

HÅKAN STRAND

ETERNAL LANDSCAPES

Gallery Artpassions Olivier Delhoume - Photographs Håkan Strand

An anaesthetist in a trauma centre and researcher for a pharmaceutical company, this Swedish artist seems to combine his professional life and his passion for photography. He offers us landscapes that are silent, calm and peaceful. Time stands still in the black and white of his square images.

For Håkan Strand, born in 1959, it all began in his school's darkroom. Thirteen years old at the time, he discovered that images appeared on the paper's white background in the developing bath. Since that magic discovery, he has always left large areas for light layered over the unexposed white of the print. In 1991, while living in New York and visiting many galleries, he became aware of what he could bring to contemporary photography. He brought his medium-format camera and silver films back out.

Since then, he has given himself the necessary time to capture known or unknown landscapes in a purified style that gives us a profound sense of eternity. With his camera as his only companion, he takes photos early in the morning or late at night. That is when conditions are best for capturing the tranquillity of the landscapes and secretly capturing an area's pristine nature.

In Håkan Strand's images there are no humans, no wildlife. Humanity only appears in the significant square of the image rather than the divine circle or ordinary rectangle. Yet there is a feeling of someone being there. A presence hidden in leaves, a crowd at the bottom of the towers? No, nothing living! Except perhaps the onlooker, who makes the image their territory. This phenomenon of appropriation is only possible thanks to the accuracy of the vision and its creator's restraint. We are beyond a décor, outside of time. Beauty shines through in a show of absolutes and we become dependent because the scenes revealed to us are usually forbidden or invisible.

His technical mastery seems surgical, as if the photographer cannot separate himself from the art of helping patients towards a deep sleep. The composition establishes itself as an access route to the limits of a held breath and a gasping heart. The shades of blacks, greys and whites put us into an aesthetic and ecstatic coma. Time stops for an instant. Our eyes dive into the image, as if we were falling asleep.

The snow spreads out, like silk awaiting its destiny, and the deep black of the water appears in the softness of velvet. Mists and the spirit of the time are the retouchers here. No special effects, no retouching the picture; nature has done its work, but that would not explain it completely. The secret is in the camera's very long exposure time on its tripod. Water, reflections and skies are caught evenly, with time working like a painter's glaze.

His destinations – countries discovered, coastlines visited or cities explored – become his themes. But even if the photo is taken in Sweden, Norway, France, Italy or the United States, the vision remains constant, full of mystery. Hardships do not deter Håkan Strand; he often works in difficult conditions to bring us views of his conquered lands. The cliffs at Etretat roar in Maupassant's country. The Quattrocento sky at Mont Saint-Michel summons the angels. Rain plunges into the Hudson River: the esplanade becomes a mirror, the line of street lamps observes and reflects. In Venice, the façade of the palaces and the prow of the gondolas form circles in the water. The strict framing and sober style of an elegant handwriting invite us to meditate.

Nature is such that seeing it reassures us and soothes us. That is why Håkan Strand keeps on taking photos. Encouraged by the many international prizes he has been awarded since 2005, he has just decided to dedicate his entire life to photography.