

# Thomas Struth's Reminders of Mortality at Max Hetzler in Berlin

BY LOUISA ELDERTON | APRIL 24, 2018



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"Rotfuchs (Vulpes vulpes), Leibniz IZW, Berlin 2017," by Thomas Struth. Inkjet print, 90,5 x 112,1 cm.  
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Celebrated for his "Museum Photographs," images that focus on human spectatorship and reaction within museums rather than the artworks per se, the German photographer [Thomas Struth](#) has also used the more formal format of portraiture many times over, photographing figures from Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh to the German artist Gerhard Richter. Turning his hand once more to this genre for his exhibition at Galerie Max Hetzler's two Berlin spaces, a show running April 27-June 2 and opening over Gallery Weekend Berlin, he closely portrays a different kind of subject, albeit a more macabre one, namely, animals that are recently deceased.

In an interview, Struth described how he felt compelled to make a statement in response to "the current political situation. I felt an urgent necessity to create a reminder of mortality. This crazy theater has to stop!" A continuation from his "Nature & Politics" series — works that examine sites of technological, industrial and scientific research — he gained access to the Leibniz Institute for Zoological and Wildlife Research (IZW) in Berlin, which specializes in examining the evolutionary developments of wildlife that have adapted to environments modified by humans. Studying animal cadavers is part of that research.

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"Recently, I had already come close to existential situations making pictures during medical operations, as part of 'Nature & Politics'," Struth said. "The next step appeared almost inevitably. Since human individuals are particular, have a name and a unique personal history, I could not imagine photographing deceased people but needed a metaphorical solution. A friend at Charité Hospital in Berlin told me about the Leibniz Institute. She sent me two pictures of a tiger and a crocodile being dissected there, which I was unable to forget. It so happened that another friend of ours, a biologist, works at IZW. He arranged a meeting with the director, who responded positively to my request and I was able to start working on the new body of pictures in late 2016 with the generous help of the Institute's staff."

With a number of the ink-jet prints being nearly two meters in width, works such as "Bergkänguru (*Macropus robustus*), Leibniz IZW, Berlin 2017," (more colloquially known as the common wallaroo and found in Australia) depict the macropod in close-up detail, each individual hair discernible as it lies on its side with arms neatly folded and its long tail stretching out behind. The smaller-scale work "Rotfuchs (*Vulpes vulpes*), Leibniz IZW, Berlin 2017," shows a fox as if still running, tail neatly tucked in. They appear calm and serene, a condition for which Struth strove: "Working at home in Berlin and on location not far from my studio allows me to react quickly, because most of the pictures I made were taken not long after the animal had died. This is important for the relative presence, the intactness of the being. It is quite similar to the early stages after the passing of a human being, when it seems that the soul is still lingering and life only slowly fades, gives in. I observed this when our father and our mother died, in 2003 and 2009 respectively. Silence and surrender are conditions worth striving for. They create humility." He added, "the pictures express not exactly what it feels like to be in the presence of a deceased animal, which is sad and sobering. I feel respect for those animals, as if they should not be disturbed. That's why part of my desire is to unveil their inherent beauty."

Citing his interest in depicting the aesthetic register of places of human progress, he said that he had felt at the start of his "Nature & Politics" series that "if I were to examine and record what kind of atmospheric, psychological aura is being emitted by the ideas, the obsessions, the mindset of scientists, once they have turned into sculpture, maybe I can enhance awareness and a more critical disposition towards technology and our belief in it as human progress." Bringing these spaces of development into the art gallery enables the everyday viewer access to an otherwise hidden infrastructure. However, for Struth "that did not calm my worries about the false, dishonest promises related to a lot of technological development or my disappointment over the fact that breakthroughs in the humanities, in the socio-political area are less frequent and increasingly more difficult."

What value can the artist infer by being allowed access to these sites and disseminating them on an aesthetic platform? "Coming from the outside, from a distant perspective, allows me to see and read levels of information with particular clarity. Aesthetics, of course, do not exist without meaning. I feel rewarded by the fact that many people who see these works consider them as representative of how they feel about the world they are living in, even though very few have had access to any of those environments."

Struth is interested in issues of morality as mediated by evidence of progress or the illusion thereof. By revealing spaces, images, objects and even bodies that are usually private, these can be reframed and even held to account by making them more broadly visible. The human imagination — what we think these otherwise invisible spaces might look like — gives way to material form that can be seen and interpreted. "As it comes out, the successful merger of archer and target, as is a goal in the Zen of archery, can be akin to the relationship of the subject and the photographer. The camera, then, represents the arrow," Struth said. "Enlightenment cannot be achieved without education, but it certainly depends on which kind."