

DOMOBAAL

Force of Nature

Daniel Gustav Cramer's photography sheds a new darkness on getting back to the land

If you lose interest in people's faces, the German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans once said, something is wrong with you. Daniel Gustav Cramer - compatriot of Tillmans and rising star on the international art scene - takes pictures of forests, coral reefs, and mountain landscapes. In the world Cramer sees through his lens, there are no wrinkles, dimples, and no laugh lines, only subterranean caves, arboreal clearings, and wet leaves. So what, exactly is wrong with Daniel Gustav Cramer?

In person, Cramer is very much the urban hipster: multilingual, enthusiastic about German minimal techno, and very particular about his coffee beans. The 30-year-old's artistic career took off in London: Born and raised in Germany, he embarked on a postgraduate course at the prestigious Royal College of Art in 2001, winning the Jerwood Photography Award in 2005 for his series 'Woodland'. His latest show 'Underwater' opened this spring to rave reviews at the domobaal gallery, in Bloomsbury, London.

Despite his cosmopolitan persona, the unifying theme in his work is the flight from the hectic bustle of the city. Forests, oceans, and mountains appear as remote mythical place, one can still get utterly lost. Not incidentally, Cramer now lives and works in Berlin, "I need London, but sometimes it just offers too many opportunities", he says. "You end up running from one place to the next without ever achieving much. Berlin is very different in that respect: its a huge city, but it moves at the pace of a village."

The forest pervades the history of German art - less as an actual place than a state of mind, from the ecstatic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich to Jürgen Teller's nude self-portraits in pine-tree surroundings. Yet Cramer's photographs seem to have a universal appeal: I deliberately don't title my images I had taken in Germany, for example, I got someone from Wales coming up to me at one of my shows who was convinced that I had photographed around the corner from where he was born."

Cramer heavily manipulates his photographs in the darkroom: he will intensify dark spots in the undergrowth and emphasize rays of light falling through the water. In effect, each of his images develops an emotional life: They don't pull at our heartstrings as violently as the dramatic landscapes of the Romantic painters, but instead work their melancholy magic slowly, softly. He insists that his strong and simple human desires and fantasies: "I am interested in secrets," in particular, he explains, he is interested in the black areas in his images, because unlike those in real life, they can never be illuminated. "With photographs, you can capture mysteries and preserve them."

There are no faces in Cramer's pictures, and yet there is sadness and joy. "Many nature photographs are like fashion photos," the author John Berger once wrote. "They record and admit pleasure." There is nothing wrong with Daniel Gustav Cramer. He just likes to see the forest for the trees.

Philip Oltermann

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