

For immediate release

THOMAS RUFF

photograms and ma.r.s.

March 28 – April 27, 2013

Opening reception: Thursday, March 28, 6–8 PM

Press preview with the artist: 10 AM



phg.03, 2012. Chromogenic print
94 ½ x 72 ¾ inches (240 x 185 cm)

David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of two bodies of works by Thomas Ruff, including the world premiere of the series *photograms*. On view in the gallery's 525 and 533 West 19th Street spaces in New York, this will be the photographer's seventh solo show since he joined David Zwirner in 2000.

Working in distinct series since the late 1970s, Ruff has approached different genres of photography, including portraiture, architecture, astronomy, the nude, surveillance imagery, and reportage. Using a wide range of technological approaches, and often pushing the limits of photographic representation in the process, he has reinvented many historical conventions and expectations of the medium. The *photograms* and *ma.r.s.* works presented in this exhibition continue his interest in visual verisimilitude, with each series exploring the mutability and material presence of the photographic image.

The *photograms* depict abstract shapes, lines, and spirals in seemingly random formations with varying degrees of transparency and illumination. Their compositions are reminiscent of artistic experimentation with camera-less photography in the 1920s, where objects were placed directly on photo-sensitive paper and exposed to light, creating white or gray silhouettes wherever they made contact. Cherished in particular by Surrealists, such photograms were governed by unanticipated light effects, allowing for the element of chance in the final result. Yet both the objects and the light in Ruff's "photograms" derive from a virtual darkroom built by a custom-made software program, giving the artist more control over the outcome.

Ruff adds colors to his photograms (a departure from the monochrome tones of traditional versions), creating visually complex, illusory arrangements of foreground and background, definition and blur. The composition of each work appears to present a fragment of a larger, continuous whole, much like the artist's photographs of stars and galaxies gathered from negatives bought from the European Southern Observatory, but ultimately corresponding to his

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own pictorial scheme (*stars* was started in 1989). As in this earlier series, Ruff's photograms are autonomous from actual referents.

By invoking early twentieth-century processes—which in the hands of artists like László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray carried revolutionary promises of a more direct representation of light than photography mediated by a camera—Ruff's photograms suggest an equally radical method of simulating light using calculations based on optics. Their digital generation raises broader questions about what constitutes photography, and ultimately touches upon the issue of the medium's veracity.

The works in Ruff's *ma.r.s.* series, many of which will be on view for the first time, are based on black-and-white satellite photographs of the surface of Mars, taken by high-resolution cameras aboard NASA spacecraft ("*ma.r.s.*" stands for "Mars Reconnaissance Survey"). Studied by scientists for information about the planet's geology and potential landing sites for future visits, these reveal extreme close-ups of the planet's rugged surface, until recently unseen by anyone. Downloading the pictures from NASA's website, Ruff digitally altered the images, changed the perspective, and added color. The resulting chromogenic prints transform the originals into visual statements that are at once documentary and fictional. Evocative of abstract and minimalist compositions, some surfaces have been rendered as 3D images, using a technique originally developed in the nineteenth century to convey the illusion of depth. Indicative of NASA's own efforts to measure topographic highs and lows, these works, as the artist has put it, "add an aspect of the absurd, in the fact that you can actually recognize deep relief on the surface of another planet with cheap 3D glasses."

Born in 1958 in Zell am Harmersbach, Germany, **Thomas Ruff** attended the Staatlichen Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf from 1977 to 1985.

Ruff's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at prominent venues internationally, most recently in 2012 with a large-scale, comprehensive survey presented at the Haus der Kunst in Munich. Other recent solo exhibitions include those organized by the LWL-Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, Germany; Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de Málaga, Spain (both 2011); Castello di Rivoli, Turin; Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg, Germany; Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (all 2009); Műcsarnok Kunsthalle, Budapest (2008); Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and the Sprengel Museum Hannover, Germany (both 2007).

Work by the artist is held in museum collections worldwide, including The Art Institute of Chicago; Dallas Museum of Art; Essl Museum, Klosterneuburg, Austria; Hamburger Bahnhof - Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; National Museum of Photography, Copenhagen; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Ghent. He lives and works in Düsseldorf.

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