

The Museum of Modern Art

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BILL BRANDT

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Wall Label

Bill Brandt was born in London in 1906. After spending much of his boyhood and youth in Germany and Switzerland, he moved to Paris in 1929, where he discovered the work of Eugene Atget and the Surrealist filmmakers, and studied with the American Man Ray. When he returned to London in 1931 he was an artist of international perspectives.

By 1931 the great tradition of earlier British photography was moribund. For the most part, British photographers had chosen to concern themselves with the marginal refinement of small virtues, or with writing letters to the photographic journals.

During the 1930's Brandt documented his island, its representative human types, and its social structure -- which seemed then immensely and permanently formidable. He produced photographs possessed both of raw force and high sophistication, in a compound which even now seems to defy analysis. A romantic poet, compassionate and intuitive toward his subjects, Brandt was at the same time a detached observer, an outsider, able to make disciplined pictures even in the presence of his own shocking discoveries.

Speaking of his early work, Brandt has said, " I found atmosphere to be the spell that charged the commonplace with beauty. And I am still not sure what atmosphere is. I only know that it is a combination of elements ... which reveals the subject as familiar yet strange. " Strange is perhaps the operative word. There is in Brandt's work -- excepting the late nudes -- a subtle but pervasive sense of malaise, a sense of beauty or virtue distorted by the presence of sin. We feel in his pictures a dislocation of the rational structures of experience, a recasting of the familiar into forms that show its meanings to be unfamiliar and threatening.

An exception must be made of the nudes of the 1950's. These pictures -- at first viewing strange and contorted -- reveal themselves finally as supremely poised and untroubled works.

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If in most of Brandt's work there is a strong sense of the surreal, it is not the intellectually disciplined irrationalism of his teacher Man Ray, but rather a dream-ridden romanticism, closer in spirit to the mordant poetry of de Chirico. Brandt's work is in fact not really explainable in terms of the central concerns of either painting or photography during the past generation. Perhaps the photographic vacuum into which Brandt moved when he returned to England in 1931 allowed his very personal (even willful) style to develop freely, unchallenged by the requirements of a vital tradition.

Brandt's approach to the craft of photography has been consistently defiant. It is conceivable that Brandt simply never learned the conventional standards of photographic quality. More probably, he has sensed that a consistently brilliant technique too often assumes for itself in time the status of a creative virtue. Brandt has in fact expressed regret at the mechanical perfection of modern cameras. Seeking a more refractory medium, one that would resist more strenuously his own preconceptions, he made the nude series with an ancient, cumbersome, fixed-focus stand camera, equipped with a wide angle lens of such minute aperture that the image on the ground glass was all but invisible.

In the early years Brandt's prints were very soft -- almost muddy -- and described a space as solidly tangible as that of London winters in those coal-burning years. About a decade ago his printing style changed abruptly to one depending on a harshly simple tonal scale, putting maximum emphasis on the picture's graphic structure. Brandt now prefers his current printing style even for the older pictures. With the exception of Avebury Stone Circle, Wiltshire, 1944, the current exhibition shows earlier work as reinterpreted by new prints.

Brandt has done little theorizing about his own work. Perhaps this has helped him preserve the precedence of intuition over system, and allowed him to accept the risks of repeatedly beginning again, free of commitments to his own past. In 1948 he said: "The photographer must have and keep in him something of the receptiveness of the child who looks at the world for the first time What we see is often only what our prejudices tell us to expect to see, or what our past experiences tell us should be seen, or what our desires want to see. Very rarely are

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able to free our minds of thought and emotions and just see for the simple pleasure of
being. And so long as we fail to do this, so long will the essence of the thing be hidden from
us. "

John Szarkowski