

Renate Graf

Austrian photographer Renate Graf has drawn wide acclaim and respect for her powerful body of work, which could be described as a form of poetic documentation where image wavers on the edge of language.

Indeed, it was a passion for literature and poetry that led Renate Graf to devote herself to photography. The reading of authors such as Fernando Pessoa, Rainer Maria Rilke, Tagore, T. S. Eliot, Edmond Jabès, Paul Valéry, and Hermann Broch called forth images in her mind, which she sought to capture through photography.

The camera began to accompany the artist on far-flung travels, as a witness to her nomadic journeys to South India, Morocco, China, Alaska, Russia, Yemen, Cambodia, Italy, and Germany—her own writing and numerous literary references melding with the images.

She began creating travel notebooks with her photos, to which she associated excerpts from chosen texts, writing them out in longhand. These are artist's testimonies to the wonderment of travel, akin to the sketched notebooks of Delacroix in Morocco, or the diaries of Frieda Kahlo—a mixture of narrative and art.

The process gained impetus, giving rise to larger format books, hand-bound by the artist herself. With time she felt the need to create larger format images, which she developed in the darkroom using traditional techniques.

Today, the photography of Renate Graf is recognized for its distinctive chimerical quality combined with the formal austerity of the pictorial composition, which characterizes her works.

Several important museum shows have been devoted to her oeuvre. Most recently, « Going back in Time and the Silk Roads » at The House of Photography in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, which opened in March 2021, evinces the universal reach of her images. An important retrospective at the gallery Rui Freire in Lisbon in 2019, « The photographer's Chronicles: Thoughts become Images, » displayed the extraordinary richness of her photographic language and nuanced black and white palette.

Her works are coveted in prestigious private and public collections worldwide.

About her work, Renate Graf says: "I am not a photographer in the classical sense of the word; my images exist to serve a different purpose than that of any true photographer; they are not complete or conclusive. Nor are they perfect photographs in search of technical perfection. They function not only as images, but as language, as signs pointing to a meaning ... They do not define, they testify, and in the cultural diversity of a universe, they are a language in themselves, my language to describe what I see. "

Sacred Landscapes

With the present group of works at the Slag Gallery entitled « Sacred Landscapes, » Renate Graf unravels the pungent beauties of Calcutta, combing through the remnants of the mystic, the profane, and the sacred, glimpsing the ancient rituals of Hinduism as they have been practiced for millennia.

Her photographs allow you to follow her gaze through the streets of the Bengali capital; perhaps at an early morning hour, the dust hardly settled after the passage of throngs of revelers and celebrants, both mundane and holy. Her lens fixes on a bit of pottery, leading to the scene where a cremation took place hours earlier, a tangle of incense, beads, dust, ash, and cloth become her subject.

As in the adage of Roland Barthes, Renate Graf's photography: "is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead." (Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography*) Each photo spans three moments: that which has just transpired, the present we are witnessing, and the transformation of that present moment into countless reincarnations. Renate Graf is a poet with a camera; the images are like voices from the past, intonations as distinctive as the spoken word but with multiple meanings; there is a degree of disorder or randomness—entropy.

Renate Graf is a nomad; there is a sense in her photos of returning to a place visited years ago and finding that little stone exactly where it was, unmoved. It's a signpost, showing the way to something new but familiar, "*eternal recurrence*."

All text rights reserved © Denise Wendel-Poray, curator.

Denise Wendel-Poray is a Canadian writer and curator holding degrees from Yale and McGill Universities . Formerly an opera singer, she is the author and editor of books and essays concerning the relationship between art, theatre and music including *Frauen-liebe und Leben*, (2013) and *Painting the Stage: Artists as Stage Designers* (Skira 2019). She has been curator and music advisor for the Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum in Duisburg Germany and guest lecturer on stage décor at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. She has curated shows for artists such as Hermann Nitsch, William Kentridge, Howard Hodgkin and Vicken Parsons. As a journalist she contributed publications such as: Opera Canada Magazine, ArtPress, Art Review and the Wiener Kurier.