



Roger Humbert

Images to Engage the Mind

30/08/2025–15/02/2026

Exhibition Leaflet English

The work of Roger Humbert (1929–2022) positions him as a pioneer of Swiss photography. His guiding principle, 'I am photographing the light,' illustrates Humbert's artistic exploration of the interplay between subject and object, materiality and consciousness, and thus between physics and metaphysics. Humbert's photographs are therefore also an exploration of what lies behind the sensually perceptible, natural world and how it relates to the fabric of existence.

In addition to his own feelings, ideas and perceptions, those of the viewer play an equally important role for Humbert. Each viewing of an image thus complements the photographic objects produced by Humbert on an individual level of experience. This doubling of processes of subjective meaning-making thus becomes an integral part of his creative philosophy.

He produced most of his 'images to engage the mind' in the solitude of his darkroom at night: through unrepeatable experimentation with stencils, which served as pre-digital image generators for the artist, he created unique photograms and luminograms from 1949 onwards. Together with René Mächler, Rolf Schroeter and Jean-Frédéric Schnyder, Roger Humbert founded 'Concrete Photography' in the 1960s, which is still a recognised term today.

This exhibition presents an overview of Humbert's work, much of which has been kept in the collections of the Swiss Foundation for Photography since 2007. On display are not only his camera-less photographs, but also series in which he documented the representational world with different camera systems. Various series produced with camera and flash reveal his great fascination with working in and with the night. His travel photographs, on the other hand, bear testimony to his decades-long thirst for worldly experience.

Even at the age of 90, Humbert was still enthusiastically exploring the digital recording of light. His late work thus comes full circle, bringing him back to his beginnings. Viewed together with his early analogue experiments with light, Humbert's late work reveals his ambitions and highlights the intertwining of free

artistic creation and the day-to-day business of an applied image maker who also ran a successful studio in Basel for many years.

A publication of the same name has been published by Vexer Verlag in partnership with the Turm Zur Katz in Konstanz to accompany the exhibition. (LW)

Black and white photographs

In the 1950s and 1960s, Roger Humbert took photographs in Basel and while travelling with a 6×6 camera and used the square format of the images to create sophisticated compositions in which he worked with contrasts of sharpness and blur, light and shadow, as well as clear lines. He then greatly reduces the series of resulting images and only continues to work with a small number of pictures, most of which form a thematic suite. In addition to pictures from Italy and of children, these are primarily images from the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris. This private art school, founded in 1904 in the Montpar-nasse neighbourhood by the Swiss Martha Stettler and Alice Dannenberg, whose students included Meret Oppenheim, still exists today and was for a long time the most famous private art academy in the French capital. Roger Humbert has visited it several times and photographed the studio rooms and courtyard. (BS)

Italy

Roger Humbert travelled to Italy time and again with his wife Ann, often with a Minox camera in his luggage, with which he took an extensive series of photographs. The Minox was a “miniature camera” that came onto the market as early as 1936, but was particularly popular in the post-war period up until the 1970s. Thanks to the miniature format of the camera, the pictures could be taken almost unnoticed and were also characterised by their snapshot-like casualness in the prints. Roger Humbert utilised the peculiar technical imperfection of the Minox negatives to create snapshots that show fleeting moments, shimmering contrasts and an Italy that has nothing at all to do with the tourist country of the “Grand Tour”. As if to heighten the technical problems, he sometimes works with strong backlighting and creates a series of shots in a restaurant, for example, in which the waiters are transformed into beings of light that wander through the rooms like good spirits. (BS)

Travelling

Roger Humbert was an enthusiastic traveller. In the 1970s, he travelled to Moscow and St. Petersburg, the United States, Tunisia, Thailand, Egypt, the Canary Islands and, last but not least, China. During his travels, he produced more or less extensive series of colour slides, some in small format, others in square medium formats. However, Roger Humbert was not a “snapper” and did not capture the entire journey photographically, but rather focussed on a few aspects and objects. In the United States, for example, he was fascinated by the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco and the Chinatown there; in Egypt, the pyramids of Giza in particular, including the Sphinx; and in China, everyday life and industrial

production. The series of China pictures is also by far the most extensive and is characterised by a pointed use of colour—especially blue and red. Even though he published a thematic selection of the China photos in 1979 under the title “Children in China” in Basler Magazin, his colour photographs were virtually unknown until recently. Humbert only made new prints in the last few years of his life and showed them for the first time in 2020 at an exhibition at BelleVue in Basel. (BS)

Photograms

The photograms that Roger Humbert has created since 1949 are without doubt his most important group of works and were donated to the Fotostiftung Schweiz in 2007. He produced them in his advertising studio and in a basement room in his house that was specially equipped for this purpose. Humbert remained faithful to this technique for decades, refining his production methods and extending them to unusually large formats. “Using experimental light sources and formal elements,” is how Humbert described his own work, “he created photograms from the 1950s to the 2000s. In the laboratory, Humbert experimented with photography and tried to find out what it means to capture light photographically by using templates, grids and punched cards.” The photograms were a field of continued experimentation: Roger Humbert changed the size of the prints and also the density of the pictorial objects, sometimes using fog-like structures, only to work again with clearly contoured objects almost in the style of the avant-gardes of the 1920s. The fact that the photograms form the centrepiece of his photography is also shown by the fact that when Humbert gave the originals to the Fotostiftung, he made small copies of all the pictures, which he mounted on index cards, complete with size information and instructions on how to hang them. (BS)

Marken Island

“Marken Island in the Markermeer—North Holland. Nikon Camera, open aperture, 2 connected Braun flashes, in complete darkness. 5 degrees below zero.” This is how Roger Humbert describes his series of striking black and white photographs, which were taken in just one night in 1968. The island of Marken, which was settled by monks as early as the 13th century and lay in the Zuiderzee for centuries without access to the mainland, was discovered by impressionist painters as early as the 19th century. Since the construction of a dam in 1957, however, numerous tourists have made the pilgrimage to the island, which is famous for its traditional costumes and the classic wooden architecture of the fishermen’s houses. Roger Humbert focuses his attention on these: in the middle of the night, he uses electric flashes to illuminate the contrasts of the white and

dark painted wooden façades and then captures them with his 35 mm camera. Humbert particularly appreciated this series, which comprises over two dozen photographs in total, and produced prints in various formats. (BS)

Concrete photography digital

Roger Humbert once described his concrete photographs as follows: “We come to the digital works of ‘concrete photography’. These photographs that you see here were realised with a manual camera. They are just as ‘non-representational’ as the analogue photographs. They are forms and refractions of light that are processed with the same transparent objects as the photogr[amme]. Again, it is a group of works that can be described with the phrase ‘Denkvisualisierung. Seeing at the back of the visual space’. It is a subjective visual space that is actually a perceptual field in our brain.” In his photographs, he is therefore primarily concerned with human perception on the subject side and with light on the object side. These are the two poles of his non-representational experimental works. In the digital concrete photographs, he therefore says quite explicitly, “the mysterious quality of light is at the centre. This is now being investigated using new, digital photographic techniques.” His “Quant” series turns the screw a little further, as the images now show photoelectric effects on semiconductors: We see quantum processes in photo cameras—and at the same time get a little closer to light. (BS)

Mannerism in photography

In 2015/16, Roger Humbert created a series of camera photographs, which he entitled “Mannerism in Photography”. As is almost always the case with his later series, he notes in pencil on the back of the individual prints that they belong to the corresponding series. With “Mannerism”, he not only deliberately chooses an epoch of art history, but also decidedly seeks a reference to painting. Some of the photographs show details of famous paintings, some of which he has reproduced from illustrated books, while others take historical photographs from his own collection as a starting point from which to try out new perspectives. Humbert is interested in a special “manner” of looking at things and exploring photography as a medium in a new way: as an object and a process. In this sense, he also works with things that are used in the darkroom, such as white gloves and photographic paper, but also with photographic processes such as magnification, flashlight-like lighting or mirrors. (BS)

The magic of objects

In the mid-2010s, Roger Humbert rediscovered colour for himself. This applies both to his non-representational experimental photographs, which now rely

on pronounced bright colours, or which, as in the “Subjective Photography” series from 2013, sometimes consist of just two monochrome colour fields. While his photograms often tend towards Pollock’s style, these, on the other hand, are reminiscent of Mark Rothko’s paintings. The “Magic of Objects” series was also created at around the same time, in which Roger Humbert now almost portrays banal objects such as a feather, a toy car or a bar of soap in a completely figurative manner. Humbert was an enthusiastic flea market goer who hardly ever came home without his finds and lovingly sought a special place for them in his home and, above all, in his photo cellar. Photography not only celebrates the magic of everyday objects, but also creates this magic through a special staging: a photographic appreciation of the world of things. (BS)

Authors: Bernd Stiegler (BS), Lars Willumeit (LW)

Events

Sunday, 7 September 2025, 11:30 a.m.

Structures, Patterns, Clichés.

Generative Image Practice Then and Now.

Lars Willumeit in conversation with Dr. Roland Meyer, DIZH Bridge Professor for Digital Cultures and Arts (UZH/ZHdK). In German.

Sunday, 5 October 2025, 2025, 11:30 a.m.

Concrete Photography and Abstraction.

Possibilities and Limitations of the Photographic.

Lars Willumeit in conversation with Dr. Kathrin Schöneegg, Head of the Photography Collection at the Münchner Stadtmuseum. In German.

Sunday, 23 November 2025, 11:30 a.m.

Roger Humbert’s Photographic Exploration of the World of Light.

Lars Willumeit in conversation with Dr. Bernd Stiegler, historian of photography and professor of Modern German Literature in a Media Context, University of Konstanz. In German.

Sunday, 18 January 2026, 11:30 a.m.

The Role of Emotion in the Work and Reception of Roger Humbert.

Lars Willumeit in conversation with Richard Spillmann, printer, curator and friend of Roger Humbert. In German.

In cooperation with



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Opening hours: Tuesday to Friday 11:00–17:00
Wednesday 11:00–20:00, with free admission from 17:00
Saturday and Sunday 11:00–18:00, closed on Mondays