

MARC STRAUS



THOMAS BANGSTED — THE HISTORY OF THE MAKING #PHOTOGRAPHY

By Anitzel Diaz
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HOW TO USE PHOTOGRAPHY TO BRING BACK SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T EXIST? THEY ARE FRAGMENTS THAT I PUT TOGETHER. THE FINAL PICTURE BECOMES A KIND OF LAYERED REPRESENTATION OF TIME. THE PICTURE HAS INSIDE THE HISTORY OF THE MAKING...

Thomas Bangsted (b. 1976), photographer, was born in Denmark, now he lives in Brooklyn, NY. He holds a Fine Arts degree from The Glasgow School of Art and Goldsmiths College, and has a master's degree from Yale University. He is represented by the contemporary art gallery MARC STRAUSS in New York. Using a large format camera, he creates surreal black-and-white compositions of battleships at sea and dark landscape scenes. Portraits that amaze not only by its scale but by the process in which they were created. Bangsted has achieved a very personal work by bringing together analogical and digital technologies with the patience of a clockmaker. Some of his images take as long as three years of layering and processing to be completed. Anachronisms codified by postmodern historicism.



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I had the fortune to meet him in Zona Maco in Mexico, where he explained his view on photography and his process:

Tell me a little about yourself, your childhood, where you live and how you started in the craft of photography?

I grew up in a small town in Denmark. That I would end up working with photography came as a surprise. At a young age, I initially set up a very cheap studio in Copenhagen where I was drawing and making objects. My studio was in a building with no electricity, heat or hot water. By early afternoon I was often too cold and the studio too dark so I would go out with a camera for the rest of the day and photograph the industrial wastelands in and around the harbor. I thought of these early photographs only as sketches or as a form of notation for later objects. Eventually the building became scheduled for demolition and I had to vacate. Being left with a little darkroom setup in my kitchen I just continued photographing instead and it just slowly developed from there. I left Copenhagen in my early twenties to study photography in Scotland and never returned. I now live and work in Brooklyn, New York.

I read that you had a love hate relation with photography, why is that?

Well it was more a matter of finding my own way of working with the medium. A way that was right for me personally. I felt the need to press against the ease with which one makes a photograph. To somehow, however artificial, create some form of resistance. Initially, picking up a cumbersome camera, the large-format, satisfied my reservations. But over the years I have intensified the process leading up to the finished picture, sometimes to point of the absurd where I have to go a long roundabout way to arrive at the kind of picture that I'm looking for.

You've described your process as history of the making in a photo... I also realize some of your images take as long as 3 years to develop in what they are. Could you walk me through your creative process?

What I have said is that I like to think that the pictures hold clues as to the elaborate history of their making. Clues that disclose to the viewer that things are not what they appear to be. Regardless of how complete the illusion is or despite the seamless form of the finished photograph something escapes. These cracks are especially evident if you are familiar with the limitations of the camera. In regards to the process, it differs quite a lot from image to image. Sometimes maximum intervention is required other times little. But in general it starts with an idea for a subject matter, which often happens to be a variant of the maritime landscape. Most times I mistrust my first instinct for a new work and I let the idea sit around for a long time. The idea then either matures or I forget about it in which case it probably was not that interesting to begin with. I search for locations and then travel there but I usually return with a picture that is only half complete if even. Often the pictures just exist in a very unfinished state for a long time, until I come across a way to finish it.

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Where does your fascination with ships (boats...) come from?

I'm not sure but I relocated to New England around 2005 and as a result was forced to deal with a different kind of landscape. I had a difficult time relating to these new surroundings but I became interested in the coastal areas of the region and its long and rich history. This was the start of the maritime works.

You were telling me about all the research you do for each image...

In the case of the dazzle-camouflaged ships, there is a lot of prior research. Few ships remain from the period and often times they have been retrofitted to the point where they no longer resemble their World War appearance. I mapped out most ships still in existence from the period and their locations around the world, but in the end only a small group really caught my interest. Not every ship has character or is visually compelling. I later go through navy archives and search old photographs to find documentation of the patterns the ships would have had during wartime.

How do you come up with the graphics? Camouflages etc... that you use in the photographs? Is it part of your research? Or your own inspiration a decision?

It varies. Navel ships would often be painted in different patterns depending on where it was to be deployed. So a ship could be repainted several times throughout the war. In some pictures I select a specific pattern from a specific conflict and then attempt to recreate it in the photograph as accurately as possible with the given visual evidence that I have been able to locate. Other times, I take the liberty to create a pattern of my own loosely based on historical material. Perhaps even modifying the physical appearance of the actual ship and changing its name. So in some works I take on the role as a pedantic historian trying to find out how a particular ship was outfitted at a given time during the World Wars and then digitally recreating it as faithfully as possible. Other times it becomes more a product of my imagination. The viewer does not necessarily know where on the spectrum between invention and fact each individual photograph falls.



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A lot of artist weight their images in the sky, I can see in your pictures the importance of the sky, the clouds... what does the sky represent for you?

It's a formal element, as is the sea. Its not fixed in a specific time unlike almost everything else your eye falls upon in the landscape. So in that way it aids me in my ambition for the picture.

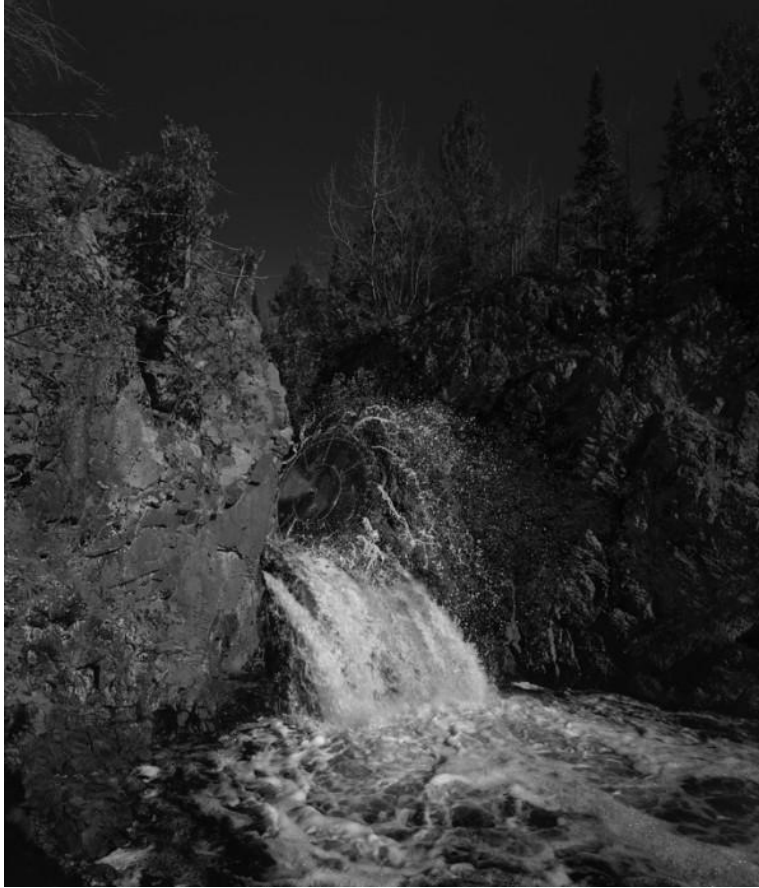
Photographic puzzles?

Although I do occasionally make what you would call a straight photograph, the predominant parts of my work are forms of photomontage. I start with a fragment, a ship, a landscape of some other element and I then build the pictures up around this initial exposure. Sometimes I put a picture aside for years because I just can't find a way finish it, some parts are missing, or I have to wait for the right season to continue where I left off. In the case of the work in color I have made, I would revisit the same landscape over months, sometimes years, and record different details or changes to the location. The camera would always be placed in the same spot and under like weather conditions but the surroundings would always change.

There is a nostalgia, a sense of quiet of solitude in your work. Is it a consequence of your thorough process?

Not necessarily. It's the result of choices I have made conscious or unconscious in making the work. But the slow and gradual way these pictures come into being is perhaps like a distillation process. My interest has been in landscapes where the past still resonates. Why, I don't know. Perhaps it's a quiet protest against art's preoccupation with the here and now. But while some of the works have this pervading sense of nostalgia they are at the same time unmistakably contemporary. At least this is evident when you see the physical print.

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Your editions, is your work unique or how many copies are in the editions?

It varies but usually 3.

MARC STRAUS. 299 Grand Street, New York, New York, 10002. 212.510.7646. info@marcstraus.com