

Wolfgang Straub's Arcadian Gardens

In a conversation with Arno Stein, the managing director of the Franz Gertsch Museum in Burgdorf, Wolfgang Straub explains the background of the "Enchanted Gardens" series of photographs on show at the project space in the park from 13 December 2009 to 28 February 2010.

What is the "Enchanted Gardens" series about?

"Enchanted Gardens" deals with the metamorphosis of ideas across various media: in their poems, Theocritus and Virgil expressed the notion of harmony between man and nature in an ideal landscape. Their poems inspired

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such seventeenth-century painters as Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin to depict Arcadian landscapes. The English nobility of the eighteenth century discovered these paintings during their travels to the Continent and attempted to realize them three-dimensionally in Great Britain. Landscape parks are perhaps among the earliest examples of concept art insofar as they create places of the imagination. They attempt to awaken certain ideas and emotions in the visitors by means of architectural elements (for example Elysian Fields, Temples of Friendship, and Poet's Groves).

Your project deals with emotions. What emotions do you have while taking the pictures?

I am not concerned with expressing my own emotions in the pictures. Many of my photographs are taken shortly after sunrise and it was often bitter cold. I hope that this is not noticeable in the pictures. I spent hundreds of

hours wandering through the parks looking for motifs in which something of the underlying concept condenses into a magical moment. In the case of almost all the motifs, I had a specific image in mind. It then involved finding the optimal picture angle and the right moment for the light. I often had to wait for days and drive to a location several times in order to realize certain photographs.

How did this series of pictures come about? What inspired it?

I have been fascinated by gardens since an early age. My earliest childhood years were spent in a house dating from the seventeenth century that was surrounded by an extraordinary garden in the Italian style with terraces, pergolas, and bodies of water. This probably infected my parents with the "garden virus." Even while still in primary school they took me to such English parks as Stourhead and Sis-



singhurst. Later I visited the famous French and Italian gardens on my own, and I very naturally took a camera along. I began dealing systematically with the history and concept of



landscape parks in 2000. Afterwards, I visited gardens with a view to photography in mind. This project thus grew slowly.

Are there models?

I am extremely curious and always attempt to photograph something new and therefore do not have specific models. I am particularly fascinated by photography of the nineteenth cen-

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tury (for example Gustave Le Gray or Charles Bodmer). In the “Enchanted Gardens” series, for example, the sky is always white like in the photographs from that time. My viewpoint has also been very influenced by painting and not least by Franz Gertsch’s woodcuts as well. That is why I feel especially honored to be able to realize an exhibition in his museum.

Why do you photograph English parks in Germany of all places?

It is in fact not coincidental that all the English parks depicted here are outside Great Britain. Although authorities on England will recognize some of the design elements here, German landscape parks are autonomous interpretations of their English models. They represent the next link in the chain of interpretations and visualize the theme of the metamorphosis of ideas even better.

What do you want to achieve with your pictures? How should they be perceived?

The picture series does not have a concealed political or social message, although the socio-economical conditions under which the landscape parks came about is a very interesting subject matter. My pictures are concerned with processes of perception. I hope that they are themselves complex enough to be perceived in very different ways, even if the viewer is not familiar with the backgrounds.

You thus have a critical view of political photography?

Parallel to the financial crisis we are experiencing a renaissance of political art. Artists such as John Heartfield have demonstrated that it is by all means legitimate to employ photography in conjunction with political commitment. The works are given an additional social relevance in that way. But something is often forgotten at the moment, namely that even the best intentions alone do not produce an artistic value. I frequently ask myself as regards my own pictures as well as those by others, what effect they will have in fifty or one hundred years.

The pictures appear as if they were taken through a filter. What techniques do you use?

I never employed a filter. Although the photographs are monochrome, a color picture always formed the starting point, be it a color slide or a digital photograph. I afterwards transform each color channel into shades of blue in such a way that the pictorial statement is shown to its best advantage. This enables much more differentiated results than can be attained by using filters.

You are taking digital photographs?

The means to create the picture is ultimately not of importance for me. In each case, I use the technique that can best realize my ideas. You may hardly notice a difference between the pictures I have originally taken on film and those I have directly captured on a chip.

Your pictures can therefore be reproduced as often as you want?

All the prints are produced in small limited editions. Interestingly, analog photography was earlier also criticized because of its reproducibility. In fact it is almost impossible to make identical prints of analog as well as digital photographs over longer periods of time. While film material changes chemically over time, the reproducibility of digital images depends on the availability of a certain combination of

hardware and software components. The files of my large prints are attuned to a specific lambda printer and contain device-specific corrections. Despite all possible calibrations, we already had problems attaining comparable results when a laser unit from this device had to be replaced.

You make enlargements from 35mm pictures. That seems paradoxical.

All the pictures in this series were in fact made with Leica equipment which enables me a large degree of spontaneity while photographing. The crucial moment would often have been lost due to passing clouds while adjusting a large format camera. My large prints have a

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resolution of more than 90 million pixels. At the moment, even digital backs for large format cameras do not provide an equivalent resolution and that is why the question of interpolation must be posed in any case. Over time, I developed an enlargement method that does not make artifacts or pixel structures visible. I afterwards often rework the image on a pixel-by-pixel base. Even significantly larger prints could be made in this way. But larger prints have to be prepared in a different way than small ones: On a postcard-sized print, a single overexposed leaf on a tree appears like a dot of light that produces good contrast. In an enlargement, however, it would look like a white hole in the picture. To avoid this, such places have to be underlaid with a structure that is as convincing as possible. For compositional reasons, I have even added whole branches.

Aren't such manipulations really falsifications?

One cannot see in my pictures what could not have existed at the original location. But they do not claim to represent photographic truth;

otherwise I would not have tinted them blue. Thomas Ruff has demonstrated in his pictures that a neutral view basically does not exist.

So why are all the pictures blue?

A reproduction of the real tonality would lead one's view to remain on the surface. I therefore experimented with various hues. Amazingly, the pictorial impact "works" best with hues of blue, perhaps because it forms the greatest contrast to the green and brown hues of the vegetation. At the same time, the picture's appearance recalls the cyanotype, a photographic process from the time of the late English park. Triggering a certain irritation in my pictures results in sharpening the viewer's attention.

You never tried to make real cyanotypes?

I even worked with a cyanotype expert to try to make my pictures using this historical technique, but it proved impossible to realize my ideas with this method. I make use of two slightly different hues to produce as many nuances as possible, one for the bright areas of the pictures, and one for the dark areas. This duotone technique makes the pictures livelier.

Why do you photograph at all?

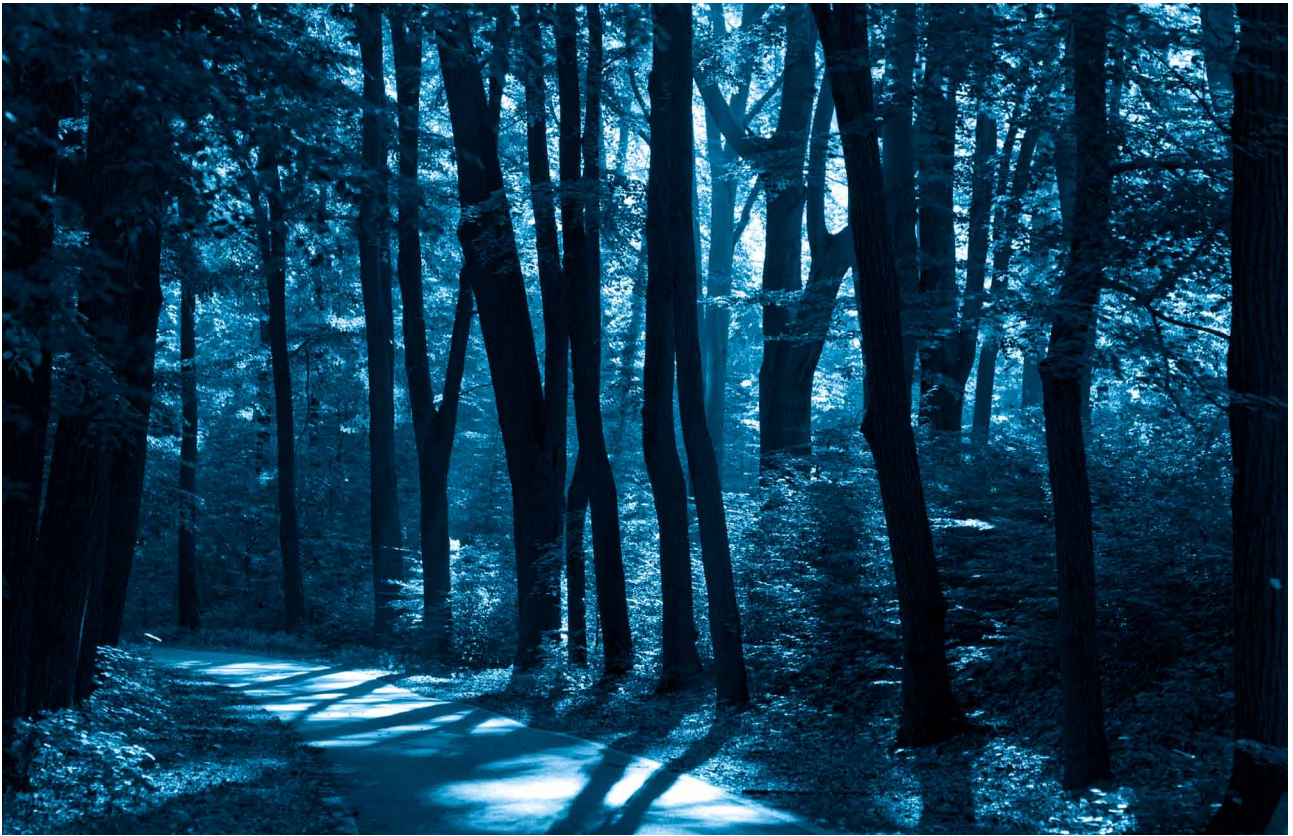
Because I can't help it. I am driven by my ideas. I cannot rest until I have realized an idea that I have in my head. And that can sometimes take years. Photography is an obsession for me, and one that often obsesses me.

You are a lawyer by profession. How did you come to photography?

It is actually the other way around: I began photographing long before I started to study law. I was given my first camera at the age of 14 and photography has not let go of me since.

Why didn't you pursue an education in the arts?

My parents both studied art history and my father taught at an art academy. He helped me a great deal in the art field. At the same time, however, his biggest fear was that I would



▲ Seifersdorfer Tal II Dresden 2009

become an artist. I decided to study law at the age of 18, but at that time I already intended to work parallelly on photographic projects on a professional level.

Is photography therefore a compensation for the dry world of the law?

Not necessarily. Of course it is wonderful to spend time in landscape parks, also for the many impressions I do not photograph. But as amazing as it sounds, landscape photography

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can also be stressful because numerous motifs only function in a very specific light. You have to be there at the right moment. And you can never tell in advance when that right moment

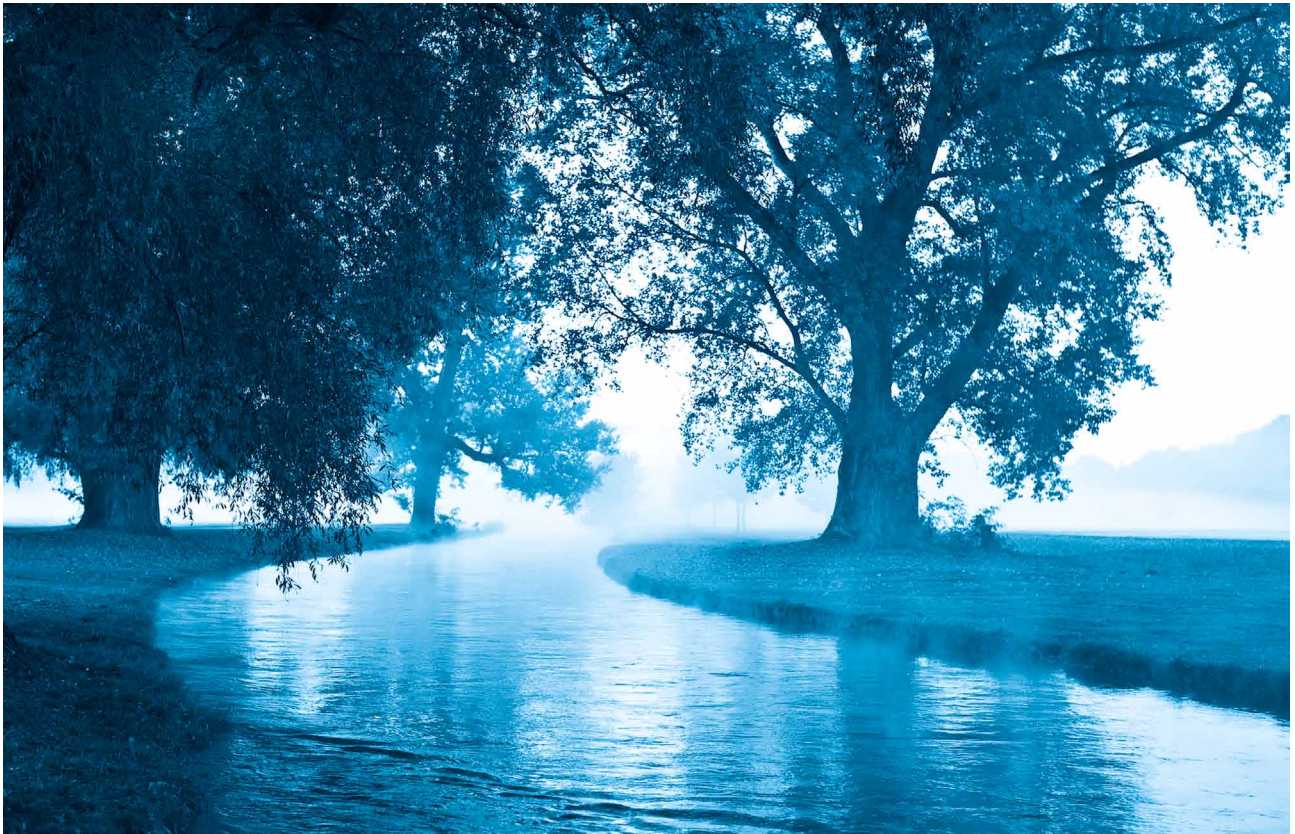
will come. If you are observing several motifs at the same time, you are constantly in motion. And then the whims of the weather also complicate matters...

Is there some link between the law and photography?

Perhaps the systematic with which I approach projects in both areas. The law is certainly not as uncreative as one might think. I always look for unconventional solutions in my scholarly publications as well as in my work as a lawyer. But this creativity is not visual in nature.

You therefore dance at several weddings at the same time.

You can see it that way. But most full-time photographers do this as well. Unlike most photographers, I do not have to do advertizing work or take on commissions in order to earn money. I sometimes suffer under the double burden, but the change of pace also helps you to stay fresh.



▲ Englischer Garten I Munich 2007

Doesn't one necessarily become a mediocre artist or a second-class jurist in that way?

Diversity does in fact make mediocrity a danger. But there are also prominent examples who prove the opposite: As the retrospective in Dresden recently showed, Carl Gustav Carus, for example, not only did excellent work in the field of medicine, but as a painter as well. I am well aware of the risks involved in my parallel

*«I have always been fascinated by
the concept of mastery.»*

activities and I make very high demands on my legal and scholarly work as well as on my artistic endeavors. Perhaps that is why I need more time than others do.

Why did the exhibition “Enchanted Gardens” take so long to prepare?

There are various reasons: As a lawyer, I have also chosen a very demanding path. Establishing the law firm and my scholarly commitments took up a great deal of my resources. At the same time, I also had to first acquire photographic know how. The last few years have therefore been quite labor-intensive.

You work with thematic focuses. How is that to be understood?

I was always impressed with the way Sebastião Salgado sometimes did years of research on his subject matters before he began to photograph. I likewise also work on long-term thematic projects. This rhythm enables a profound understanding of a subject and prevents the torpor of always having to do the same thing.

You caused a sensation in the 1990s with surrealistic still lifes. Afterwards you hadn't been heard from in a while.

After the still life series "Le dictionnaire des analphabètes", I worked for a number of years on a project that dealt visually with everyday life in earlier centuries which was supposed to appear in various magazines. I finally withdrew from the publication because I was not satisfied with the results. I also stopped a first book project on the subject of the English parks during the final layout stage because the project had in the meanwhile developed in a different direction.

You are, however, not the creative rebel type?

I have always been fascinated by the concept of mastery that perhaps seems antiquated to us in the West, but which is still significant in Asia. In this regard I have am very impressed by photographers like Bae Bien-U and Kenro Izumi. Concentrating on technical perfection, however, bears of the danger of contentual emptiness, a lack of relevance. When I switched from studio photography, where you can control all the parameters yourself, to a landscape project, I knew that I would have to learn many new things. I first wanted to appear in public with my work when I had reached a certain level. Although I have been working on this project for a whole decade, there are no pictures in the exhibition which were taken during the first years. I sometimes returned to the same locations and tried to take even better pictures.

What is your next project?

Let me take you by surprise. I do not think that the subject of gardens has yet been completely exhausted. But I am thinking about a project that deals in a new way with the boundaries between still and moving pictures.



Wolfgang Straub was born in 1969. Both parents studied art history. He began occupying himself with photography in 1983. After his school leaving examination he studied law and has worked as an attorney since then. He has published numerous works in the field of information technology law and taught at the informatics department at Freiburg University. But photography continued to play an important role. The surrealist series of still lifes "Le dictionnaire des analphabètes" produced since 1993 has been published in numerous magazines around the world. Straub began working systematically with gardens in the late nineteen nineties. The "Enchanted Gardens" picture series has been gradually produced since 2000.

