

Observatory

In the exhibition *Observatory*, Istanbul Modern Photography Gallery presents a retrospective of the later collaborative work of Barbara and Zafer Baran, from 1999 to the present. This is the Barans' first comprehensive exhibition in Turkey, bringing together 11 series that the couple liken to **"the top layer of an archaeological dig"**. Curated by the Head of the Photography Department at Istanbul Modern, Sena Çakirkaya, the exhibition will run from **November 28, 2013 to April 27, 2014**.

Barbara and Zafer Baran have been collaborating since 1981. Through their experimental practice, which interweaves art history, nature, science and technology, they create images that bring out the hidden simple, ordinary, minimal aspects of life. The couple have always kept at the heart of their work "the enjoyment of photography for itself, at its purest (the act of beholding and transforming)".

They prefer to keep their imaging devices, techniques and processes as simple as possible. Using in-camera as well as camera-less photography techniques, they enrich their experimental approach through narrative. **"Since 1999 we have relied on two techniques: in-camera and camera-less, using basic equipment and a minimal amount of post-production."**

The Barans have featured in solo and group exhibitions in various galleries and museums, including the Victoria and Albert Museum, Photographers' Gallery, Saatchi Gallery, British Library and Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and their work is held in the collections of the V&A and Tate Britain among others. The couple have also produced numerous works for commissioned projects, ranging from corporate to cultural. Among these works are: the first opera poster in Britain to feature abstract photography, produced for the English National Opera; a photo-typographic alphabet created for the well-known cover of Phaidon's *The Photography Book*; stamp designs for Royal Mail, including a series celebrating the bicentenary of the Royal Horticultural Society; and film work for the title sequence of David Hare's *The Designated Mourner*.

"Time" is at the heart of their work

"Time" is at the heart of the Barans' work. They document the natural wear and tear caused by time, they document ephemerality, transformation, the fragility of nature and the impact of humans on the world, visualizing these subjects in diverse ways: via rocks and stones from archaeological sites, decaying flowers, the depths of a captivating yet noxious bloom, disregarded weeds, contrails, bird's-eye views of cities as seen from an aircraft, the light radiating from the moon and stars, or moonlight sparkling on the surface of the sea. "Seeking out what is timeless and quiet", the Barans prefer to draw inspiration from what they see and find in daily life, working with the materials directly around them.

"In our images, the passage of time is implied in the decaying petals of a flower; in the slow erosion of rocks and stones; in the movement of the moon across a sheet of water, or of clouds across the sky; in the yearly dispersal of seeds; or in the light reaching us from an unimaginably distant star. There is the time of the photographic exposure itself, varying from split seconds to many minutes. And there is of course our own time, as we move along within the framework of our life."

In 1998 the Barans were commissioned by Royal Mail to create a work on the invention of photography. This enabled them to examine the pioneering photographer William Henry Fox Talbot's photogenic drawings at first hand, which in turn led them to develop a camera-less method that they continued to use in their later works. Made possible by digital technology, this imaging technique can be considered as a modern extension of the photogram. Through it the fragility of nature is articulated in a direct manner, without intervention in the content.

The photograph *Observatory 7* (2002), which gives its title to the exhibition, calls to mind the pupil of an eye or solar flares. In fact it depicts a much simpler object, seen during the couple's visit to the observatory built by Zafer Baran's father above Izmir in the 1960s: an apple fallen from a tree in the observatory orchard. The photograph, a view of the apple from above, has a symbolic meaning in terms of observation, and particularly in terms of looking at objects from different perspectives. It lies at the heart of the Barans' work, and anticipates their later celestial themes. **"Often, in our work, what is very small, or close up, has a clear affinity with what is distant: an apple becomes an eye, or a cosmic phenomenon; seeds become star clusters viewed through a telescope ... We are not depicting the stars and the moon as they are, but using their light to make 'drawings'. This reflects our interest in the act of drawing itself, as well as the language of photography and its boundaries."**

The exhibition begins with the *Atlas* series (1999-2000), comprising field and studio shots of rocks and stones from archaeological and other sites, in different geographic locations. By striking roots where they are, in their own time and space, these motionless objects, photographed in situ, display the sense of belonging that a static existence engenders. Meanwhile small stones, taken from these sites, are documented in the studio environment, using photographic techniques that often recall topographic mapping or scientific imaging systems.

In contrast to the feeling of permanence in *Atlas*, the *Ephemera* series (2002) explores the ideas of transience and transformation through flowers (or parts of flowers) that the Barans have collected – whether from living plants, or as specimens that have fallen and begun to decay. In the details of these flowers, treated in cross-sections and close-ups set off by deepest black, the cycles of sexuality, reproduction and death are embodied in single images.

The series *Toxic Forest* (2003-2005) focuses on the exotic plant species *Rhododendron ponticum*, introduced into Britain in the 18th century. This plant enlivened British parks and parkland with its vibrant purple flowers, but later – once its invasive, poisonous qualities, noxious to other life forms, had been discovered – came to be considered a weed. The Barans employed two photographic approaches to capture their subject, using two different light conditions. The first entailed photographing at twilight, using a small-format camera to accentuate the mysterious, claustrophobic environment of the plant and the 'forest'. The second involved taking close-ups, in bright sunlight, of other rhododendron species' vivid blooms, thus inviting us into the depths of the plant, whose eroticism and allure contrast with the darkness of the forest.

In some respects an extension of *Ephemera* and *Toxic Forest*, the series *Weeds* (2006-2007) explores wild plants that are unwanted, whether in conventional agriculture or in ornamental gardening. The Barans display the unnoticed, modest beauty and inaudible sound of these species, and of the creatures that coexist with them – including, in the triptych *Herb Robert*, insects and a tiny spider that have made their way into the frame.

The series *Particles and Fluid Bodies* (2007-2008) includes close-ups of seeds and dust. The similarity between a crushed fruit and circulation in the human body, or between ordinary seed and dust particles and cosmic bodies in the depths of space, is striking.

The series *Xanthos / Letoon* (2007) takes its title from the administrative and religious centres of the Lycian civilization, situated in the present-day provinces of Antalya and Muğla. While the most important artefacts from Xanthos are now exhibited far from their land of origin, in the British Museum, the Barans go in search of seeds and botanical specimens from this archaeological region: simple, obscure organisms, long since part of the geography of the area.

With *Turner's View: Synthetic Cloud Series I* (2006-2009), the Barans turn their gaze to the sky. The skies above Richmond Hill, which the artists depict – as the English painter J.M.W. Turner once did – are now dominated by the flight paths of aircraft as they fly at high altitude over London. Turner painted his atmospheric views of the sky two centuries ago, at the height of the Industrial Revolution; today a different dramatic effect is created by the clouds that develop from contrails left by passing aircraft. The artificial and deceptive landscapes formed as these slender lines turn into cirrus clouds act as visual signifiers of population movements, of technological advances and air pollution; in brief, of the impact of humans on the world.

Where *Turner's View* looked skywards to observe the trails of aircraft, the *Metropolis* series (2008-2011) looks down, giving bird's-eye views of towns and cities from inside an aircraft. Contrasting with the light from the stars, which takes hundreds or thousands of years to reach us, the momentary lights of the city suggest a mere copy of the universe, reproduced daily by humans. Like galaxies in space, the settlements built by humans on Earth reflect traces of life in the darkness.

In *Star Drawings* (2009-2010), images are generated against the night sky, using the camera frame as a blank sheet of paper and the stars and moon as a pencil. Creating diverse shapes in the sky through the movement of the camera, which is focused on the light radiating from the moon and stars, the Barans capture, in the darkness of the night, a narrative that has a calligraphic and poetic ring.

The artists used existing light to create new forms in the series *Star Drawings*. In *Moon Drawings* (2012-2013) they reveal the natural drawings that are hidden in the reflections of Earth's sole natural satellite on the sea. Recording the play of light that takes shape on the surface of the sea through the movements of the water and wind, the Barans sometimes create graphic compositions by juxtaposing the figures that form on the waves over time, and sometimes, with the movement of the camera, they produce drawings reminiscent of musical notes or hieroglyphs.