

## SUMMERLAND

# BETWEEN HEAVEN AND THE CLEAR BLUE SEA

Ralph Kaspers' recent photographic work comprises different themes and series of images, which, mostly, were created simultaneously and which, in the context of their respective content, explore the possibilities of photography as a multi-layered creative discipline. In terms of theme, the work of the Düsseldorf-based artist initially focused on urban landscapes, shot in New York, Berlin, Düsseldorf, Moscow or Tokyo and characterized by light and colours, by dynamic vanishing points and specific perspectives and also by abstracting views on architectural structures.

Broadening the spectrum of visual content, Ralf Kaspers subsequently also concerned himself with natural landscapes and with allegorical series as an interaction of photographic images from different contexts. Another thematic field comprises staged presentations of objects and serial image constructions of object arrangements.

Symbolically, these images often reference both the human condition and the cycle of life. Depending on the artist's intention, the human being may also be presented as a sing-

le figure or in a social context.

Characterised by documentary, staged or digitally composed elements, as well as by colours and shapes and by narrative and abstract aspects, Ralf Kaspers' photographs often emphasise auratic moments in the context of the respective visual content. Photographic and painterly aspects combine to create individual qualities of perception, for which the Summerland series, presented in this publication, is an example. Based on contemporary issues, with this series, Ralf Kaspers once again takes up the landscape theme in such a way that he simultaneously brings to mind aspects from the history of painting. Removed from architectural or other references to the actual environment, the water and the people swimming in it are the central theme of the series.

For both humans and other creatures, water is certainly the most important natural element which can equally mean life or death. In the history of art and culture, these aspects are not only linked to the myth of the birth of Venus as the goddess emerging from the foam of the sea but they can also be found in many other mythological, biblical and other stories.

In art history, further iconographically important examples representing water and its significance for human beings are seascapes as a landscape genre or, in Japan, the famous colour woodcut 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa' (actual title: 'Under a Wave off Kanagawa', about 1830) from a woodcut series by Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai. Water is also used symbolically as a representation of the soul and, according to the notion of the unfathomable, is then mostly depicted in dark colours.

In contrast to this tradition, the water in Ralf Kaspers' large-format Summerland photographs is of a clear light blue and takes up the entire pictorial space. Foreground, middleground and background combine to form impressive, almost monochrome surfaces, whose vertically and horizontally aligned compositions seem to be structured by different formations of waves, whirls and foam. The water's white streaks and the people bathing in it are not only reminiscent of the aforementioned birth of Venus but also of clouds and of sky prospects known from the history of painting

and from baroque churches. The cloudy sky symbolises the endless space which, with its weightless and abstract qualities, has always been equated with being removed from all things earthly, with the divine and paradisiacal space. "In baroque art, cloud formations permeate the architecture and lift both gods and saints into the sky. The apotheosis, the overcoming of earthly life and inclusion into transcendental space are among the main subjects of the baroque era. The clouds visualise the faraway sky, thus making this abstract theme visible by serving as the home of these figures."

Like a photographic analogy, the water in the Summerland series almost appears like the sky in baroque sky prospects and offers the swimmers an existence as carefree as the one in the baroque sky seems to be. At least that's what it looks like to the viewer who can observe the scene from the vantage point of a bird's eye perspective.

With their half-length portraits and their black hair, the swimmers are set apart from the water surface, as are the children's colourful swim tubes, while the generous pictorial space, the water's clear and rich colour and the swimmers' joyful mood is transferred onto the viewer, thus causing the captivating effect of the images in this series. The fact that these images present a constructed seascape, and hence an illusionary world, does not seem to matter: the pictorial world of art follows its own rules. As spaces of illusion and interpretation, these worlds do not have to be real.

The same is true for photography, which, even if it is based on documentary techniques, is always subject to subjective perspectives and compositional options. This illusionistic creative effect appears to become even stronger with the possibilities afforded by digital manipulation: only by the series' title do we know that the starting points for these images were photographic motifs that were not shot on a beach, for instance, but at the wave pool in the Tokyo-based Summerland theme park.

Depending on his compositional intention for the individual images, Kaspers has either removed some of the density of the human crowds or he has shot the photos at a time when the pool was not overcrowded. Space

is also related to the idea of wellbeing, which allows us to refer back to the thematical frame of the landscape image: landscapes are artefacts or mental spaces according to Franz Xaver Baier. The perception and composition of these spaces is always culturally defined, which is also apparent in the art history of the genre.

In this context, the human being and its relationship to nature and natural forces is a constantly recurring reference point, for which, in the history of painting, the earlier mentioned seascapes are another example. Especially the 17th century Dutch painters depicted the sea with sailors and sailboats to represent, besides the pictorial qualities of water, the theme of man's relationship to this important aspect of the natural realm. In contrast to both the sailors of bygone times and today's fishermen and shipping companies, our experience of the sea and of nature in general is not predominantly grounded in a fascination for the forces of nature but is first and foremost related to leisure. Tourism as a leisure activity, water, sea and beautiful beaches have become, for most of us, an accessible 'paradise', allowing us to have a break from our urban everyday life. Based on this desire, landscapes have increasingly become constructs of urban tourism and are being artificially recreated as spaces of leisure culture within urban environments. Examples for this are not only wave pools like Summerland in Tokyo but also skiing halls.

Besides a suggestively pleasant effect, the formations of artificially generated waves and foam, with the Summerland swimmers happily emerging themselves in the water's currents and force fields, also conjure up images of the Tsunami since we know that the swimmers are Japanese people in Tokyo. However, the swimmers in the large-format photographic images do not show any traces of the danger and experience of the Tsunami; the paradise seems as undisturbed as the images' clear blue colour.

Ralf Kaspers uses the medium of photography in a multi-faceted way and translates his motifs, which derive from moments of external reality, in large-format, newly composed images. In the Summerland series, this becomes particularly apparent since water and sky seem to dissolve into one another while the

human being is having a joyful time, similar to the apotheosis in the sky prospects of baroque painting.

In both Kaspers' Summerland images and in the baroque sky prospects, colour and atmosphere communicate a moment of timeless bliss which may transfer to the viewer as a sensory experience while letting awareness of potential dangers retreat into the background. There is no feeling of a looming life-threatening danger in the controlled wave pools such as Summerland and neither is there in the photographic paradisiacal places of the eponymous photographic series by Ralf Kaspers.

TEXT: BARBARA HOFMANN-JOHNSON, 2014

Director of the Museum für Photographie Braunschweig since 2016. She studied art history, German studies, theater, film and television studies and worked as a freelance curator with a focus on contemporary art and photography. Between 2003 and 2016, she worked as a freelancer at the Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur and held various teaching positions, including at the Folkwang University of the Arts Essen. In 2018, she was guest curator of the exhibition "Bernd, Hilla and the Others - Photography from Düsseldorf" at Huis Marseille - Museum for Photography Amsterdam.