

**MANFRED
WILLMANN**

Manfred Willmann

8 February – 26 May 2019

The ALBERTINA Museum is devoting a comprehensive solo presentation to the works of photographer Manfred Willmann (*1952). In his various series, each of which he takes over a period of several years, Willmann captures everyday scenes from his immediate living environment in Graz and in rural southern Styria.

This exhibition includes six extensive work groups that manifest Willmann's very direct, subjective manner of viewing things. These photographs can be read both as autobiographical introspection and as studies of social structures in rural areas.

The end of the 1970s saw Willmann develop a visual vocabulary that shapes the perception of his motifs, motifs that had not been considered worth portraying until then. His focus on details and narrow fields of view is just as characteristic of this as is his consistent use of flash. It was in 1979 that Manfred Willmann began using flash lighting in his works, even though this was frowned upon in artistic photography at the time. He has continued employing the creative influences derived from that technique to this day: flash lighting accents light-colored surfaces, gives rise to reflections, and emphasizes differing textures. Flash lighting also steers viewers' attention toward details that it helps to emphasize. And finally, it gives rise to cast shadows that set the motifs off from the space around them. This effect is reinforced by the fact that the objects or individuals on which the flash is trained appear lighter while their surroundings appear darker. The contrasts thus become stronger and the focus sharper. Lighting from the side increases the plasticity of three-dimensional objects. And in Willmann's color photography, flash lighting gives rise to greater intensity and exaggerated effects.

Willmann's unique visual language was first seen in the work group *Schwarz und Gold* [Black and Gold] (1979–1981), in which the artist's central aim was to deal with his own biography. Willmann also played a pioneering role in terms of color photography, becoming one of the first Austrian photographers to employ it as a means of artistic expression as early as 1981 in the work group *Die Welt ist schön* [The World Is Beautiful] (1981–1983). And his opus magnum is the series *Das Land* [The Country] (1981–1993), in which he broke with the traditionally idyllic depiction of rural life in Austria—thereby also preventing the ideological co-optation of his pictures.

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More recent works such as *Blitz & Enzianblau* [Lightning Flash and Gentian Blue] (2005) and *2018/2017* (2017–2018), which are characterized by a newfound close-up perspective, take up themes that Willmann has examined without letup over the course of his career: human beings' shaping of their common living environments, ephemerality, and the state of our natural surroundings.

The Albertina Museum is now showing these newer works alongside the influential series *Schwarz und Gold* and *Das Land*, thus illuminating central aspects of Willmann's oeuvre while also illustrating the development of his output from the late 1970s to the present. All of the works presented in this exhibition are from the holdings of the Albertina Museum or owned by the artist himself.

Alongside his work as an artist, Manfred Willmann has also overseen numerous exhibitions by Austrian and foreign photographers in his capacities as head of the photo department of the organization Forum Stadtpark in Graz (1975–1996) and, until 2010, as editor of the magazine *Camera Austria International* (which he founded in 1980).

Series

Schwarz und Gold (Black and Gold, 1979–1981)

Published in 1981 as an artist's book, *Schwarz und Gold* comprises three series dating from between 1979 and 1981. Divided into three chapters, this group of works is pivoted on an introspective examination of the photographer's own biography. The first part, *Volkmarweg 36*, the title of which derives from the address of the photographer's parental home, unfolds as an analysis of Willmann's social background and confronts portraits of his parents with pictures of the family's house with all its details and peculiarities. *Portraits für ...* (Portraits for ...) brings together portraits of his circle of friends in Graz and the local art scene. The third part, titled *Ich träume nie!* (I never dream!), is made up of a heterogeneous group of photographs showing motifs Willmann came upon on the street or during walks. These pictures reveal his forthright view of social contexts and nature.

Working in comprehensive series enables Willmann to explore complex subjects on a long-term basis. *Schwarz und Gold* is the first work for which the photographer relied on a Rolleiflex camera with 6 × 6 cm negatives that he would also use for future projects. The preference for the square format went hand in hand with the development of visual strategies that inform Willmann's depiction of motifs and provided the foundation for his characteristic pictorial language: the focus on details, the penchant for tight cropping, unusual perspectives, and the consistent application of flash, which has a decisive influence on the pictures' effect.

Die Welt ist schön (The World is Beautiful, 1981–1983)

The years from 1981 to 1983 saw Manfred Willmann working on a series that he called *Die Welt ist schön*. The title refers to Alfred Renger-Patzsch's 1928 publication of the same name, a key work of New Objectivity. The ironic reference is emphasized by the subjective tenor of Willmann's pictures and the use of color photography in contrast to Renger-Patzsch's works. Similar to *Schwarz und Gold*, Willmann arranged the contents of *Die Welt ist schön* in thematic blocks characterized by his straightforward pictorial language. The photographer not only continues to examine his own biography but also to photograph nature. Yet he also delved into new subjects: the series includes first pictures of the everyday life in rural Southwest Styria, where he had rented a house with his partner Christine Frisinghelli. The concentrated exploration of this world inspired the photographer to start dedicating himself to the series *Das Land*, pursued as a work in progress, which cannot be completely dissociated from *Die Welt ist schön*.

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Unlike *Schwarz und Gold*, Willmann photographed *Die Welt ist schön* in color, which, as far as Austrian photography of that time is concerned, must be considered as a ground-breaking feat. Black-and-white was de rigueur for art photography up to the 1970s; color was frowned upon because of its use in the fields of advertising, fashion, and amateur photography. Starting from the United States, color began to establish itself in art photography from the mid-1970s on, however. Willmann turned to color photography in order to lend his pictures a greater measure of realism.

Das Land (1981–1993)

Willmann dedicated himself to his main series *Das Land* from 1981 on, pursuing it as a work in progress. In 2000, he published a selection of 126 photographs dating from 1981 to 1993 as an artist's book under the same title. *Das Land* focuses on a small village in Southern Styria where the photographer had made a second home. Choosing an inner perspective, he centers his attention on the socio-cultural texture of this rural area, capturing everyday, unpretentious scenes. His pictures thwart any notion of the rural world as an idyllic, pristine sphere, which was rooted in the Heimat photography of the 1930s and was increasingly used in National Socialist pictorial politics. Multifaceted and ambiguous, Willmann's photographs do not render a harmonious image of the rural area but describe it as an anti-idyll and evade an ideological appropriation.

Willmann achieves this through his choice of motifs and by focusing on details, preferring closely cropped motifs, and employing flash. The glaring illumination exaggerates the colors, lends them an unnatural character, and thus rejects an affirmation of preconceived images of this world. Thus, even the smallest details stand out, which makes a contextualization of the motifs difficult. The use of flash and tight cropping isolates them from their surroundings. At the time the pictures were taken, the capturing of butterflies, sunrises, and sunsets was frowned upon in art photography as was the use of flash. This group of works not least bears witness to Willmann's questioning of these conventions.

Für Christine (For Christine, 1984–1988)

The series *Für Christine*, dedicated to the photographer's partner Christine Frisinghelli and dating from between 1984 and 1988, reveals how Willmann intertwines conceptual and intuitive approaches in his work. The photographer brackets two photographs each that were exposed directly one after the other, but not conceived as a diptych when taken. The pictures were only paired in retrospect. The presence of the edge with the negative numbers is a crucial detail of this work that documents the temporal link between the pictures.

Für Christine is a very personal work that depicts different moods and intimate moments of the photographer's life with his partner, coeditor of the magazine *Camera Austria*

International, with whom he has worked together since 1976. She is the person the photographer relates to by combining portraits of her with motifs that, characteristic of his oeuvre, point at him. Some pictures of this series are also included in *Das Land*, which suggests a connection between the two groups of works.

Blitz & Enzianblau (Lightning Flash & Gentian Blue, 2005)

The photographs of the comprehensive series *Blitz & Enzianblau* date from 2005. A selection of about 160 motifs was published as an artist's book in 2019. The volume comprises pictures from seventeen thematic groups, which are arranged chronologically. Motifs such as portraits as well as details of patches of ground and trees, dining tables, food, and dead animals recall Willmann's earlier series *Die Welt ist schön* and *Das Land*. Like these groups of works, *Blitz & Enzianblau* deals with the photographer's personal surroundings. Compared to his older series, *Blitz & Enzianblau* is characterized by a new kind of close-up perspective, which makes the pictures appear like studies of different surfaces and textures.

The photographs show no longer a square format but a 2 : 3 aspect ratio, which results from the use of an analogue reflex camera with 35 mm film. Such a camera permitted the photographer to get considerably closer to his motifs than before and to use a ring flash that ensures a more even illumination. Although the light is not as harsh here as in his earlier series, the additional illumination does make the colors shine. Willmann depicts everyday objects, people, and plants under the same conditions and arranges them side by side. This results in a stream of images on par with each other that fathom the world in which Willmann moved for a year.

2018/2017 (2017/18)

The title of this group of works, *2018/2017*, refers to the time of origin of Willmann's most recent series. The photographer relied on a digital camera as his constant companion in this case. A large number of pictures thus came together within a brief period. Willmann returned to the square format he had already used for earlier series. The close-up approach pursued in *Blitz & Enzianblau* is clearly taken another step further in *2018/2017*. The photographer makes full use of his camera's possibilities in these shots taken from an extremely short distance. He offers a study of surfaces, objects, insects, animals, and plants that sounds out issues of transience, the state of today's environment, and nature's diversity.

In *2018/2017*, Willmann still makes use of flash, which, due to the close proximity of the object being photographed, has a striking effect and generates hard shadows. The stark rendering of details enables Willmann to "show things even more beautifully and perhaps even uglier." This principle of his practice expressed in 1985 runs like a golden thread through all his series and has maintained its validity to this day.