

Guido Baselgia

As If the World Were There to Be Measured

Over the past 25 years, Guido Baselgia (born in 1953) has created an extensive oeuvre. His interest in landscape spaces found a very specific visual language, resulting in concentrated black-and-white tableaux on the verge of abstraction. The photographer's approach is characterised by slowness and diligence. After geographical research and photographic experiments, Guido Baselgia exposed his large-format films, which he then enlarged in his own darkroom. His prints are handcrafted masterpieces in shades of grey and fascinating detail.

The Fotostiftung is taking the completion of Guido Baselgia's latest project as the occasion for a monographic presentation. After working on the peripheral zones of vegetation in the Alps, northern Norway and the Andes, and a long-term project on light phenomena – sun and star paths – he sought out a new challenge: the specialist for emptiness confronts overabundance, addressing the representability of the tropical rainforest in its incomprehensible density. Guido Baselgia's photographs of the Amazon Basin explore a habitat that is so pervasive in the collective visual consciousness, a landscape at the centre of climate policy debates due to its acute endangerment. Against this background, the photographs of plants, still lifes and portraits appear solemn and melancholic at the same time. They are an expression of awe, but also of concern for the future.

The photographer pursues elementary questions and crosses the paths of famous explorers on his travels to Ecuador and Peru. But his pictures testify to a very nuanced view. The world no longer needs to be mapped, there are no more white spots, today we have become critical of the utilitarian and colonialist gesture inherent in measuring the world. Looking at photographs from remote parts of the world now prompts us to reflect on the conditions of our perception.

Room 1

The photographs in the first two rooms represent central groups of works in Guido Baselgia's oeuvre and trace his artistic origins. The photograph *Lago Bianco 3 February 1981*, right next to the entrance to the exhibition can be seen as the foundation stone and key image for his work. It was created at a time when the photographer was mainly active in the applied field and documented industrial buildings and plants on behalf of major companies. Limiting the field of view to the frozen surface of the lake creates an almost abstract picture. This approach would continue to play a role in Baselgia's artistic work. The cracks and furrows in the black ice are reminiscent of the aerial photograph of the Amazon basin with its branching river courses – in retrospect, the picture almost seems to anticipate the journey into the rainforest.

In the late 1990s, Baselgia, equipped with a large-format camera – the tool of the industrial and architectural photographer –, began translating mountains and valleys of the Engadine region into images. However, he avoided reproducing the familiar panoramas and concentrated on forms and structures that are difficult to localise. In this room, 5 out of 20 prints from the 40-

part work cycle *Hochland* (“Highland”) are on display, which the Fotostiftung was able to purchase in 2001.

The Mountains impress me as being a concentrated world. They are so literally, since their pleats and folds provide a relatively greater surface-area over a given distance.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, New York: Penguin Books 2012, p. 339.

Room 2

Baselgia’s work in the Alps drew his attention to the phenomenon of the tree line: Due to the cold temperatures, only low-growing plants can survive above a certain altitude. Since the climate also depends on latitudes, the tree line in northern Norway is at sea level, while near the equator it is much higher than in Switzerland. On journeys to the Barents Sea and the Bolivian Andes, Baselgia photographed landscapes beyond the tree line. This resulted in the work cycles *Weltraum* (“Space”, 2004) and *Silberschicht* (“Silver Coating”, 2008), individual pictures of which can be seen in the exhibition: Baselgia produced the seemingly timeless photographs of the rocky coast of the Barents Sea covered with ice as small formats using the heliogravure technique (also known as photogravure), a high-quality printing process developed in the 19th century that gives the images a precious and dreamlike quality. The *Salar de Uyuni* in the Bolivian highlands, the largest salt pan on earth, finally brought the artist to a zero point in landscape photography. The earth and the sky collide as equally sized surfaces and become interchangeable. Furthermore, the salt lake can be seen as a metaphor for analogue photography, which is based on the light sensitivity of silver salts.

Baselgia grouped his photographs taken between 2006 and 2013 under the title *Light Fall*, dedicated to the manifestations of the celestial bodies over the earth and the resulting light moods. The darkness of the polar night gradually displaces all grey tones, a long exposure entitled *Durch die Mitte des Tages* (“Through the Middle of the Day”) transforms the sun’s path into an intense glow above the horizon. The ‘sun staff’ above the *Jordan Rift Valley* was also created by long exposure and visually references the steady drying up of the Dead Sea, whose shores are the lowest part of the earth not covered by water or ice.

Baselgia’s interest in climate zones finally brought him to Ecuador in 2013, where a wide variety of landscapes intersect in a small area. Two works in the exhibition illustrate this diversity: *Tierra nevada – Cotopaxi* shows a glacier erosion on the highest active volcanic cone in the world, while *Tierra helada – El Angel* portrays a jungle at an altitude of over 3000 meters. The Polylepis trees growing here protect themselves against the cold of the mountain nights by creating an insulating cavity with their peeling bark.

The [mountainous] countries bordering on the equator possess another advantage, to which sufficient attention has not hitherto been directed. This portion of the surface of the globe affords in the smallest space the greatest possible variety of impressions from the contemplation of nature.
Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe, Vol. 1*, New York: Harper and Brothers 1856, p. 32f.

The steep decline of the Andes quickly leads to the tropical zone of the tierra caliente, also known as oriente. His first confrontation with the rainforest made such a lasting impression on Baselgia that it gave rise to the idea for his latest project. After preparatory research and material tests, he embarked on two trips in 2018 and 2019, each lasting several weeks, with the help of contact persons and assistants. These included journeys to Yasuní National Park in the east of Ecuador and the Peruvian blackwater region.

Tierra caliente – “Traurige Tropen”

The photographer had no precise idea of how these landscapes could be translated into images before he began his work. He had only sketched one image in his mind: a view over the canopy of the jungle, divided into two equally sized halves of sky and forest – similar to his pictures of the Salar de Uyuni. However, this project failed to come to fruition due to climatic conditions. The humidity on the viewing platform was so high that the film sheets stuck together and could only be removed from the cassette by force. Only a single scratched negative was rescued. Baselgia enlarged this picture, marked by the resistance of the jungle, and gave it the title *Tierra caliente – “Traurige Tropen”*. This is a reference to the travel diary *Tristes Tropiques* (“Sad Tropics”) by the French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, published in 1955.

Room 3

Baselgia approaches the jungle by perceiving it as a multitude of small worlds. On the one hand, his work is once again grounded in geologically and climatically distinct zones. On the other hand, he searches for images that reflect a characteristic mood of the respective zone. The photographs from the cloud forest overgrown with lichens, ferns and orchids convey an external point of view: draped against a white curtain of condensed humidity, the plants appear as fragile silhouettes. While the cloud forest still offers open spaces, the image compositions become denser the further he ventures into the forest. But even in the thick of the tropics, Baselgia succeeds in photographically isolating shapes: sweeping vines, tangled branches and monumental trunks are reminiscent of Karl Blossfeldt’s *Urformen der Kunst* (“Art Forms in Nature”) from the 1920s. This series of almost sculptural plant details is complemented by views that refuse to give a foothold to the observing eye: it becomes lost in the depth of a restless clutter of leaves.

The forest, being often difficult to penetrate, demands of anyone venturing into it the same concessions that the mountains, more peremptorily, require of the walker.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, New York: Penguin Books 2012, p. 340/341.

In addition to Baselgia’s photographs of forest spaces and plants, which in a sense can be seen as a continuation of his landscape photography, the exhibition is rounded out by distinct still lifes **and portraits** that highlight the importance of the forest as a habitat. Today, the **Waorani** and **Secoya** indigenous peoples live in a state of tension between their traditional lifestyles in harmony with nature and adaptation to the changes brought about by the encroachment of oil companies. The progressive exploitation of the rainforest is increasingly depriving them of their homelands and livelihoods. In full awareness of the problematic tradition of ethnographic photography, Baselgia strives for a very respectful representation of the people he meets and who agree to support him in his project. He captures their serious gazes and pays tribute to the individuality of the people he portrays. The traces of life that mark their faces seem to be related to the structures of stones and leaves.

Light boxes

For the **still lifes**, Baselgia on the one hand arranges fruits of the forest, hunted animals or their remains, and on the other hand utensils of traditional village life. Enlarged as diapositives and presented in glassine covers, the objects resemble archival finds. The archaeological character of the still lifes is also echoed in another group of pictures: reproductions of selected pages of the book *Anfänge der Kunst im Urwald* (“Beginnings of Art in the Jungle”), published by the German anthropologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg in 1905. Viewing the unprinted backs of the plates under grazing light reveals fine reliefs of line patterns and ornaments. With this citation, Baselgia reflects on the history of the exploration of the Amazon Basin and critically examines the possibilities of its representation in media.

Room 4

The **trunk of the Ceibo tree**, which is presented in the exhibition as a monumental three-part installation, is even larger in reality. Like a giant, thick-skinned animal, it dominates the forest. Baselgia concentrates on the lines and furrows, which in turn are reminiscent of the surface of Lago Bianco. The high and sweeping **crown of the Ceibo tree**, seen in a confusing doubling as both a negative and a positive in Room 3, is the starting point of various creation myths of indigenous peoples.

A horizon only opens out again in the images of the *Aguas Negras* region. Isolated plants protrude from the still, black water and, through their symmetrical reflection, accentuate the line that divides the image area into two equal halves. These rather graphical compositions of perpendicular lines reflect Baselgia’s earlier works, especially his observations of light conditions above the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia.

By the mysterious relations existing among all types of organization, the forms of exotic vegetation present themselves to [our] mind as nobler and more perfect developments of those [we] had loved in earlier days.

Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe, Vol. 1*, New York: Harper and Brothers 1856, p. 27.

Work in the darkroom

The production of the silver gelatin prints in his own darkroom is equally essential for Guido Baselgia’s artistic work. The images captured during his travels on analogue, mostly large-format film material are reinterpreted according to the photographer’s memories of the sensory impressions he collected while on location. This includes the search for the ideal combination of film material, photographic paper, exposure time, filters and developers and, for example, the decision as to which size each photograph should have. In the case of photographs from the tropical rainforest, the pre-exposure of the paper plays a crucial role. Baselgia thus avoids excessive contrasts and manages to recreate the mood of the thicket. In the portraits, on the other hand, the dark veil seems to protect the faces.

Geopolitical background

Guido Baselgia visited several different landscapes in the east of Ecuador. Some of his photographs were taken in the Yasuní National Park, which, due to its rich natural resources, is always in the spotlight of international reporting. In 2007, the former President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, proposed to the UN General Assembly to ban operations at the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) oil field in the northern Yasuní National Park in exchange for an international compensation payment of 3.6 billion dollars. Since only a fraction of this amount was raised, the Ecuadorian parliament approved oil production in 2013.

Not least due to the escalation of the situation in Brazil over the past few months, Baselgia's latest work cycle is a highly topical project. Although this is no photo reportage claiming to represent a reality, to report on the extinction of species and the displacement of indigenous people from the forest, and although there is no raised finger lamenting climate change – or perhaps precisely for this reason – Baselgia's interpretation of this unique habitat is especially moving.

Exhibition curator: Teresa Gruber.

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Unless otherwise stated, the works are hand prints on silver gelatin barite paper from the artist's private collection. The photographs from the new work series are produced in an edition of 3 and are available for purchase. Please ask for further information at the ticket office or contact: info@fotostiftung.ch.

Biography

Guido Baselgia was born in the Engadine in 1953. He lives and works in Malans GR, Switzerland.

1976–1979 Professional photography class at the Zurich School of Applied Arts (now ZHdK).

1978 Federal Art Scholarship.

1979–1982 Photographer for leading industrial companies in Switzerland.

1983 Opening of his own studio in Baar, where he lived and worked until 2010.

1983–1992 Intensive reportage activities, e.g. in Eastern Europe, Switzerland and for industrial projects in Europe, USA and Iraq, resulting in numerous publications in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the *Tages-Anzeiger Magazin* and other print media.

After his first book *Galizien* (“Galicia”, 1992), Baselgia turned to his immediate living environment in the 1990s. The photographic exploration of the familiar space resulted in the photo books *Zug* in 1994 and *ZugStadt* in 1998. The character and transformation of the environment became the central theme of these studies.

Between 1996 and 2001 he collaborated with the Kunsthaus Zug and the artists Tadaschi Kawamata, Richard Tuttle and Pavel Pepperstein. The close cooperation with the artists resulted

in comprehensive photo essays and book publications. In 1998, he began a wide-ranging research project into the alpine habitat of the Engadine. The return to his homeland was accompanied by a profound change in his photographic work. It marked a shift from photojournalism to independent artistic work.

Guido Baselgia has received several awards, including the Recognition Award of the Canton of Graubünden (2004) and the Central Swiss Culture Prize. The work in the Ecuadorian rainforest was made possible by the working scholarship of the Landis & Gyr Foundation.

Publication

Accompanying the exhibition is the book by the artist:

Guido Baselgia, *Als ob die Welt zu vermessen wäre*
("As If the World Were There to Be Measured")

Edited by Fotostiftung Schweiz

Edizioni Periferia, 2019

30 x 24 cm, 144 pages

With texts in German/English/Spanish

Hardcover with protective cover bound in thread stitching

Available at bookshops for CHF 58, or at the shop of the Fotozentrum for CHF 48 for the duration of the exhibition.

Special events

Sunday, 20 October, 11:30 a.m. Tour and dialogue with the artist

Guido Baselgia in conversation with Teresa Gruber.

Sunday, 1 December, 11:30 a.m. Tour and dialogue

Teresa Gruber in conversation with Dr Michael Kessler, scientific director of the Botanical Garden of the University of Zurich, specialised in tropical biodiversity and tree line research.

Sunday, 19 January, 11:30 a.m. Tour and dialogue with the artist

Guido Baselgia in conversation with Teresa Gruber.