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# HYPERALLERGIC

INTERVIEWS

## A Photographer Recreates Maritime Scenes from the World Wars

Thomas Bangsted shares how he reconstructs moments from the past with present-day photography.

Sarah Rose Sharp | November 30, 2017



Thomas Bangsted, "Port of Embarkation (Lady Liberty SS Margaret Knight)" (2012–2017) (all images courtesy the artist and Marc Straus)

ST. CLAIR SHORES, Mich. — In his third exhibition of photographs at Marc Straus, photographer Thomas Bangsted presents large-scale photographs that recreate historical

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maritime scenes through a painstaking process of shooting, collecting, and aggregating present-day images. The seven black-and-white pigment prints include selections from two different bodies of work — battleships and landscapes — both created through a similar process of long-term research and layering of photographs, sometimes taking years to complete a single image.

Bangsted's current work-in-progress is concerned with a monument in his native Denmark. Commissioned in 1920 by a wealthy World War I war profiteer, who made his fortune by selling goulash (known in Danish as a *gullaschbaron*) to the troops on both sides, it was placed on Thor Island, a small island that once served as a sacrificial ground to the Nordic god, Thor. Eventually the *gullaschbaron* committed suicide, and the forest grew up around the monument. Bangsted is making a small group of images that recreate and trace the removal and relocation of the sculpture to the mainland, following the purchase by a Danish factory in 1958. The process has involved him digging a massive trench in the backyard at the home of his in-laws, where he and his growing family have relocated from Brooklyn. I sat down with Bangsted in his home studio in St. Clair Shores, Michigan, to discuss the process behind his intricate and labor-intensive photographs, which push his relationship to the medium, and the medium's relationship to ideas of truth.

On one level, Bangsted's works reference actual events in history. On another, they are complete fabrications — even the witness accounts that he incorporates are vulnerable to the subjectivity of memory, and historical references are subject to editorial frameworks. Perhaps Bangsted's work is informed by the post-truth era, where facts give way to the imagination.

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Thomas Bangsted, “Schlachtschiff Tirpitz” (2012–2017)

**Sarah Rose Sharp:** *I like this idea that you’re almost assembling history from pieces of the present — is that an accurate characterization of what you’re doing?*

**Thomas Bangsted:** Yeah. But for these maritime works, for the most part, I have started with locating a Navy ship that is still kind of authentic to how it appeared during the World Wars. There’s not many left to choose from, and I would travel and photograph them, and then I later recreated the specific camouflage it had — or I invented my own. And then I would have to recreate the landscape or setting for it, because it will usually be in a contemporary environment.

**SRS:** *Right, I think there’s one in the Port of Oakland, in California.*

**TB:** Right, and I actually haven’t photographed that one, because it has been changed so much since, so I couldn’t use that ship. But then, some of the more recent ones I’ve started with the landscape, and it’s the ship that didn’t exist — so in those cases, I’ve had to create the ship afterwards. And in more recent pictures, they’re not about Navy scenarios, but they’re about other historical events, where I’m trying to recreate an

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event or scenario. But yes, all from fragments that are slowly pieced together, until they finally become a complete whole.

**SRS:** *And do you find any of this footage in archival images?*

**TB:** No, it's all shot on film, but sometimes I have to search for a long time, I have to travel to certain locations. So it's a bit like putting together a puzzle. Sometimes they take years — it all depends on the picture and the specific challenge. A lot of the work in this recent exhibition are negatives I've had since 2014, and I just didn't really know how to finish them, and all of a sudden it came together.

**SRS:** *So, in a way, it's almost like each of these photos is a collection — you say it's sort of a puzzle, but you also have an idea of the objects you're trying to locate and put together. Are you working on groups of them at a time?*

**TB:** Yeah, I used to have a handful, and then I have ideas that I don't really trust yet, and I sit on them until they're worth pursuing. My first show of these images was in 2014, but there were some images that had technical and practical challenges, so I continued to work on them for a long time. Some pictures I can only work on at certain times of year, because the light and the shadows have to match the initial exposure. I've built a way of working where I can take a picture, go home and look at it, and then continue working on it. I always wanted to try to find that way of working where I could extend it beyond the initial act of taking a picture.

**SRS:** *Photography seems like this instantaneous thing — the idea that you're capturing a moment, as opposed to a conglomerate of moments. There's something about getting a lot of things in one still capture, and having a continuous process, that's very interesting. I'm wondering, though, why recreate these moments?*

**TB:** It's not so much about the moments; it's more about thinking about photography and the medium. With the technological change in the medium, I find myself going in the way of creating my own reality, instead of recording the observable reality.

**SRS:** *Post-truth photography!*

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Thomas Bangsted, "Sopnes" (2017)

**TB:** Yeah. But I've been more interested, these past seven or eight years, if I can reconstruct a moment from the past, and whether photography can even do that. And I don't really have an answer to that — it is our reality, because it's fragments that exist in the world, but they come together into a simulation of the past.

Sometimes I think about it a bit as, you know, if you write a historical novel and you do all this research — and the more you know, the more difficult it becomes, because you realize how it looked, and you want to be truthful to that. That's how it ends up taking years, because you uncover more facts. But at some point, you have to choose — it will always be somewhere on the scale between invention and fact.

*Thomas Bangsted continues at Marc Straus Gallery (299 Grand Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 10.*

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