

Thomas Struth *Nature & Politics*

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German photographer Thomas Struth's latest work is beautiful yet dehumanising. Rarely does it feature people, only the machines, theme-parks, settlements and science labs that provide the infrastructure and support for people. In this jaw-dropping survey of the photographer's recent large-format photography, the various series on display feature monumentally scaled prints of twisting cables and cords, hulking relics from the industrial age and vast cities that together, in their quiet detachment from human activity, impart an almost apocalyptic vision of technological mediation.

This might seem surprising for some, considering Struth is most famous for a series of photographs during the 1990s that did largely the opposite, which was to show groups of museum visitors gazing at very nontechnological things – ie paintings. Of the works at the High, however, few feature people (most notably *Aquarium, Atlanta, Georgia*, 2013, a print showing a gaggle of families gazing through the window of a large tank at the Georgia Aquarium). Typical is *Figure, Charité, Berlin* (2012), a terrifying photograph of a patient at a hospital where

most surgeries are performed with the use of robots: his or her body is almost entirely obscured by machinery, tubes and plastic. In *Space Shuttle 1, Kennedy Space Center, Cape Canaveral* (2008), we're given a wide-angle view of the underside of a space shuttle, though the area is so cluttered with ladders, cables and other equipment that one almost misses the fact that there even *is* a space shuttle here to be seen.

Struth's prints always seem to decentre their primary subjects. This is in no small part because, by its very nature, large-format photography gives every centimetre of the print enormous detail, so the stress here is on everything. The tiny detail in a corner is just as vivid as the thing right in front of your face. In this, some of the works appear strangely redolent of Abstract Expressionism's 'all-over' painting. For example, *Tokamak Asdex Upgrade Periphery, Max Planck IPP, Garching* (2009), which features an interior view of a device that confines plasma for the purposes of generating fusion power, consists entirely of a riot of cables going every which way. If it were any more abstracted, the colourful wires would actually look like

paint. Ditto for *Epitaxy, JPL, Pasadena* (2014), which details a heap of cables and monitors filling NASA research equipment.

Disneyland is featured too, which might seem odd, until one considers the elaborate technologies that support today's theme parks. Struth is interested in Disneyland's highly calibrated artificial environments, where, for example, a Swiss mountain can jarringly abut a pair of submarines (*Mountain, Anaheim*, 2013). Then there's the series of photographs taken of conflict zones in Israel: the context is politically loaded, but Struth trains his lens on the landscape itself, largely devoid of people, which seems to reflect the dehumanising impact of the ongoing occupation.

No matter what subject he's featuring, the artist finds common cause in the way humans are exerting greater control over their environments, while losing it all at the same time; the prints feature feats of human engineering, yet in these machines' vast scale – and often total lack of human presence – the human seems dwarfed by its own creation.

David Everitt Howe



Mountain, Anaheim, 2013, chromogenic print,
212 × 332 cm (framed). Courtesy the artist