

Thomas Ruff

January 7 – February 17, 2006

Thomas Ruff is one of the most important German photographers of his generation. A student of Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf from 1977 till 1985, he thereafter systematized a personal, rigorous approach of the photographic medium. Famed for his series of portraits, nudes and substrates, he has ever since exhibited throughout the world, his main focus being the viewer's perception of the image. The present exhibition at the Nelson Gallery features his last series: the Jpegs.

This series is made up of images borrowed from the web, of mangas and photo negatives, which he has ultimately processed. The sources, as we see, are varied: the large majority, borrowed from the net stores, have generally been widely circulated. Some are pictures of his own, others are scanned from travel brochures. Once processed on his computer, these images are undecipherable, amounting to a mosaic of pixels. From a distance one can distinguish their subjects: landscapes, peaceful views of the Paris Jardin du Luxembourg, architectural monuments juxtaposed with images of disasters (volcanic eruptions or bombardments). Some images are more easily identified than others having been widely circulated in the medias, such as the New York Twin Tower on September 11th. The viewer's perception is nonetheless confused due to the larger number of dots per inches which diminish the impact conveyed by these frightful images. In a like manner, a reduced "high definition" of the Nudes introduces distance between image and real subject.

Thomas Ruff presents us with some "abc book" of the contemporary world. The series starts with "aa" (American architecture), followed by "bu" (bunkers) and ends up with "wi" (war in Iraq). Such a wide variety of images is not innocent on the part of Thomas Ruff: the artist endeavors to prove that the images capture "the surface of reality" only. Processing the images on the computer, as in the substrate series, empties them of content and original meaning. Don't we — saturated of images as we are from "googling" the world wide web — distinguish colors and light only? Thomas Ruff's specific technique of pixel processing introduces a new dimension in the artist's works which, at times, clearly evoke the painterly technique of a Caspar David Friedrich, the German romantic painter.

The absolute neutrality of his pictures confirms Thomas Ruff's denial of any journalese approach in his work. His interest zeroes in on our own image consumption and the way views, rather familiar and real — once taken out of their original context — are deprived of meaning for the viewer. Image processing is central to his creative practice and here again, we are the admirers of his brilliant demonstration. However, in the last resort, it is our task — spectators that we are — to interpret what we see.