outside the window of an illuminated domestic interior, while more sensible winged vertebrates conduct sophisticated business in the wooded fringes of many of Crewdson’s photos.

The natural world that Crewdson so provocatively presents is rarely in sync with what one knows actually happens



Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled*, 1992, chromogenic color print, 40" x 30", collection Johnson County Community College



Adam Fuss, *Untitled*, 1993, photogram, 40" x 30", courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

in nature. Rather, his imaginative dramas utilize animal and insect actors to impersonate human conceptions and projections about familiar fauna. At the same time that Crewdson entertains viewers with the engrossing beauty and fantasy of his fastidiously crafted stage sets, the artist reveals the common indulgences of the human imagination in its tendency to see and think through the filter of a circumscribed set of assumptions.

In Adam Fuss' radiant photograms, nature is transformed and reallocated through the very process of his artmaking. In several different bodies of work, Fuss has placed organic materials directly on Cibachrome paper, where an amazing interaction between those objects and the chemical properties of the film takes place, revealed only after the paper is exposed to light and printed. This most

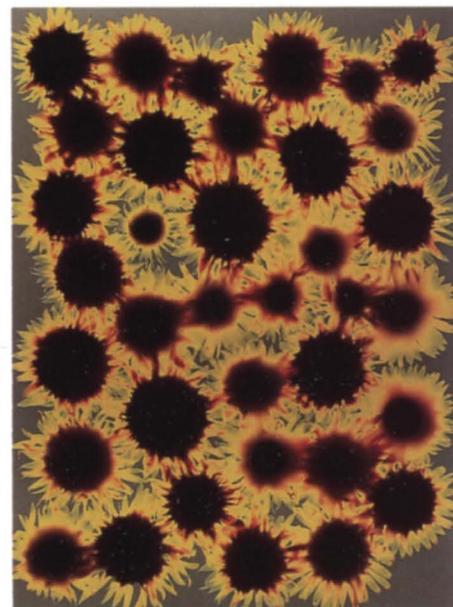
straightforward process, where Fuss has even disposed of the camera, has yielded results that are anything but simplistic – coloristically or conceptually.

Underlying the undeniable beauty of many of Fuss' images is a simmering violence at odds with the ebullient bursts of high-keyed hues. This invigorating tension is most evident in the *Details of Love* series, in which Technicolor skeins create an all-over pattern that immediately brings to mind the Abstract Expressionist paintings of Jackson Pollock and Sam Francis. These works can be wholly enjoyable as decorative abstractions until it is revealed that the splatters of saturated indigo, fuchsia and chartreuse are the chemical aftereffects of rabbit intestines laid out on the photo paper. This revelation is made more explicit in images where the animal's carcass is included in

the composition, its dark silhouette anchoring the riotous innards with somber punctuation, but once the secret is out, no matter how abstract the image appears, a gnawing sense of violation counterbalances its visual pleasure.

A subtler, but still palpable, conflict is felt in the series of flower pictures Fuss has created in the past few years, in which sunflowers, nasturtiums, water lilies and calla lilies have been plucked from their natural habitat with their leaves and root systems intact, to be imaged in the same manner as the rabbit photograms. The vivid, surreal colors that describe the floral forms are so hot, and the space of these images so shallow and compressed, that the flowers seem to be victims of some type of nuclear radiation, caught the instant before dissolving into thin air. The dangling, delicate roots that define the bottoms of the plants further suggest a life-threatening intervention, lending the works an aura of profanity paradoxical to typical representations of flowers. Fuss' ability to accommodate such divergent interpretations of nature within what would seem to be the most direct and objective of reproductive processes highlights the inherent subjectivity of all forms of representation.

Hiroshi Sugimoto has revealed himself to be a photographer of uncommon versatility, effortlessly shifting from indoors to outdoors, man-made to natural, banal to sublime in several distinct bodies of work. In all of his photographs, from incandescent movie screens to awe-inspiring ocean vistas and disturbing



Adam Fuss, *Untitled*, 1993, photogram, 40" x 30", courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco



Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Gemsbok*, 1980, black-and-white photograph, 20" x 24", courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York

wax museum studies, Sugimoto pries at the edges of perception, finding the fissures where vision and knowledge cohere or slip apart. The series of pictures taken in natural history museums explores a similar territory, but one that has particular relevance to contemporary conceptions of nature and concomitant issues of representational veracity.

Framed as they are, Sugimoto's photographs remove any identifiable context that could tie his tableaux to the contrivances of museum display. The crisp clarity of the images and the engaging subjects of wildlife make for believable mementos of travel to far-off places. Yet learning of the real location of Sugimoto's photo shoots forces the viewer to re-examine his or her suspension of disbelief. The image of underwater sea life seemed so convincing, but the hand-painted background, on closer

inspection, isn't quite seamless. Altogether too much of the African animal population is visible in the image of vultures gathering for lunch on the savanna. Likewise, the pack of Nordic wolves marching across the frosty tundra is perhaps too ordered and well-behaved in their trans-territorial trek. And yet, all the cool-headed criticality one can muster is often not enough to fight the disarming gravitational pull of these visual yarns. The camera's ability to make the fake appear compellingly real is exposed to a disconcerting degree in Sugimoto's work, but is not the solitary, or even central, appeal of his photographs.

In photo after photo of low-tech trickery, Sugimoto points to our culture's love of illusion and artifice, a tradition of visual escapism that dates back through millennia. Nature, and especially that of

the potentially dangerous type, is often best viewed from the safe distance representation affords, an experiential detachment the artist recognizes equally as social construct and source of enduring pleasure. The evenhandedness of Sugimoto's presentation allows room for both critique and compassion, satisfying intellectual doubt and imaginative escape in a single gesture. Like the other photographers in *Nature Studies*, Sugimoto has found image making to be the most effective method for provoking concentrated yet nuanced reflections on nature, finding that the most familiar facts often make for the best kind of fiction.

— Michael Darling

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Cover: Gregory Crewdson, *Untitled*, 1994, chromogenic color print, 30" x 40", courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York