

Georg Gerster: trailblazer, aesthete and philosopher

Gerster... Georg Gerster... When I first encountered these aerial photographs of Iran, when visiting an exhibition dedicated to the work of the Zurich photographer at Galerie Cosmos in Paris in 2014, the name didn't really mean anything to me. Nevertheless, and though I did not recognise them, these Persian landscapes evoked strong memories: a sense of *déjà vu*!

But where could it have come from?

Rapidly, my neurones began to reconstitute: flash back to the 70s, 80s and early 90s, to unusually framed (for the time) photographs, to breathtaking images, to towns, forests, mountains, lakes, rivers and deserts as nobody had ever imagined them – an eagle's eye view through a crystal-clear lens, long before the wide availability of satellite images, the everyday prevalence of online maps, and the use of model aircraft for aerial photography. In 1975, Georg Gerster paved the way for a new genre of photography: the planet as seen from the sky. He was working on behalf of Swissair when he did this, then one of the most prestigious airlines in the world.

For half a century, Georg Gerster spent his time flying tirelessly over about one hundred different countries, shooting tens of thousands of images. He has made aerial photography an art form of its own, which has earned him an international reputation. His images have been published by some of the biggest names in the world of the international press, such as *National Geographic*, *Geo*, *Stern*, *Sunday Times Magazine*, *Paris Match*, *Focus*, *Epoca* and others. Formerly represented by the Rapho agency, he won the prestigious Prix Nadar in 1976 and has exhibited a number of times in Europe, America and Japan, and that's without even mentioning the numerous books he has published.

His images have been seen all around the world. The Swissair calendars and posters, which in their day captured the very essence of *Swiss made* quality, are now iconic and have acquired the status of works of art sought after by enthusiastic collectors.

More than just an extraordinary photographer, trailblazer and pioneer, Georg Gerster is also both an aesthete and a philosopher. His fascination with abstract geometrical forms and the interplay of colours when viewed from the sky is combined with a personal need to

understand the world and report back on what he finds. For him, the effect of strangeness, of the distance and detachment of aerial photography, is not an aim in itself. Georg Gerster instead uses this to bring to the fore the unique and exceptional beauty of the Blue Planet and elicit a compelling sense of respect towards it. His images also help us to better understand the evolution of the planet's surface structures and lifeforms over time, and document the consequences of human intervention in ecological cycles.

But let's hear it in his words: "When seen from the sky, the earth is different. To capture this, you need to choose just the right moment, just the right light. I have tried to document not only the infinite beauty of nature but also the richness of the world's architectural heritage, contributing, in so doing, to archaeological discoveries that would otherwise have been impossible." By bridging the gap between information and abstraction, Georg Gerster has enabled the discovery of things not even suspected to exist.

Like the wonderful aerial views of Iran displayed in this exhibition, Georg Gerster's approach to his art inspires a reflection on the ecological future of our planet on the one hand, and on the very essence of photography itself on the other. Is it really a reflection of reality? Or, like the work of minimalist painters, which tends towards complete abstraction, is it nothing more than a transposition of our imagination?

In the absence of a definitive response to this existential question, this exhibition of aerial views of Iran will provide an opportunity to gain an appreciation of the thousand-year-old richness and wealth of Persian civilisation.

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