

Ruff Guide to Mars

A journey with Thomas Ruff



For a photographer who has always been fascinated by astronomy, it's actually high time Herr Ruff produced a series of images from outer space. Making this new work must have been very satisfying for him indeed. And, to boot, not only did he not have to take any of the photos himself (compliments of NASA), he could colour them to suit his fancy. The chosen large format certainly fits the subject matter, while suitably allowing the viewer to get lost in the image, all the while wondering if the craters, sandstorms and the like are really those colours.

text SANDRA HOFMEISTER
images © VG BILD-KUNST, BONN 2011 (except where mentioned otherwise)

Thomas Ruff just recently moved into his new studio in Düsseldorf. The timber building was designed by his "Swiss friends", as the photographer refers to Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron. The Pritzker prize-winning architects had previously built his former studio across the street. Ruff's new place, however, is a huge building whose monumentality reminds one of a church. Inside, its generosity of space is of a magnitude certain museums can only dream of. Size matters, as suggested by the large format the German photographer has adopted in his most recent series. His landscapes of Mars show dunes and craters, mountains and sandstorms on the planet's surface.

DAMN°: Where does your fascination for stars and planets come from?

Thomas Ruff: Since I was a little boy, I have been interested in astronomy. At the age of 12 I owned a telescope – needless to say, I could hardly see anything with it. Though I found some amazing images in astronomy books, photographs published by observatories. After finishing school I decided to study photography. At that time I must have thought that studying astronomy was too demanding... (laughs). But I'm still interested

in all things astronomical. I even have a subscription to 'Stars and Planets' magazine!

DAMN°: At the end of the 1970s, you disengaged yourself from the 'Interieurs' series, from the petit-bourgeois world of your childhood ...

TR: From that micro-universe in the Black Forest (laughs)...

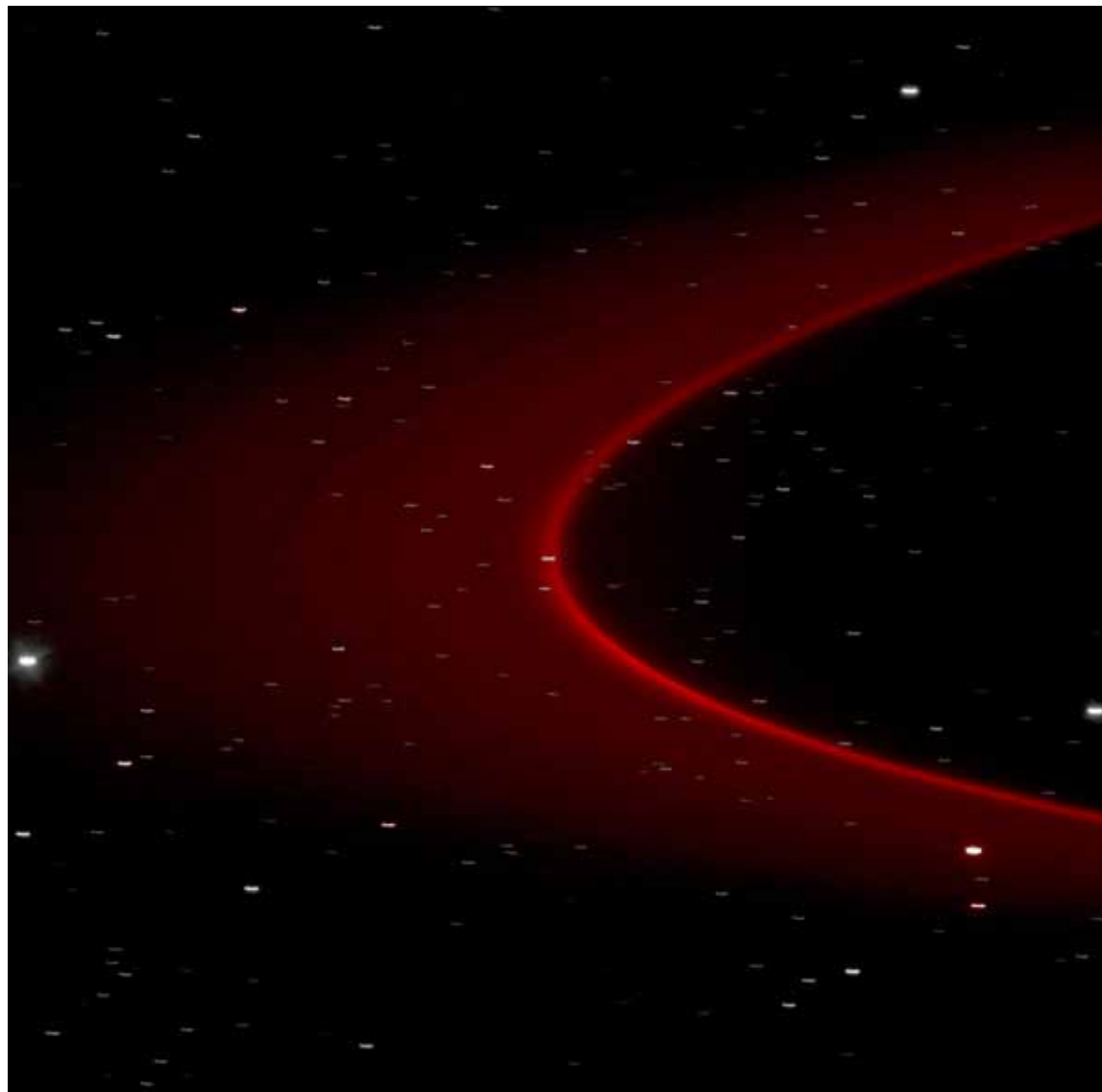
DAMN°: And some decades later, you finally arrived on Mars with your photographic series. What were the reasons for this long journey and this enormously expanded view?

TR: 30 years passed between 'Interieurs' and 'ma.r.s.', meaning three decades of fundamental changes in photographic technology. When I started my studies, there was only analogue. Today we have digital and analogue is scarce. Due to the shift, handling and distribution have also altered. Changeability and manipulation have increased. In my work I've always concentrated on the medium of photography itself and have reflected its contingencies, deliberately following this course.

DAMN°: The initial data for your photographic planet landscapes derive from the Mars Reconnaissance

Thomas Ruff, self-portrait, 2011
© Thomas Ruff

Facing page:
ma.r.s.15, 2011
From the series: ma.r.s.
Mars Reconnaissance Survey
C-print, 255 x 185 cm



cassini 35, 2011
From the series: Cassini
C-print, 108.5 × 108.5 cm

Orbiter that has been sending back pictures since 2006. You have added colours to NASA's digital photographs. Your 'Interieurs' series uses analogue technology, but is coloured too. That was quite unusual at the time. Are colours fundamental to your work?

TR: Back then, in the 1970s, documentary photography was usually black-and-white, even though there were a few photographers who used colour, like Stephen Shore and William Eggleston. I initially began 'Interieurs' in the tradition of the Becher school, meaning in black-and-white. But I quickly noticed that they were much better in colour. My professor, Bernd Becher, encouraged me to continue in this way. Since that time, all my photographs are in colour, with only very few exceptions.

DAMN°: The colours in your Mars landscapes have the effect of being authentic, scientific observations, even though they were added and are therefore fictional.

TR: In thinking of NASA pictures, everybody has in

mind the fantastic photographs of intergalactic mist or stellar clusters made by the Hubble Space Telescope. In fact, colour is very common in astronomical photography. That has driven us to a very multicoloured conception of the universe... (laughs). But colours in space are relative. The various kinds of light as we see them are only a very small portion of the diversity of electromagnetic waves that exist in space. In colouring the Mars photographs, I sometimes used scientific references, and sometimes my imagination.

DAMN°: Can you give us details about your revisions?

TR: The NASA high-resolution camera takes pictures in oblong strips. It exposes the surface of the planet from the top. I squashed these images, hence generating a pseudo perspective - a new point-of-view, much like observing the Mars landscape from an aeroplane. After that, I colourised.

DAMN°: Do you anticipate a perspective that might



cassini 34, 2011
From the series: Cassini
C-print, 108.5 × 108.5 cm

not exist in the future?

TR: Maybe when astronauts fly over the surface of Mars in 20 years' time their perspective might be similar. The 'ma.r.s.' series is realistic, on the one hand, because it uses scientific photographs. And on the other hand, due to my treatment of the primary images, it has a fictional aspect. What is true or not? Which images show us reality? How is reality changed by photography? These questions are crucial to the discussion on the medium today.

DAMN°: Do we still have a chance to distinguish truth from fiction?

TR: Actually, a camera is a very simple device. It automatically records precisely what is before the lens. A painter can highlight things in his paintings and leave others out, that's his artistic decision; whereas a camera is considered to be objective. But if you give a camera to 20 people and have them photograph the same motif, you will get 20 different results. The creative ob-

jective depends on the intention of the photographer, even though the camera itself is neutral. It's only a stupid machine. But there are smart people behind it, and perhaps even smarter people behind the photographer, who select the images, define the details, or even stage the truth in front of the lens.

DAMN°: Your Mars photographs show landscapes that open up a world of science and a world of fiction. Is the genre of science fiction relevant to you?

TR: I've always sneered at aliens and extraterrestrial planets, because in general they don't have any scientific basis. The only movie that impressed me was '2001: A Space Odyssey'. It closely matched my imagination, back in the 1960s. But maybe it's not even science fiction? I've never had much to do with science fiction anyway, and all of a sudden, I'm making it myself.

DAMN°: You grew into digitalisation. How did this affect your concept of photography?



TR: Editing pictures on the computer is a tool for me, similar to a wide-angle lens. The advantage is that you can easily dislocate the smallest element, which is the pixel, and you can multiply and change it. What was complicated or even impossible in the darkroom, is easily done on the computer screen. Of course, this doesn't reveal anything about the quality or the content of the photographs.

DAMN°: You work with series and often continue with subjects over several years. Do you try to explain general phenomena with that method?

TR: I often compare this to the tests made by a scientific researcher. In order to prove his thesis, he must show the evidence of his argument. This is similar to my approach. Every photograph is an assertion I put forward. To prove its correctness and quality, I have to take several photos, and only after a series of these can I say whether I am right or wrong. On Mars, for example, there are many different landscapes – and they all exist in several constellations on the planet's surface. Again, I have to take 30 or 40 photographs... (laughs)

DAMN°: In your two latest series – 'Cassini' and 'ma.r.s.' – you gave up looking into the camera, which is part of a very common cliché. Is it now time to go back to painting?

TR: I would have loved to take all my photographs myself. Unfortunately, this is not possible – it would mean a very long journey with no return... (laughs). But I still look at images from the viewpoint of a photographer, even when I don't look into the camera myself.

DAMN°: Why would you have loved to do all the photographs by yourself?

TR: That has to do with an outmoded idea of authorship, I guess. My colleagues, Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer and Axel Hütte, take all of their photographs themselves, with a plate camera. Andreas Gursky does too, even though he assembles single images to achieve the whole. I'm the only one of this group who is in principle too lazy and takes advantage of pre-existing photographs. Maybe I should step outside with my camera instead of filming pictures.

DAMN°: You don't seriously accuse yourself, do you?

TR: OK, that was a rather ironic lament. My student days in Düsseldorf were definitively an unbelievably wild time. But nevertheless, the question of authorship was handled very strictly. #

cassini 35, 2011
From the series: Cassini
C-print, 108.5 x 108.5 cm (top left)

cassini 38, 2011
From the series: Cassini
C-print, 108.5 x 108.5 cm (above)

Facing page:
ma.r.s.13, 2011
From the series: ma.r.s.
C-print, 340 x 246 cm

Thomas Ruff exhibition, Haus der Kunst, Munich, until 20 May 2012
www.hausderkunst.de