

Bill Brandt: Shadows and Substance to Open at The Akron Art Museum



Bill Brandt, Parlourmaid and Underparlourmaid Ready to Serve Dinner, 1936, vintage gelatin silver photograph, © Bill Brandt Archive.

AKRON.- Bill Brandt, England's greatest twentieth-century photographer, began as a photojournalist and became a poet of light and shadow. Decade by decade, Brandt (1904 – 1983) moved toward evermore radical dualities of black and white, not just in his new photographs but also in his printing of older images. This resulted in his own reinterpretation of his earlier work. Bill Brandt: Shadows and Substance presents 67 photographs from throughout the artist's career. All are vintage prints, providing a rare opportunity to see the work as the artist originally conceived it.

"I had the good fortune to start my career in Paris in 1929," he recalled. "Already two modes [of photography] were emerging: the poetic school, of which Man Ray and Edward Weston were the leaders, and the documentary moment-of-truth school. I was attracted by both." After two years as a studio assistant for American surrealist (and portrait and fashion photographer) Man Ray, Brandt spent the next decade as a freelance photojournalist in England.

For Brandt, emotional truth took precedence over factual information. His "documentary" images of nightlife in London turn out to have been staged, including one where a prostitute (actually his sister-in-law) solicits a customer (her husband) just out of sight of a policeman (a real one who serendipitously walked into the picture).

Brandt found the "extreme social contrast" of the British class system visually inspiring and made it the focus of his work during the Great Depression. His images of upstairs and downstairs life provide an intimate glimpse: the upstairs people are his relatives, the downstairs ones their servants. Toward the decade's end, Brandt made factual, powerful images of workers and their families in England's industrial north that are examples of social documentary photography at its finest.

When World War II started, Brandt returned to London to photograph the blacked-out city. "The darkened town, lit only by moonlight, looked more beautiful than before or since," wrote the photographer. The best known of those images, St. Paul's Cathedral in the Moonlight, shows the cathedral dome rising above the rubble of bombed-out buildings. It became an important national emblem juxtaposing the damage inflicted by the war and the reason it needed to be endured.

"Toward the end of the war," wrote Brandt, "my style changed completely." Moving from documentary to poetic photography, he switched his emphasis from reportage to nudes and landscapes. To photograph nudes, he used a seventy-year old wooden Kodak. It had a wide-angle lens, no shutter, a pinhole sized aperture and a focus set at infinity, "and it saw differently. It created a great illusion of space, an unrealistically steep perspective, and it distorted.... Instead of photographing what I saw, I photographed what the camera was seeing...the lens produced anatomical images and shapes which my eyes had never observed." Brandt's interest in distortion could also have been inspired by the contorted figures in the paintings of his close friend Francis Bacon.

For landscapes, Brandt found "atmosphere to be the spell that charged the commonplace with beauty.... It is a combination of elements, perhaps most simply and yet most inadequately described in technical terms of lighting and viewpoint, which reveals the subject as familiar and yet strange." The world as seen through Brandt's lens became an increasingly surreal place.

This effect was enhanced by changes in his printing style. Brandt was always a master printer. "I find the darkroom work most important, as I can finish the composition of a picture only under the enlarger.... And there are certainly no rules about the printing of a picture. Now I prefer the very contrasting black-and-white effect. It looks crisper, more dramatic and very different from color photographs," he explained toward the end of his career.

"Photography is still a very new medium and everything is allowed and everything should be tried," wrote Bill Brandt. And that is precisely what England's preeminent photographer did throughout his five-decade career.