

September 2019
Press Release

Guido Baselgia As If the World Were There to Be Measured

Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur, 19 October 2019 to 16 February 2020
Private press viewing: Friday, 18 October 2019, 10 a.m. – 12 noon
Tour of the exhibition with Guido Baselgia and curator Teresa Gruber: 10:30 a.m.,
opening event: starting at 6 p.m.

Known for his photographs of landscapes of stone and ice – extremely dense black and white compositions on the verge of abstraction – Guido Baselgia ventures in a surprising new direction with his latest cycle of works. The specialist for austerity and emptiness has made the transition to abundance: his photographs of the tropical rainforest in the Amazon Basin explore the representability of a habitat that is so pervasive in the collective visual consciousness, a landscape at the crossroads of geopolitical controversies due to its acute endangerment. The exhibition at the Fotostiftung Schweiz is showing Guido Baselgia's photographs from eastern Ecuador for the very first time.

The new work opens up another chapter in the series of Baselgia's work cycles. Seen in sequence, his projects of the past twenty years almost read like a creation myth: images of lifeless wasteland are followed by the stars above, then by vegetation and humankind. The photographer pursues elementary questions and crosses the paths of famous explorers on his travels, but his pictures testify to a very nuanced view. The world no longer needs to be mapped, there are no more white spots, today we have become critical of the utilitarian and colonialist gesture inherent in measuring the world. Looking at photographs from remote parts of the world now prompts us to reflect on the conditions of our reception.

Prelude

In the late 1990s, Baselgia, equipped with the tool of the industrial and architectural photographer – the large-format camera – began translating mountains and valleys of the Engadine region into images. However, he avoided reproducing the familiar panoramas and concentrated on forms and structures that are difficult to localise. Baselgia's work in the Alps drew his attention to the phenomenon of the tree line and its dependence on altitude and latitude. On journeys to the Barents Sea and the Andes, he photographed snow deserts at sea level and wastelands at altitudes of over 4000 metres. Following the work cycles *Hochland* (2002), *Weltraum* (2004) and *Silberschicht* (2008), Baselgia grouped his photographs taken between 2006 and 2014 under the title *Light Fall*, dedicated to the manifestations of the sun path over the horizon and the resulting light moods.

Baselgia's interest in climate zones finally brought him to Ecuador in 2013, where a wide variety of landscapes intersect in a small area. The steep decline of the Andes leads from the glaciers of the tierra nevada to the tropical zone of the tierra caliente, also known as oriente. This first confrontation with the rainforest made such a lasting impression on Baselgia that it gave rise to the idea for his latest project. After preparatory research and material tests, he embarked on two trips in 2018 and 2019, each lasting several weeks, with the help of contact persons and assistants.

Images of the jungle

Baselgia approaches the jungle by perceiving it as a multitude of small worlds. On the one hand, his work is once again grounded in geologically and climatically distinct zones, on the other hand he searches for images that reflect a characteristic mood of the respective zone. The photographs from the cloud forest overgrown with lichens, ferns and orchids suggest an external point of view: draped against a white curtain of condensed humidity, the plants appear as fragile silhouettes. While the cloud forest still offers open spaces, the image compositions become denser the further Baselgia ventures into the forest. But even in the thick of the tropics, he succeeds in photographically isolating shapes: sweeping vines, tangled branches and monumental trunks. This series of almost sculptural plant details reminiscent of Karl Blossfeldt's work is complemented by views that refuse to give a foothold to the observing eye. It becomes lost in the depth of a restless clutter of leaves. A horizon only opens out in the images of the Aguas Negras region, where isolated plants protrude from the still, black water and, through their symmetrical reflection, accentuate the line that divides the image area into two equal halves. These rather graphical compositions of perpendicular lines reflect Baselgia's earlier works, especially his observations of light conditions above the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia.

Portraits and still lifes

In addition to Baselgia's photographs of forest spaces and plants, which in a sense can be seen as a continuation of his landscape photography, the exhibition is rounded out by distinct still lifes and portraits that highlight the importance of the forest as a habitat. Today, the Waorani and Secoya indigenous peoples live in a state of tension between their traditional lifestyles in harmony with nature and adaptation to the changes brought about by the encroachment of oil companies. The progressive exploitation of the rainforest is increasingly depriving them of their homelands and livelihoods. In full awareness of the problematic tradition of ethnographic photography, Baselgia strives for a very respectful representation of the people he meets and who agree to support him in his project. He captures their serious gazes and pays tribute to the individuality of the people he portrays.

For the still lifes, Baselgia on the one hand arranges fruits of the forest, hunted animals or their remains, and on the other hand utensils of traditional village life. Enlarged as diapositives and presented in glassine covers, the objects resemble archival finds. The archaeological character of the still lifes is also echoed in another group of pictures: reproductions of selected pages of the book *Anfänge der Kunst im Urwald* ("Beginnings of Art in the Jungle"), published by the German anthropologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg in 1905. Viewing the unprinted backs of the plates under grazing light reveals fine reliefs of line patterns and ornaments. With this citation, Baselgia reflects on the history of the exploration of the Amazon Basin and critically examines the possibilities of its representation in media.

Work in the darkroom

The production of the silver gelatin prints in his own darkroom is equally essential for Guido Baselgia's artistic work. The images captured during his travels on analogue, mostly large-format film material are reinterpreted according to the photographer's memories of the sensory impressions he collected while on location. This includes the search for the ideal combination of film material, photographic paper, exposure time, filters and developers and, for example, the decision as to which size each photograph should have. In the case of photographs from the tropical rainforest, the pre-exposure of the paper plays a crucial role. Baselgia thus avoids excessive contrasts and manages to recreate the mood of the thicket. In the portraits, on the other hand, the dark veil seems to protect the faces.

Climate-policy background

Guido Baselgia visited several different landscapes in the east of Ecuador. Some of his photographs were taken in the Yasuní National Park, which, due to its rich natural resources, is always in the spotlight of international reporting. In 2007, the former President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, proposed to the UN General Assembly to ban operations at the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) oil field in the northern Yasuní National Park in exchange for an international compensation payment of 3.6 billion dollars. Since only a fraction of this amount was raised, the Ecuadorian parliament approved oil production in 2013.

Not least due to the escalation of the situation in Brazil over the past few months, Baselgia's latest work cycle is a highly topical project. Although this is no photo reportage claiming to represent a reality, to report on the extinction of species and the displacement of indigenous people from the forest, and although there is no raised finger lamenting climate change – or perhaps precisely for this reason – Baselgia's interpretation of this unique habitat is especially moving.

Exhibition curator: Teresa Gruber.

Biography

Guido Baselgia was born in the Engadine in 1953. He lives and works in Malans GR, Switzerland.

1976–1979 Professional photography class at the Zurich School of Applied Arts (now ZHdK).

1978 Federal Art Scholarship.

1979–1982 Photographer for leading industrial companies in Switzerland.

1983 Opening of his own studio in Baar, where he lived and worked until 2010.

1983–1992 Intensive reportage activities, e.g. in Eastern Europe, Switzerland and for industrial projects in Europe, USA and Iraq, resulting in numerous publications in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the *Tages-Anzeiger Magazin* and other print media.

After his first book *Galizien* ("Galicia", 1992), Baselgia turned to his immediate living environment in the 1990s. The photographic exploration of the familiar space resulted in the photo books *Zug* in 1994 and *ZugStadt* in 1998. The character and transformation of the environment became the central theme of these studies.

Between 1996 and 2001 he collaborated with the Kunsthaus Zug and the artists Tadaschi Kawamata, Richard Tuttle and Pavel Pepperstein. The close cooperation with the artists resulted in comprehensive photo essays and book publications.

In 1998, he began a wide-ranging research project into the alpine habitat of the Engadine. The return to his homeland was accompanied by a profound change in his photographic work. It marked a shift from photojournalism to independent artistic work.

Guido Baselgia has received several awards, including the Recognition Award of the Canton of Graubünden (2004) and the Central Swiss Culture Prize. The work in the Ecuadorian rainforest was made possible by the working scholarship of the Landis & Gyr Foundation.

The exhibition and publication were supported by: Vontobel Foundation, Friends of the Fotostiftung Schweiz, Landis & Gyr Foundation, Ernst Göhner Foundation, Canton of Zug, Canton of Graubünden, Ernst and Olga Gubler-Hablützel Foundation, Ars Rhenia, Municipality of Baar, Graubündner Kantonalbank.

The Fotostiftung Schweiz receives regular financial support from the Swiss Federal Office for Culture, the cantons of Zurich, Thurgau, and Ticino, and the city of Winterthur.

Publication

Accompanying the exhibition is the book by the artist:

Guido Baselgia, *Als ob die Welt zu vermessen wäre*

("As If the World Were There to Be Measured")

Edited by Fotostiftung Schweiz

Edizioni Periferia, 2019

30 x 24 cm, 144 pages

with texts in German/English/Spanish

Hardcover with protective cover bound in thread stitching

Available at bookshops for CHF 58, or at the shop of the Fotozentrum for CHF 48 for the duration of the exhibition.

Special events

Friday, 18 June, 6 p.m. Opening event

At 7 p.m., curator Teresa Gruber will introduce the exhibition.

Sunday, 20 October, 11:30 a.m. Tour and dialogue with the artist

Guido Baselgia in conversation with Teresa Gruber.

Sunday, 1 December, 11:30 a.m. Tour and dialogue

Teresa Gruber in conversation with Dr Michael Kessler, scientific director of the Botanical Garden of the University of Zurich, specialised in tropical biodiversity and tree line research.

Sunday, 19 January, 11:30 a.m. Tour and dialogue with the artist

Guido Baselgia in conversation with Teresa Gruber.

For **press enquiries**, please contact Sascha Renner: renner@fotostiftung.ch, Tel. +41 52 234 10 35.

Press images in print quality and other exhibition documents can be downloaded from the following link: www.fotostiftung.ch ('Press' section). Please provide us with a sample copy.