

## DOMOBAAL

### Deep Waters

Photographer Daniel Gustav Cramer has plunged from dark uncanny forests to submarine seascapes. But, says Charles Darwent, his work is still concerned with the mes of concealment, where what is shown in the light may be more baffling than what lurks in the darkness.

Fingers on your buzzers, your starter for 10. Name the German artist best known for his fascination with the anderswo, that 'elsewhere' of dark woods and mountains beyond the human realm; who described his happiest moment as getting lost in a forest as night fell; who tussled with the aesthetics of the Sublime, and offered as the greatest influences on his work the operas of Richard Wagner and The Island of The Dead by Arnold Böcklin Ready? Caspar David Friedrich? No, sorry: the correct answer is Daniel Gustav Cramer.

If you've never heard of Cramer, that's entirely forgivable. Just turned 30, the young German only graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2003. If you do know his name, it's probably because he won the 2005 Jerwood Photography Award last November with Woodland, the first part of a trilogy of what might loosely be called landscapes: large, square-format photographs of deep woods, dark, empty and Friedrich-ish.

What business does a young photographer have messing with German High Romanticism? The answer is something like this. First, Cramer is by no means exclusively rooted in the 19th century. Along with Wagner, his favourite music is Cologne techno and the alternative country ballads of Bonnie 'Prince' Billy. A fogeyish choice this is not. Another measure of Cramer's modernity is, of course, that he is a photographer, and that his attitude to photography is fiercely of its day. His pictures share the Düsseldorf School's extremely up-to-date preoccupation with self-doubt.

For 150 years, the presumed genius of photography lay in its ability to reveal objective truth. In the past 20 years, though, this belief has become a dead letter in art photography. Contemporary camera-based artists are neurotically fixated with their medium's capacity to lie; indeed, with its inability to do anything but.

At first glance, Cramer's Woodland images seem obsessively exact, concerned with scientific attention to detail: they should come from a textbook on sustainable forestry. Their complete lack of narrative, straight-on viewpoint, deep focus and square format suggest the pursuit of empirical truth. But a quick stroll through Cramer's woods reveals a rather different quality to his art.

The word that suggests itself is 'uncanny', a sense that pervades the works from the roots up. The question that nags at you as you walk through Cramer's sylvan woods is: why? Why here? Why this tree? And the realisation dawns on you that these photographs aren't just about revelation but equally about concealment. They focus not just on things seen - leaves, sunlight, twigs - but on things unseen; the unexplained, the shadows between.

The real story of photography is that the medium has always been as good at hiding as revealing. Cramer's images find a precise balance between the two, and that balance is scary. They tell you everything you need to know, and nothing, ask just as many questions as they answer.

And they do this by finding an equivalence between the anderswo of German High Romanticism and the Elsewhere of photography: that shadowland which is the flip-side of the revealed world. Look into the real wood and your eye makes a distinction between grades of darkness, depth of field. Sight demystifies.

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The Romantic forest, the Caspar Friedrich glade, is less a visual placed than a Jungian, prowling with archetypal wolves. By contrast, the photograph of a wood flattens depth and shade into a single field, creates a two-dimensional mystery where none exists in three. Light becomes a black hole, swallowing up information instead of giving it: Jung made photographic.

If Cramer's woods bear shades of Friedrich, then his latest work - Part Two of the Trilogy, on show at London's DOMOBAAL gallery - echoes Turner. In this new series, Cramer has abandoned the Friedrichean landscape for the Turner-esque seascape, though, typically, his sally into marine photography takes place underwater rather than over it.

Untitled (Underwater) is a contemporary take on Turner lashing himself with the mask in Ramsgate harbour. To shoot the photographs in this series, Cramer had to dive down 24 metres off the coast of Cyprus and, buffeted by currents, work with the agonisingly slow exposures required by the lack of light at that depth. Keeping his tripod steady called for vast endurance: like a good Romantic hero, the young German, made his art while wrestling with nature.

You sense this battle in the work, and air of preternatural calm expensively won. And, as with the Woodland pictures, these find that exact balance between opposing things at which photography excels.

The Underwater shots record exactly what they see, but, given the lack of familiar context, they puzzle us mightily by doing so. (Is that rocky outcrop a mountain or a molehill? Is it a foot high or a mile, close up or far off?)

For every revelation there is an equal and opposite concealment, down to the elemental question of whether we are looking at earth or water. Cramer's work is hugely clever, but it is hugely heartfelt too: a pairing you don't much see in contemporary photography. A genuinely new Sublime.

Charles Darwent, Paris.

Charles Darwent is the Art Critic of The Independent Newspaper.

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