

FABIAN & CLAUDE WALTER GALERIE

Press release

BALTHASAR BURKHARD

16 March 2018 – 28 April 2018

We show a selection of important photographs by Balthasar Burkhard (1944 - 2010) from the work groups of the Cities, Namibia and Animals as well as Heliogravures and Collector's prints in the gallery's cabinet room.

The legendary city photographs by Balthasar Burkhard were first shown at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999 and 1999 at the Fabian & Claude Walter Gallery in Basel. The exhibition was curated by Harald Szeemann, with whom Burkhard had been associated since the 1960s through professional cooperation and close personal friendship. From 1961 to 1969, when Szeemann was director of the Kunsthalle Bern, Burkhard was a photographer who assisted him in the realisation of posters and catalogues as well as in the documentation of exhibitions. From 1969 to 1970 Burkhard worked with Markus Raetz. Together, they conceived a series of photo canvases that made Burkhard famous as a pioneer of monumental black-and-white photography. In 1970, the works were first shown in a museum exhibition, the show "Visualized Thinking Processes", curated by Jean Christophe Amman, at the Kunstmuseum Luzern.

In 1977, Burkhard presented his works for the first time in a solo exhibition at the Zolla Liebermann Gallery in Chicago, where he was a visiting professor at the University of Illinois from 1976 to 1978. After his return to Switzerland, he had his first solo exhibitions in museums at the Centre d' Art Contemporain in Geneva (1980) and at the Kunsthalle Basel (1983). Burkhard showed two sensational female nudes stretching over more than 13 metres. In the 1980s, plants appeared as motifs in Burkhard's work alongside human bodies. In the 1990s, a series of animal photographs followed, whereby the motif of the falcon's wing, a subject predestined for black and white photography with its nuanced structure, repeatedly fascinated Burkhard.

A few years later, Burkhard realized the photographs of cities and deserts presented in the exhibition. They show the opposites of nature and culture in their most extreme polarity: the vast dune landscape, gently formed by natural forces, and the man-made, finely divided urban landscape. In black-and-white technique and through aerial perspective, pictures of extraordinary clarity and distance are created whose forms take on abstract traits. Burkhard's work is not about portraits of an individual city or a particular place, but about the natural or civilizing phenomenon itself. In doing so, he approaches his motif without judging, without political or philosophical implications, with an open but objective view.

Burkhard's photographs have fascinated their viewers for decades. On the one hand, this is based on the classical beauty of the photographs and their technical perfection, and on the other hand on a certain overstrain experienced by the recipient of the works. The large-format pictures, but especially the desert photographs, offer the viewer little orientation aids, not an eye-catcher that could serve as a starting and ending point for viewing the picture. The eye wanders around, somewhat helplessly, and is overwhelmed by the monumentality of both the artwork itself and its motif. A shivering, a mixture of admiration and reverence emerges, which distinguishes Balthasar Burkhard as a photographer of the sublime.