



Sebastian Riemer
Photo: Sebastian Riemer Studio, January 2019

SEBASTIAN RIEMER

Seeing and believing

interview by

ANNA SANSOM

An alumnus of Düsseldorf's Kunstakademie, which is renowned for Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographs of industrial structures and the work of Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Thomas Demand and Candida Höfer, Sebastian Riemer has made his own path within a rich tradition. With a group and solo show opening, he acknowledges the happy role of chance (and mould) in his appropriated imagery, work that has wonderfully poetic qualities.

Sebastian Riemer's appropriated photography reveals a penchant for unearthing ruined and discarded images. In his larger-than-life size *Gr/s* series, the bluish, flaky gradations of the faded models are the last vestiges of the original glossy magazine pictures burnt by the sun shining on a wall. Taken in 2017 in Tel Aviv on a scorching Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest, they are the outcome of a serendipitous discovery made while strolling past an old, closed-up shop on a quiet street.

'Everything inside was left to rot and, as I walked past the window, I suddenly saw these bluish, 7 x 10cm images of models which had flakes on them stuck on the wall,' says the German artist, who was on a residency at the Dan and Cary Bronner Foundation, part of an artist exchange programme between Israel and North Rhine-Westphalia. 'Because of the extreme Mediterranean sun and humidity from the sea, this unique change in the imagery could develop.'

Peering through the glass in front of the windows, Riemer snapped 30 of the 100 pictures. 'The skin of the models was literally sunburnt in a harsh

way and the clothes were stripped away, giving them a vulnerability and an emotionally aesthetic value,' Riemer, 36, explains.

Back in his studio, Riemer took several months to figure out how to make a body of work out of 20 of the images. He started by scanning them, then adjusted the digital files on his computer before enlarging them. 'I wanted them to have a *trompe l'oeil* [deceiving the viewer] effect and the illusion of depth,' he informs.

There is the notion of Riemer freezing a moment in time, further deterioration of the 1980s/1990s magazine tear sheets being halted. Information about the fashion worn by the models irretrievably lost, the images convey homogenised visual decay. 'When I photographed the images they were in a perfect state, but when I revisited the shop one year later they had changed slightly and lost more of their colour,' he recalls. 'It makes me think of Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the painting in the attic getting older.'

Decontextualised and exalted to billboard-esque dimensions, Riemer's ensuing works,





Grls, titled after the absence of written vowels in Hebrew, interrogate our relationship to appropriated imagery. Three of them, plus one similarly made 'Coastscape', are included in the exhibition *Next Generations: Aktuelle Fotografie made im Rheinland* at the Museum Morsbroich in the German city of Leverkusen.

The show features 18 artists born in the 1970s and 1980s: the third generation of Düsseldorf's Kunstakademie (which became renowned for Bernd and Hilla Becher's typological, black-and-white photographs of industrial structures, followed by the work of Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Thomas Demand and Candida Höfer) alongside students from Cologne's Academy of Media Arts. Riemer, who was taught by Ruff, is one of the Düsseldorf alumni.

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'Sebastian Riemer's works are all characterised by a strictly conceptual approach: they deal with the creation of analogue and digital images from a sign-theoretical/semiotic point of view,' Stefanie Kreuzer, curator of the *Next Generations* exhibition, opines. 'Reflecting on the process of perception and interpretation of the image enables works to be created

which are also supported by a great poetic quality.'

Riemer's fascination with found imagery harks back to visiting a Robert Rauschenberg retrospective at Museum Ludwig in Cologne on a school trip. He was 16 and it was his first encounter with contemporary art. 'Before then, I thought that you had to depict what you see with paint and a brush on a canvas,' he remembers. 'I quickly understood that art is an open field about the mind (rather than craftsmanship), that gives possibilities to everyone that enters it, and I became intrigued by artists like Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.'

We are talking in Riemer's new Düsseldorf studio, which he shares with three other Düsseldorf graduates: two that were in Gursky's master class and another from Ruff's master class. 'A master class is an old-fashioned system that differs from art schools outside Germany,' Riemer says. 'When you enrol, you have one academic year to find a "master" – a teacher that accepts you to study with him. If you can't, you're expelled. There's even an expression, "hallway student", for somebody running around corridors but unable to attend classes [if they struggle to find a master].'

Inspired by how Joseph Beuys had been a professor at the Academy, Riemer enrolled in 2002 at the peak of the photography market boom. What was Ruff like as a teacher? 'The best guidance was that he gave no guidance at all,' Riemer remarks about the level of creative freedom. 'But he

was also very strict; if he didn't like something you'd know immediately.'

When Riemer started snapping existing photos, Ruff advised him to research American Pictures Generation artist Sherrie Levine, who made reproductions of Depression-era photographs by Walker Evans in the 1980s. Riemer became hooked on adding another layer to appropriation photography. Turning his camera onto museum paintings, like Van Gogh's self-portrait, he inverted the colours of his reproductions to make negative versions.

It was stumbling upon American press photographs from the 1920s to 1970s at a flea market that led to his *Press Paintings* series, which he began in 2013. 'The photo had been painted over, with whole parts of it altered, and I realised that this must have been how photographs were retouched manually before Photoshop,' Riemer says. Upon discovering that images from former press archives in the US were being sold on eBay, he bought all the interesting ones he could find. Think of a ballerina's arm being erased to give the illusion of her dancing without leaning on the wall to support her balance. Or a high-jump bar and distant trees painted onto an image of a leaping athlete. 'There's a surreal moment when you realise that the photo is deceiving you but in a decipherable way, like how a footballer isn't catching the ball but that the ball has been painted into his hands,' Riemer recounts.

To make the manipulated information compelling, Riemer

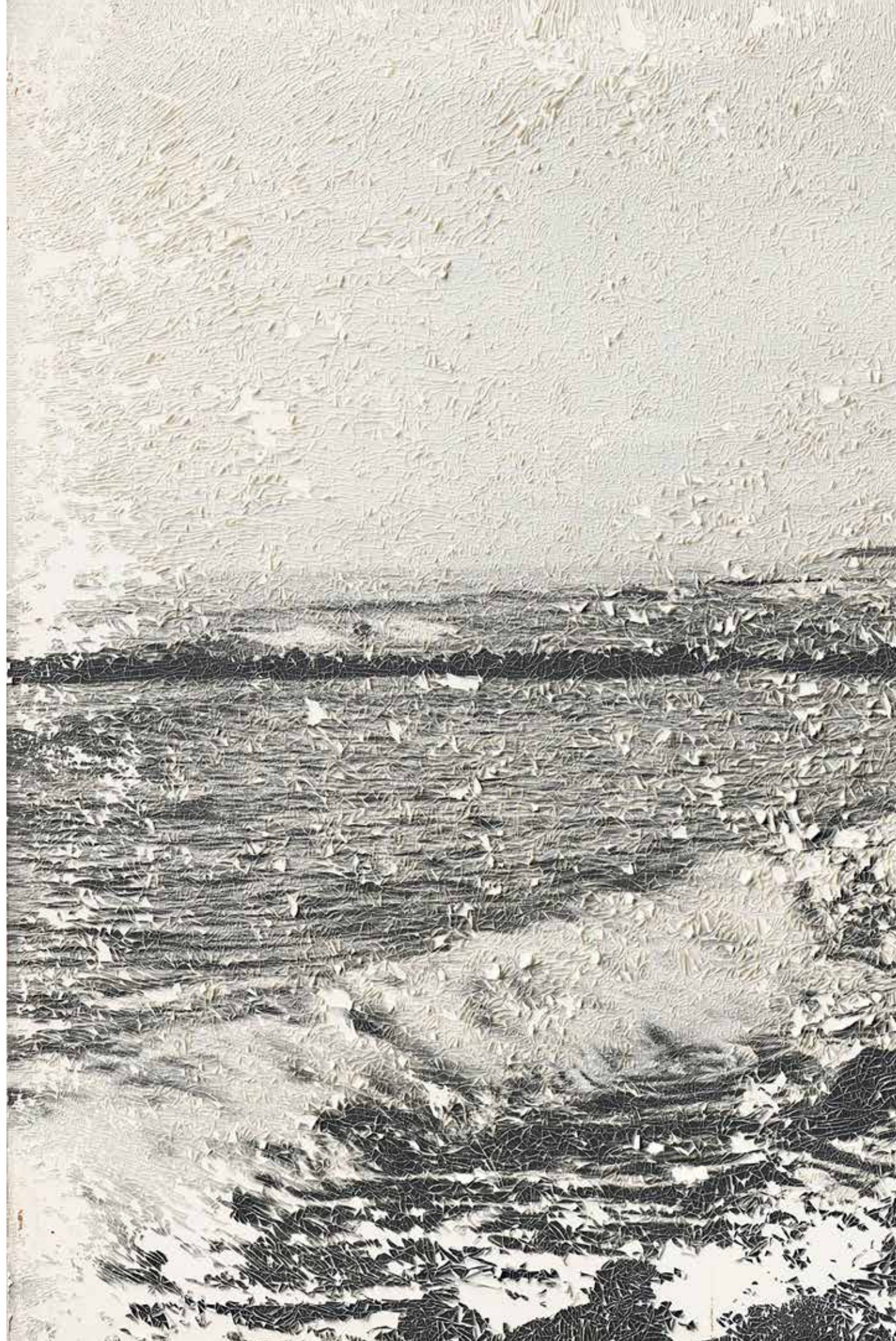
previous spread
Mdl. (grl). 12ED, 2018 (left page)

Pigment Print, 206 x 145 cm
Courtesy of the artist & Setareh Gallery, Düsseldorf
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Mdl. (grl). 16BC, 2018 (right page)
Pigment Print, 206 x 145 cm
Courtesy of the artist & Setareh Gallery, Düsseldorf
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Ballerina (Alma), 2015
Pigment print
164 x 123 cm
© Sebastian Riemer







Coastscape, 2013
C-Print, 160 x 200 cm
Courtesy of the artist & Setareh Gallery, Düsseldorf
© 2019 VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

transferred the photographs into a large format that draws attention in an exaggerated, impactful manner to how they had been overpainted. Like the generation of Düsseldorf photographers before him, Riemer believes that size does matter. 'Having a very large-scale photograph in front of you gives a completely new experience because you relate your body to the image,' Riemer remarks. At a time when imagery is heavily altered beyond recognition on Photoshop, provoking debate about the ethics of retouching, Riemer's work feels particularly pertinent. Excitedly, Riemer showed his new work to Ruff who, having worked extensively with existing imagery, later began a new series related to the media himself. In Ruff's subsequent work, the backs of prints displaying picture captions, stamps and notes are superimposed onto the front of the prints. The relationship between the two projects was explored in an exhibition on retouched photography at Museum Folkwang in Essen two years ago, juxtaposing Ruff and Riemer with a third photographer, Bogomir Ecker.

Some of Riemer's *Press Paintings* feature in his upcoming solo show, *Archival Empathy*, at Münchner Stadtmuseum in Munich, Germany. As the title implies, it raises questions about the archived history of Riemer's modified images and our capacity to analyse them, thereby examining their 'post-truth' dimension. One example is *Wetzler Boy* (2016), based on a 1930s studio photograph that had been overpainted with brightly coloured oils to give the impression that the boy is

standing on a forest path. Only his head and right hand have been left intact, lending an uncanny discordance. By reproducing the image in black and white, Riemer has heightened its ambiguity. Indeed, while Riemer's work is cerebral, objective and emotionally detached, it carries an empathy with how the original images were created. 'I like people to look at my work and think of it photographically, rather than pictorially, as I'm using appropriated images and source materials to give them a twist and make the techniques applied on them more visible,' he clarifies.

Elsewhere in the exhibition are *Achrome Stills*, another 'ruined' series made from mouldy slides of 1990s Hollywood movies stemming from a fortuitous find in an antiques shop in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar covered market. At the back of the store was a large basket full of thousands of jumbled-up, discarded slides that had once been used to illustrate newspaper articles. Noticing Riemer's captivation, the shop owner served him tea and Riemer spent the entire afternoon shifting through the chemically discoloured slides. Thanks to climatic humidity, the mould had eaten onto the images, resulting in new colours tarnishing them.

After examining his 50 purchases with a magnifying glass, Riemer invented a technique to rephotograph them. In *Achrome Monuments*, a riotous medley of pinks, purples and acidic limes is daubed over monuments and gravestones. Meanwhile, *Achrome Beach* depicting a young,

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swim-suited woman climbing out of the sea is blemished with darkened dots. The startling, pointillist effect reveals the enmeshing of the mould over the original, which Riemer has dramatised photographically. 'The mould had partly destroyed the images and become like a second author and then I became the third author,' he says excitedly about the over-layering processes. Pondering back on the *Gr/s* series, Riemer muses, smiling, 'Chance is a big friend that you can have as a photographer.'

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sebastianriemer.de

Next Generations: Aktuelle Fotografie
made im Rheinland, Museum Morsbroich,
Leverkusen, Germany, until 5 May
museum-morsbroich.de

Sebastian Riemer – Archival Empathy,
Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich,
Germany, 24 May – 25 August,
muenchner-stadtmuseum.de