

Ladies and gentlemen,
dear friends of photography,
dear Esther, dear Sacha,
but above all: cher Jean-Louis Garnell,

First of all, special thanks to Esther and Sacha, who invited me to attend this vernissage. In the work of Jean-Louis Garnell, here we have a photographic position that fits perfectly into the current Triennale of Photography.

I'm sure you've all noticed that Hamburg is again endeavouring to claim the honorary title, "capital of photography". For the eighth time, all of Hamburg's major exhibition institutions and museums, as well as countless galleries and initiatives, are presenting a wide variety of photographic exhibitions and projects. This year's guest curators of the Triennale – Koyo Kouoh and her team comprising Rasha Salti, Gabriella Beckhurst Feijoo and Oluremi C. Onabanjo – have chosen "Currency" as the motto for this year's festival. The term "currency" is broadly conceived, with each exhibition offering its own definition as a link to the overall concept.

Although I don't want to apply the motto to this exhibition right now, there are some basic considerations that the curators took into account for the exhibition "Photography Beyond Capture" – the one they curated in the Halle für Aktuelle Kunst in the Deichtorhallen – that also provide interpretative starting points for these photographs by Jean-Louis Garnell.

For example, the curators seek to question the established modes of viewing images and develop a new vocabulary of seeing and interpreting "using poetic, archival and documentary practices". This intends no less than a deconstruction of the photographic canon, whereby it is also about setting up an alternative canon that questions entrenched narrative norms and their instrumentalization.

What does this mean in relation to the works by Jean-Louis Garnell exhibited here?

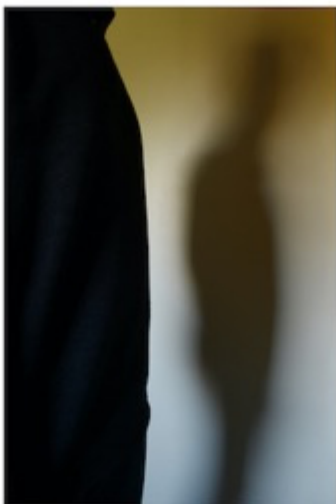
First of all, they challenge the viewer. Even the most easily recognizable motifs are not self-explanatory. The images cannot be immediately categorized, which makes it all the more important to reflect on appropriation processes.

Looking at photographs is never a passive process. Images represent a resource through which people pursue their own meanings, statements, and interests. There are widely varying practices of appropriation, and Garnell leaves open which set of tools the viewer can or should use to read his motifs.

What is triggered by the image of a shadowy figure? What is the gesture of the open hands all about? And what is the relationship between the two images?

It is certainly not the aim here to document a situation; instead, the staging of the images subtly draws attention to the open interpretive space beyond. It seems to be about a kind of self-reflection; the view of one's own alienated shadow or the outstretched, empty hands testify to the artist's idea of posing questions with his motifs that lead far beyond the actual photograph.

Intimacy and empathy are key to drawing attention to the image. Since nothing is explained and there are very few clues to the place, time or context of the photograph, the viewer is thrown back on the depths of his or her own experience.



Did you immediately look at your own hands, perhaps?

This is the direct appropriation practice, suggesting empathy and intimacy as a way of approaching the image.

We may need a moment longer for Jean-Louis Garnell's photographs before we can grasp the motifs' power and impact.

Garnell's images are not self-contained, they open out into the viewer's experiential space, simple and banal though they may appear at first glance. Garnell is more of a picture-finder than a picture-inventor.

It's possible to elucidate this on the basis of his still lifes:

Au bout de la table (At the end of the table) shows various objects that change imperceptibly over the course of several days. Fluctuations in light change the colours and the surfaces, sometimes foregrounding the lines, sometimes the reflections or textures. We see a citrus fruit with a dramatic shadow; fruit, a slender glass vase, a candlestick, a table lamp, a coaster.

Things of everyday life, placed on a shelf with a wax-paper cover.

But this simple list understates the actual pictorial effect, which is created primarily by light falling on the objects.

Garnell highlights, making everyday objects glow anew.



So, how should we imagine the creation of these images?

It is probably quiet in his flat, his studio, his kitchen, and his gaze wanders in the familiar surroundings. Suddenly, there is this changed light that makes an object appear different.

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What generally stays in its place, unnoticed, or has been put down quite carelessly will suddenly arouse the photographer's interest. The open, wandering gaze recognizes the special moment, and then detail and perspective condense the everyday moment into a cohesive motif. The gaze now concentrates on the individual objects, their relationship to each other, and the



mysterious play of light and shadow on the wall behind the shelf. Just taking the time to look at the image more closely is a process of appropriation leading to increased awareness. An engagement with the theatre of the everyday, the visual joy of ordinary things, which can be passed on to the viewer.

Initially, there were works showing two motifs. The juxtaposition of two photographs provokes a specific perception of the whole formed in this way. Two photographs, then three or more: as the number increases, so does the complexity of forms and meaning. The images within a work interact with each other, just as individual works communicate across an entire exhibition.



This can be experienced in the example of the suite comprising six motifs from 2018 we see here.



In an interview, the artist talks about his method, the evolution of his photography, and he explains what, with the distance of maturity, still carries him forward.

"I'm not interested in defining or describing things as they are, but in meditating on their becoming. [...] What is there is an imprint of reality. But at the same time, this reality remains an enigma to us. That's what constitutes its immense potential, this ability of photography to show and yet not show."

Let me add a few more details concerning the artist's biography:

Jean-Louis Garnell was born in Dolo, a town in Brittany, in 1954. As a teenager, he was already enthusiastic about photography, but first studied computer science in Toulouse, where he was particularly interested in research on computer-assisted speech synthesis. It was not until after his diploma as a computer engineer that he returned to photography; while working as a teacher, he bought his first camera in 1983. So, he is a photographic autodidact, as he says, and his training consisted of around 50,000 black and white negatives up to that time. From 1983 onwards, however, he took photographs in colour as well.

In 1985 and 1986, he took part in the DATAR photo mission with his landscape photographs.

DATAR stands for the Delegation for Rural Development and Regional Action, which, on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary in spring 1983, had commissioned photographers to capture the French landscape of the 1980s. Originally, the project was supposed to last only one year, but it did not end until 1989 and numerous, now renowned photographers received their first decisive promotion and recognition in this context – including Jean-Louis Garnell, for whom it was his first experience as a photographer.

After landscapes, the photographer focused his work increasingly on his own private world. He was exhibited, received initial attention, and so ended all his previous teaching activities in order to devote himself entirely to photography. He produced various series of photos: "Désordres", "Portraits", "Nuits".

In 1989 he settled in Paris and took part in the exhibition "Une autre objectivité" (Another Objectivity).

In 1991 he taught at the Art School in Marseille.

He took his first digital photos in 1997: the series "Les jours" and "modules", among others.

In 2000, he was appointed as a teacher at the art school in Tours. In 2005 he became a teacher at Marseille College of Art.

Today, he lives and works in Château-Malabry near Paris.

Over the past twenty years, he has been exhibited internationally, published many catalogues, and is represented in numerous collections. He has long been one of France's most prestigious contemporary photographic artists.

And now you can also discover his work in Hamburg!

To close my reflections, I would like to introduce the largest work of this Hamburg presentation:

The piece belongs to the group of works comprising computer-processed digital photographs, each assembled into larger image compositions made from many individual motifs.

Découpes # 4 2001 (125 x 173 cm)



These *découpes*, as Garnell calls them, are large-scale nested tableaux whose effect derives from their superimpositions, colours and transparencies. Here, too, the artist's accuracy, subtlety and precision are not to be underestimated. *Découpes* consist of several digital views combined into a single image. The image abandons its rectangular frame format and occupies the wall space. This relationship to the space and the viewer, therefore, also establishes more of a link to sculpture.

Here, too, the viewer who wishes to meticulously sift and order things will fail. The layers overlap, the individual objects permanently elude clear classification. The images merge into one another, but are still present as individual motifs.

Landscape and trees, interiors, windows, the shadowy figure of a head, the torso of a nude, water surfaces, intense colour and black-and-white motifs: all together they create a new, resonating space that oscillates between real objects and intuitive interpretations. This has long since ceased to be a matter of depicting reality; it is about pure artistic invention.

Garnell has developed his own strategies for working, always challenging us.

He sets down a poetry of forms, plays with light and shadow, pushes the boundaries of what is recognizable and representable. And sometimes, he even departs from the medium of photography by producing drawings: intuitive traces of pigment that merge into abstract figures on the watery paper surface.



But to return to the photographic works:

Perhaps the closest equivalent to his visual collages are poems. The computer-generated superimpositions of various motifs from the photographer's environment become a new overall picture, just as the poet's words come together to form a verse. They invite the viewer to engage with the image as a whole, to trace the individual motifs, to find associations.

Here, at the latest, the artist Garnell has finally left behind the ordinary snapshot, the capturing of a moment in photography. He has not simply taken a picture; he has created a new pictorial form by combining different motifs.

Now – at the very end – we can refer once more to the Triennale exhibition by curator Koyo Kouoh, who also consciously seeks to depart from the appropriating power of photography in her presentation. She – as we can read in the introduction to her exhibition – is definitely looking for a "tender" framework that suggests how "other kinds of exchange are possible – an exchange characterized by intimacy, trust and commitment."

An approach, then, that expresses itself more through lived experience and relationships in the photographic images.

Garnell also helps photography to achieve unique, poetic, sensual, touching and impressive qualities. His motifs build bridges between the visible and the invisible, the concrete and the incomprehensible. His images are indeed realistic and yet simultaneously quite intangible – they are animated by the artist's view of the world and underline the viewer's own perceptions.

What more could photography achieve than that?

Thank you very much for listening, and I hope you will enjoy as well as learn from Jean-Louis Garnell's photographs.

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