

MARC STRAUS

Art in America

Thomas Bangsted

By: Elisa Decker

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Thomas Bangsted: *USS Texas (Measure 12-modified)*, 2012-14, pigment print, 63½ by 96 inches; at Marc Straus.

This was the Denmark-born, New York-based Thomas Bangsted's third exhibition of photographs at Marc Straus. The seven mostly large-scale, black-and-white pigment prints represented two different bodies of work unified through their disorienting and transformative qualities: battleships at sea and dark landscape scenes. Made up of layered exposures over time, typically taking up to three years to complete, the artist's pictures suggest the question posed by a recent exhibition at New York's International Center of Photography, "What Is a Photograph?"

Three works can be said to join the well-established genre of battleship photography, which has been around since the end of the 19th century. But with Bangsted, what you see is not necessarily what you get. The images of vessels painted in high-contrast "dazzle" camouflage patterns, commonly used on ships during World Wars I and II, are really shots the photographer took of old warships without their wartime designs. Bangsted returned them to their painted glory through the use of historic archives and the magic of painstaking digital modification. Charles Mary Kubricht's 2011 installation for New York City's High Line, featuring dazzle-painted storage containers, comes to mind.

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For the 63½-by-96-inch *USS Texas (Measure 12-modified)*, 2012-14, Bangsted chose to re-create the specific dazzle pattern applied to the *USS Texas* during World War II. While the sky looks overexposed in the other two large-scale dazzle pictures, in this work, the wispy clouds against a darker sky create a harmonic connection that strengthens the impact of the photo.

Further conflating the authentic and the invented, Bangsted sometimes takes the liberty of creating his own dazzle patterns, and often seamlessly inserts background and foreground elements from other photographs he's taken. In *Panzerkreuzer* (2011-13), part of a ship's deck with a coiled rope appears at the lower right, along with two gun barrels jutting into the frame. Obvious compositional devices leading the viewer into the scene, these narrative details don't increase the power of the overall image, but instead add unnecessary clutter. A more successful effort, *Last of the Dreadnoughts* (2011-12), was shown in an exhibition last year at Straus that paired Bangsted with Canadian artist Jeff Wall. The ship is stunningly covered in a striped pattern, made all the more dazzling by its reflection on calm waters, and the unencumbered composition strikes a perfect balance, with richly toned areas of mountains, sea and sky.

Bangsted's work intrigues in the way he presents landscape as a layered representation of time, conflating the decisive moment with the continuum. For the constructed picture *Rotary Disc (For Robert Cumming)*, 2011-13, Bangsted attempted to re-create the character of the other artist's 1978 drawing of a saw blade and waterwheel spinning in perfect equilibrium at the crest of a waterfall, a metaphor for the fragility of reality. In order to stay true to Cumming's white-on-black drawing, Bangsted shot the seemingly nocturnal scene using "day for night" techniques, which were frequently employed by Hollywood cinematographers in the 1940s and '50s to simulate nighttime while filming in daylight. By photographing a rotating metal disc that he fabricated and superimposing it on a waterfall, Bangsted adds a sculptural element to his photographic fictions.