Balthasar Burkhard

13 December 2003 — 8 February 2004

The Fruitmarket Gallery presents the first major exhibition in the UK of the work of Swiss photographer Balthasar Burkhard. Consisting entirely of new work made in the Engadin region of the Alps, the exhibition brings together majestic images of glaciers and mountains, skies and forests in a monumentally-scaled yet intimate exploration of an impressive landscape.

Balthasar Burkhard was born in 1944 in Bern. He first came to international prominence in the 1970s, with detailed studies of the human body. Since then, his work has developed subject by subject, the artist turning his camera on landscapes both natural and constructed, photographing series of cities, deserts, the Amazonian jungle, animals and mountains; a subject he has recently returned to after a gap of 30 years.

Burkard's photographs exert a powerful presence. He always works in black and white, and usually on a vast scale, combining huge photographs of even huger subjects in diptychs and triptychs so that the viewer is enfolded in lustrous blacks, whites and greys. His panoramic images are made from 6 x 12 negatives taken with a large format German Linhof Technika camera, a byword for quality in the photographic industry. Unlike many contemporary photographers, Burkhard does not manipulate his images in any way, eschewing digital technology, and processing and printing his photographs himself.

From the air

Burkhard is fascinated by flying, and both the real act of flying and the idea of flying are encoded in many of his pictures. His father was a pioneer pilot in the early part of the last century, and the artist has felt at home in the air since he was a child. Flying is now an intrinsic part of his practice as an artist – partly because it still excites him, but mostly because of the dramatic, inaccessible areas that have become his primary subject matter. He travels to remote locations by helicopter, and either has himself dropped into the landscape, or shoots it from the air. The effect of this is to disorientate the viewer – there are very few points of reference in a Burkhard photograph, and it is hard to tell the scale of the image he makes. He could be hundreds of metres above a vast landscape, or engaging with a more intricate formation at close range.

Burkhard feels that, for the most part, his photographs are taken in his head, before he even goes to the area he is shooting. When he gets there he flies around surveying the site from above, but he always has a precise idea of what he is looking for in mind.

In previous aerial photographs, Burkhard has documented 'megacities' such as Tokyo, Mexico City and Chicago, the proverbial monoliths of modern civilisation. Although shooting from above, his are no cartographic surveys, rather he makes the city dissolve in the infinity of his picture. He has also made photographs of deserts: regions which – like the mountains and skies in this exhibition – are not shaped by human activity. In this manner Burkhard sets cultural and natural structures against each other, though without seeking polarisation. Through their heavy, deep tones his photographs take on a massive

stature, comparable to the scale and substance of their subject. Yet in these almost sculptural bird's-eye views, details continue to command attention.

Mountains (Bernina)
The mountain and glacier works in this exhibition are the logical end of a cycle of morphologies – of cities, mountains, deserts, jungles – which Burkhard has been exploring over the past few years. To make the work, he explored the Alps by helicopter, shooting from the air and being set down in the remotest of glacial areas. The mountains of Switzerland, with their cracks and crevasses, their sheer faces and often unpredictable weather, are spectacular. Look up, and the immense size of the mountains is overwhelming. Look down, as Burkhard's camera does, and it is hard to work out exactly what it is you are seeing. In an ever-changing society, mountains are a constant. To enter the mountains means to enter another time zone, another world, leaving everyday life behind. They give a new perspective, both literally and figuratively.
The average height of the mountains of the Swiss Alps is 1,700 meters (5,576 feet), with the snow line beginning at 2,500 meters (8,200 feet). Burkhard's images capture the grandeur of the mountains, and also their dangerously seductive beauty. One remarkable sequence of images of a glacier, a field of snow and ice, was taken from the ground. Focusing on one incredible formation, the artist presents it from different perspectives, and at different moments, his camera moving around it, capturing it in close-up and from a striking distance. The images have an immaculate quality – it is impossible to fix the position of the camera, much less to imagine how it got there.

Skies (Himmel)
Burkhard believes his photographs are not landscapes as such, but more abstract expressions of feelings. What he wants to express through his pictures of skies and clouds is their ephemeral yet menacing formations, the way in which they complement the terrifying beauty of the mountains.His skies are grey, with little or no cloud.
Like his mountains, they are images of emptiness, holding out perhaps the promise that they might in time unveil the mysteries of life's organic phenomena. Under the camera lens's cold and objective gaze, the clouds seem to dissolve and vanish to leave an ambiguous image in which perspectives shift and mutate at random, attracting the eye, yet making the head swim.

Trees (Chlonthal)
The series of images from Chlonthal forest – taken at the base of a mountain gorge close to Glarus in Swizerland – are darkly abstract forms which mark the beginning of a series of new works. These photographs are both visual and sculptural. They are forceful presences in space in which the trees themselves slide in and out of abstraction, at once solid trees in a forest and patterns against the surface of the image. The close focus at which they are shot emphasizes the discipline of Burkhard's work – the artist does not improvise, but pays extreme attention to framing the subject, adjusting the light and to the quality of the outcome. Shape dominates.

In each of these recent series of works, Burkhard shows the essential power of nature, its beauty uninfluenced by the viewer: a beauty that is near and yet strange to us.

Burkhard's black and white vision of matter goes behind the appearance of things to capture something of their essence. In his own words:

"Perception is prior to conception… one does not impose, but rather exposes the site."

Gallery Talks and Events

Admission free

Artist's Talk
Balthasar Burkhard
Saturday 13 December, 4pm, free
An opportunity to join the artist on a gallery tour to discuss his work

Balthasar Burkhard:
A Photographer's View
Thursday 8/15/22 January, 6pm, free
Alan MacDonald, Picture Editor for The Scotsman, discusses the work of Bathasar Burkhard.

Family Workshop
Saturday17 January, 2–4pm, free
Following the success of previous family workshops this session will offer parents the opportunity to work hands-on with their children to create artwork in response to the exhibitionby Swiss photographer Bathasar Burkhard.

Festive Live Music at The Fruitmarket Gallery
Admission free

Americana Power Pop
The Sunshine Delay
Tuesday 16 December, 7.30pm
Enjoy guitar-driven roots music, country harmonies and festive bar fare as Edinburgh-based four piece The Sunshine Delay perform on the eve of their debut CD release Outrageous Expectations. Families welcome. www.sunshinedelay.com

New Year's Day
Ragas for a New Year
Thursday 1 January, 2004, 12-5pm
Celebrate New Year's Day at the gallery's annual Hogmanay music gathering, featuring Hindustani vocalist-musician Gouri Roy Chowdhury from Calcutta and star sarangi player Surjeet Singh from Delhi, India. UK-based Vijay Kangutker (tablas) Hardeep Dheere (harmonioum) and Bharati Bundoo (tampura) will perform a classical Indian programme.

Gallery Tours
Gallery Information Assistants
Gallery Information Assistants will be in the exhibition between 12 noon and 3pm daily. They are available for impromptu tours of the exhibition, and to answer any questions you may have. No pre booking is required and tours are free. These tours are not suitable for large groups.

Group Tours
Groups can book a visit to The Fruitmarket Gallery by phoning Tracy Morgan, Education Manager. With advance notice we can offer tailored education activities to complement a gallery visit for schools and colleges. Group bookings must be made two weeks in advance of your visit.

School, community, minority ethnic and disabled group bookings are particularly welcome.

For further information on The Fruitmarket Gallery Education programme ask at the bookshop or contact

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The Fruitmarket Gallery is a not-for-profit organisation and a registered charity, programming national, international and touring exhibitions of work by leading artists and emerging talent.

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