

# Joachim Schmeisser

## Side Effects

The Essence of Photography

by Marc Peschke

Is there magic in photography? Is photography itself magic? We wonder about such questions while considering the new series of "Side Effects – The Essence of Photography" by Joachim Schmeisser. The series of works is one of those few genuinely surprising, captivating and innovative examples of contemporary photography, also because it presents its theme as the fundamental principles of the medium itself.

Joachim Schmeisser established a reputation for his iconic pictures of animals – in particular, his portraits of elephants. His current series, "Side Effects", juxtaposes the majestic beauty of endangered animals with a highly contrasted aesthetic, namely, the beauty of unprocessed analogue film material. His basic material comprises exposed first clips of films, produced between 1975 and 2006, which the artist collected over many years. Every film emulsion has its own unique structure, he says. Films like Ektachrome 64, Ektachrome 100, Kodachrome, Fuji Velvia, Fuji Provia, Polaroid Polachrome or Polaroid Polapan are also clearly differentiated in their many distinctive variants.

The artistic process begins with scanning the individual film clips that have been significantly enlarged in size. By means of a complicated digital process, which does not alter the original quality of the individual clips, the artist develops a hybrid analogue–digital artwork, which takes us back to the essence of the photographic image. In other words, "Side Effects" pays homage to photographic emulsion, to the light-sensitive solution that the film is coated with. This beginning of the photographic process involves something that has been associated with the term "magical" many times in the past.

Susan Sontag, William Henry Fox Talbot and particularly Walter Benjamin emphasized in their work what Benjamin called the "magical value" of photography. Those who have experienced the darkroom are familiar with the astonishment about the analogue photographic process. Early on in his career, Joachim Schmeisser discovered what, nowadays, he calls a "magical trace". This can appear when the shutter takes several exposures to forward a film to the shooting position, as he explains. "It is about unnoticed, accidental exposures that, occasionally, capture the perfect transition to light-sensitive film emulsion. Mostly over- or underexposed, they show pastel hues or crimson colour patches, which grow out of the uncoated, still black film surface, and leading in certain films and developments to bizarre expressionist forms that, in some cases, are reminiscent of cosmic or microcosmic structures."

These accidental, unintentional "Side Effects" are what usually gets cut and discarded. Schmeisser has been using this material since 2022 to create artworks, which – although subjected to a digital process – are also a throwback to the early era of photography when the medium was described as "magical handiwork".

Walter Benjamin referred in his essay "A Short History of Photography" (1931) to the "magical value" of photography. That is, he meant rather a unique accident when he stated: "It is a different nature which speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye: so different that in place of a space consciously woven together by a man on the spot there enters a space held together unconsciously." The same can also be said of the "Side Effects", whose accidental character leads, at the artist's hand, to the creation of pictures whose effect is quite overwhelming.

These pictures come to the fore at the present time from the legacy of films, many of which are vintage and now no longer produced. They are very diverse, abstract visual images, which are also reminiscent of the art-historical relevance of painting. For example, the colour field painting of American artists such as Mark Rothko produced much the same style in the 1950s.

Keeping in mind the example of Rothko: the visual effect of the often heavily reworked surface structure of his paintings reflects the spectrum of human emotional states. This also resonates with the "Side Effects": sometimes luminous, then gloomy; sometimes harmonious, then full of tensions; sometimes impulsive, then introspective and meditative; sometimes warm, then cold; they are a mirror of these feelings. A mirror that doesn't manage without its counterpart. As Rothko himself once stated: "A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token."

Barnett Newman is another representative example of American colour field painting. Newman became famous in the 1950s for his paintings with their distinctive colourful bands, for his monochrome fields of colour and vertical bands, which he called "zips". Newman painted "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?" between 1966 and 1970, a cycle of paintings that has become iconic of 20th-century art. Newman repeatedly used the term "sublime" to describe his artwork and defined it as a "metaphysical experience of the sublime". In his essay "The Sublime Is Now" (1948), he explains how colour is the most important medium of expression in his works. Newman's painterly abstractions are charged with deep intellectual meaning – that connects them with the "Side Effects". Newman treated abstraction as a vehicle to reflect ideas, myths and emotions.

In fact, the "Side Effects" series also requires sensitive observers. The pictures are testimony to a completely unseen, entirely astonishing abstract photographic expressionism. The long tradition of abstract art is prolonged here by writing another chapter, with a series that stands alone in contemporary photographic art and derives its eloquence from a seductive mixture of beauty and magic. The artist goes back with this series to the essence of photography as abstraction of reality.

There is something ineffable in this. It is something that is not completely accessible to rational thought. At the same time, these pictures are also proof of "Concrete Photography" in the sense of photographer and photo-theorist, Gottfried Jäger, because they are not "abstractions of something, but concretize something, something new."

We can discover so much and always something new in the vivid, wonderful pictures of the series – they are different from what we usually see otherwise. They come from a completely original world, from the inner world of the camera and they also remind us that a photograph need not necessarily depict something. To put this again in Jäger's terms: these light traces point out something that was previously hidden: "The photograph only comes into its own by foregoing reproduced and depicted elements, and it can advance to its innate foundation, to a syntax, which otherwise would remain obscured."

As much as the artist's hand was also at work here in creating these photographs, they tell of limitless freedom that seems to prevail in the camera's darkroom. They explore the basic principles of the photographic process, and yet in great beauty they indicate how the physical is transferred to the spiritual dimension. Is there magic in photography? We can also contemplate this question while we make our observations.

Finally, we can reflect, too, on what connection ties these pictures to us as observers. We could interpret them as a mirror of our emotional states. They seem in a strange way to be very close to human experiences, close to our fear, joy, life and death.

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