

19/10/2024 – 26/01/2025

Binia Bill – Images and Fragments



Fotostiftung Schweiz

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Binia Bill (1904–1988) turned to photography with ambition and confidence, creating a remarkable body of work between 1930 and 1942: Her portraits and still lifes are characterised by a striking visual language based on the aesthetics of the Neues Sehen ('new vision') movement. Binia Bill's interest in perspectives, surfaces, and the interplay of light and shadow was combined with a very distinct sensitivity, which influenced her view of objects, plants and people.

After Binia Bill abandoned her career as a photographer, her work was largely forgotten. It did not see the light of day again until after her death, when her son established the max, binia + jakob bill foundation. In 2023, the family decided to entrust Fotostiftung Schweiz with Binia Bill's photographic estate.

What has survived of Binia Bill's work shows that she deserves a place in the history of international photography: She was one of the few women in Switzerland working with a camera for both applied and artistic purposes in the first half of the 20th century. Today, her photographs are an integral part of the visual memory of Swiss modernism.

Youth and education

Binia Mathilde Spoerri was born in 1904. She was the youngest of the three daughters of Ida Spoerri-Gross and Ferdinand Jakob Spoerri, who made his way from a farm in the Töss Valley to Japan, as a representative of the firm Volkart Brothers. Binia grew up in Fluntern, Zurich, and began to play the cello in her youth. She went to Paris to study under Pablo Casals and Diran Alexanian at École normale de musique, and graduated as a qualified concert cellist in 1926. She obtained her first orchestral position in Sicily, but soon quit because of the director's fascist views. She returned to Zurich and subsequently decided to take her career in a new direction. In 1930, she attended the photography class at the Itten School in Berlin for one semester. She was taught by Lucia Moholy, who, like the head of the school, Johannes Itten, had previously worked at the Bauhaus: Both advocated a doctrine in which modern design was considered part of a societal transformation.

Marriage and collaboration with Max Bill

Binia Spoerri began her photography career in Zurich. When she met Max Bill, who had himself been a student at the Bauhaus but had dropped out, he was barely 22 years old and she had just turned 26. When they married in 1931, they also started working together in close collaboration. Binia Bill produced the photographic images that Max Bill needed for his commissions as a commercial graphic designer. For brochures and posters promoting the newly founded firm wohnbedarf, the couple presented a folding table and the 'Volksessel' cantilever chair, appearing as actors to demonstrate the products' functionality and simple design. Binia and Max Bill also worked together on commissions for Zurich's Zett-Haus building, which was completed in 1932, the fuel company Shell, a radio manufacturer, and the Schulthess & Co washing-machine factory. For a brochure promoting the medical technology firm Wechlin-Tissot, Binia Bill supplied almost all the visual material, photographing neatly lined-up medical equipment. In 1934, Max Bill designed various sections of Schweizerische landwirtschaftliche Produktenmesse (a Swiss agricultural products fair) in Zurich's Zügapark and used several large-format photographs by Binia Bill. She, in turn, documented Max Bill's exhibition design, as well as his advertising texts on facades, shop windows and cars.

Relocation to the Höngg studio house in Zurich
With these commissions, Max and Binia Bill earned their living. During their first years together, the couple lived in a two-room flat on the street Goldbrunnenstrasse. In 1933, they moved into a studio house that

Vernissage: Friday, 18th of October 2024, from 6 pm

Welcoming address at 7 pm: Lars Willumeit, director of Fotostiftung Schweiz. Introduction to the exhibition: Teresa Gruber, curator, Fotostiftung Schweiz

Sunday, 27th of October 2024, 11:30 am

From archive to exhibition:

Curator-guided tour with Teresa Gruber

Sunday, 17th of November 2024, 11:30 am

Who was Binia Bill?

Exhibition talk with curator Teresa Gruber and Jakob Bill

Sunday, 19th of January 2025, 11:30 am

Binia Bill and the Zurich Concretists: Exhibition tour with Thomas Haemmerli, film director and co-editor of the publication *Circle! Square! Progress!*

Every Sunday, 11:30 am. Public guided tour through the exhibition *Binia Bill – Images and Fragments*

Max Bill had designed, on a plot of land financed by Binia Bill's parents, in the Zurich borough of Höngg. The house had a workshop with a skylight and a north-facing window front extending over two storeys, as well as an adjoining photo lab. The simple architecture, with its bright open-plan living area, selected furnishings designed in part by Max Bill, and effectively positioned works of his, along with photographs by Binia Bill, served as a manifesto: Max Bill made his mark as an architect with this building, the first he had realised, and Binia Bill contributed significantly with her photographs. She captured the facade and interiors with her large-format camera; her carefully arranged self-portraits, in which her elegant clothing corresponded with the clear forms of the surroundings, depicted an ideal of modern living.

First exhibitions and SWB membership

One network in which a progressive tone prevailed at the time was that of the association Swiss Werkbund (SWB), which Max Bill had been a member of since 1930. SWB spoke out in favour of modern photography and brought the influential German Werkbund exhibition *Film und Foto (FiFo)* to Zurich. After photographers had long orientated themselves towards painting, using elaborate techniques to depict atmospheric scenes, an awareness of the specific properties and

possibilities of the photographic medium was now called for: detailed reproduction of surfaces, accentuation of the contrast between light and shadow, and experimentation with unusual cropping, perspectives and motion blur. Binia Bill followed this trend and based her work on these avant-garde principles.

In 1933, Binia Bill's works were shown in two Swiss Werkbund exhibitions at the Museum of Arts and Crafts Zurich: *Zürcher Werkkunst einst und jetzt* (Zurich Applied Art, Then and Now) and *Foto-Wanderausstellung* (Travelling Photo Exhibition). The latter was conceived in 1932, in response to Lucerne's *I. Internationale Ausstellung für künstlerische Fotografie* (1st International Exhibition for Artistic Photography): In order to counter the art photography shown there, which was devoted to the painterly 'pictorialist' style from the turn of the century, this exhibition presented 'new Swiss photography'. Binia Bill had seventeen works included – the fourth-highest number of works among the twenty-four photographers presented by SWB. After Gotthard Schuh, Ernst H. Heiniger, Herbert Matter and other male photographers, Binia Bill and Grete Hubacher became the first female photographers admitted to SWB in 1934.

Publications

From 1934 onwards, Binia Bill's photographs were distributed by the Suzanne Blum photo agency in Bern and published in various magazines, most frequently in the SWB journal *Das Werk*. One series of three full-page close-ups showing 'new St Gallen machine embroidery' is particularly noteworthy. The pictorial magazine *Föhn*, which had a modern look and was popular with a wide audience, also repeatedly included photographs by Binia Bill. The 1935 Parisian publication *Formes Nues* featured photographic depictions of bodies by Brassai, László Moholy-Nagy and others, along with two photographs by Binia Bill. Exhibitions and publications mostly presented stand-alone pictures of hers, although she did also work on reportage-like groups of images – for example, she documented sheep shearing, a Parisian market for small animals and a travelling circus. On trips to Nice and St Tropez, she captured Mediterranean street and beach scenes in simple compositions.

Circles of friends

During the interwar period, Binia and Max Bill maintained close ties with the Parisian art scene. Binia Bill had already socialised in Parisian circles during her cello studies and she accompanied Max Bill, who joined the Abstraction-Création collective, on his visits. In 1933, she photographed Jean Arp in his Clamart studio. Her portrait is one of the most impressive of

later became known as an important representative of concrete art, are among her most frequently reproduced photographs.

Exhibiting

In 1935, Binia Bill showed another seven photographs in a Swiss Werkbund exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern, including a portrayal of dancer Marie-Eve Kreis, whose teacher Katja Wulff had already been portrayed by Binia Bill in an avant-garde low-angle shot back in 1931. Her first solo exhibition, the only one she had during her lifetime, followed in December 1935: According to the invitation card, the exhibition was called *pflanzen / tiere / menschen / erde / wasser / luft* (plants / animals / people / earth / water / air) and the venue was 'Haus Ciné Nord-Süd'. This referred to the building at Limmatquai 16, where Willy Boesiger set up Café Select and Cinema Studio Nord-Süd in the year of Binia Bill's exhibition – and where Galerie 16, a platform for the Zurich Concretists, would open ten years later. In 1936, Binia Bill's work was present at the *6th Triennale di Milano* in the Swiss pavilion, which was set up by her husband, and which she documented photographically. In Milan, her composition featuring clover leaves on a black background earned her the silver medal for photography. Her work was also included in a 1937 group exhibition on amateur photography in Turin.

On the whole, Binia Bill's presence in exhibitions was quite unusual for the 1930s and demonstrates that she not only worked in applied photography, but also considered her pictures to be artworks and received recognition for them. There were hardly any female photographers in Switzerland who saw themselves this way at the time. For instance, Fotostiftung Schweiz houses the archives of Leni Willimann-Thöni, who attended Hans Finsler's photography class at the Zurich School of Applied Arts in the late 1930s and remained true to the 'new objectivity' style until the 1960s, as well as those of Margrit Aschwanden, Hedy Bumbacher and Marie (Margy) Ottomann-Rothacher. The three latter also trained in the 1930s and produced photo-reportage in a social context at the beginning of the 1940s, e.g. for Pro Juventute and the Red Cross. However, the works of these female photographers were not shown in contemporary exhibitions. Annemarie Schwarzenbach and Ella Maillart, whose estates are not held by Fotostiftung Schweiz, were operating as travel journalists in the 1930s and their work did appear in magazines and books, but not in exhibitions. In western Switzerland, Gertrude Fehr and Germaine Martin are represented in exhibitions and photographers such as Aenne Biermann, Florence Henri, Germaine Krull and Lucia Moholy took part in the *FiFo* of the Deutscher Werkbund

(Non-)political?

The Nazi terror in Germany also had an impact on Switzerland. Over the course of the 1930s, more and more emigrants sought refuge here. As documented in records from the Zurich city police, acquaintances from communist circles were sometimes taken in at the studio house in Höngg, which even led to a police report. In those years, there was also a political aspect to Binia Bill's role as the woman of the house and as hostess. As a photographer, she was only marginally involved in documenting current events, but her responses to design-related issues did reflect the spirit in the oppositional Zurich circles in which she operated.

Objects, plants, family

Up until the early 1940s, many reproductions of Max Bill's designs and artworks were realised by Binia Bill. She presented his small-format sculptures on the balcony of the studio house or accentuated their forms with artistic lighting and striking shadows. Alongside this, she was also creating her own assemblages: She photographed plants and objects on a white or black background, on wickerwork and fabric. In the Höngg garden, which Binia Bill lovingly tended, she produced a series of fine nature studies. The numerous cats and dogs that the Bill couple surrounded themselves with also kept appearing in the photographs. Their son Jakob Bill was born in 1942 and would become the centre of Binia Bill's life for two decades. From then on, she only rarely took photographs and when she did, they were of the family, or occasionally of Max Bill's works.

The photographic estate

Binia Bill's photographic work was stowed away in a cupboard and when the Bill couple moved into a new house in Zumikon, it remained in the Höngg house, which Jakob Bill would later take over. His mother hardly ever mentioned the photographic chapter of her life and explicitly wished it to remain invisible. It was not until after her death that Jakob Bill, together with his wife Chantal Bill, looked through his mother's archives. They decided to disregard the wishes of the deceased. Through their max, binia + jakob bill foundation, they would also represent the oeuvre of this largely forgotten photographer. Jakob Bill compiled valuable information for a monographic exhibition held at Kunsthaus Aarau in 2004, as well as for the accompanying publication. Alongside numerous vintage prints, several new prints from the original negatives were also shown.

The Binia Bill archives at Fotostiftung Schweiz
The Binia Bill archives have been at Fotostiftung Schweiz since the beginning of 2024. Thanks to generous financial support from Jakob and Chantal Bill,





the material was cleaned up and repackaged. The contact prints that Binia Bill had glued onto sheets of cardboard and numbered, as well as a database created by Jakob Bill, aided the cataloguing of the 6x6 negatives. Unfortunately, Binia Bill did not date her photographs and the year of origin can only be determined for some of them. Moreover, it is not clear whether a number of the later photographs were taken by Binia Bill or by Max Bill: When Binia Bill stopped working as a photographer, her husband started documenting his sculptures and paintings himself, using her camera.

Almost all the negatives have been digitised and added to the Fotostiftung Schweiz database, as have the 350 vintage prints and 188 small-format prints mounted by Binia Bill on A4 sheets of cardboard. After this comprehensive inventory, gaps have become apparent upon comparison with existing publications: Some negatives are missing because they were not returned by editorial offices (a clue as to how many of Binia Bill's pictures were in circulation) or have simply been lost because the photographer placed little value on the preservation of her work. What has become clear though, is the quality and richness of this estate. For the 1930s, the large-format vintage prints are remarkable. A selection of these are mounted in passepartouts, which also date back to the 1930s and indicate that these photographs were exhibited by Binia Bill. In an initial analysis of the digitised negatives, variations on well-known images were found, as well as photographs that have never been published. From among these discoveries, 78 are on display in this exhibition as new prints, shedding new light on Binia Bill's work: They reveal an independent oeuvre that combines the modern visual language of the pre-war period with a distinct sensitivity.

In present-day approach to the history of photography, there is an interest in the polyphony and significance of collective work. This approach considers the perception of individual personalities and their works in the context of interplay between various protagonists. Binia Bill's photography, for instance, had a significant influence on the reception of Max Bill and his oeuvre. Beyond that, her photographs also document the avant-garde scene in 1930s Zurich and are thus part of the visual memory of Swiss modernism.



This exhibition was made possible by generous support from the max, binia + jakob bill foundation, as well as the Dr Georg and Josi Guggenheim Foundation and the Else von Sick Foundation, along with additional donors who wish to remain anonymous.

Captions: Self-portrait, 1930s. Small animal market, Paris, 1930s (excerpt). Southern French bread, 1930s. Two photographs for a wohnbedarf brochure, 1931. Foot, 1932 (excerpt). Travelling circus, 1930s (excerpt). © jakob bill / Fotostiftung Schweiz



