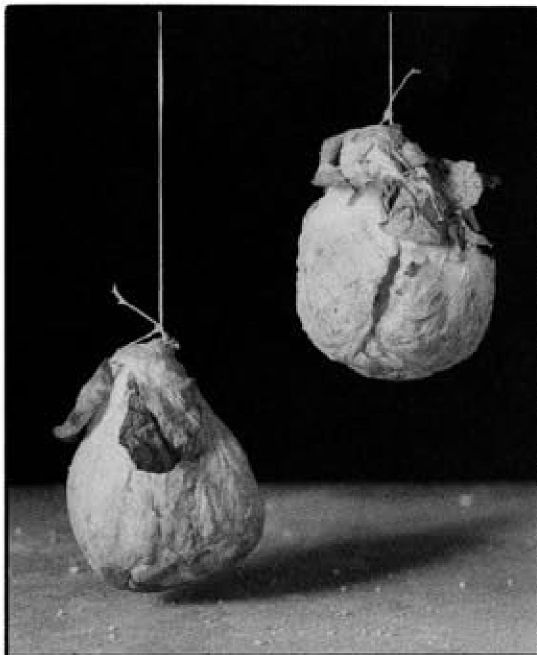


JOACHIM FROESE'S RHOPOGRAPHY

BY TIMOTHY MORRELL

Just as photography was thought to herald the death of painting[1] in the 19th century, digital technology is now starting to make the future of photography look rather uncertain. The computer has begun to take the place of the darkroom, and skill with a camera is probably regarded by many as a quaintly anachronistic craft. Painting of course continues to survive regular threats to its life, and no doubt photography will too; in fact the development of technical advances and alternatives has, as in the past, caused artists to intensify the exploration of their medium and what it can do.

Brisbane photographer Joachim Froese does this by resisting the use of a computer altogether when making images, and instead examining more deeply the intrinsic properties of photography, in the way impressionist painters were prompted by photography to examine more deeply the distinctive properties of paint.

Froese works exclusively in black and white, printing relatively small images (by contemporary standards) and using only photographic paper made from natural fibres rather than synthetic polymers. It is a stringently purist approach to photography and the resulting images capture some of the sense of arcane strangeness that the mysterious chemical process must have aroused when it was first developed.

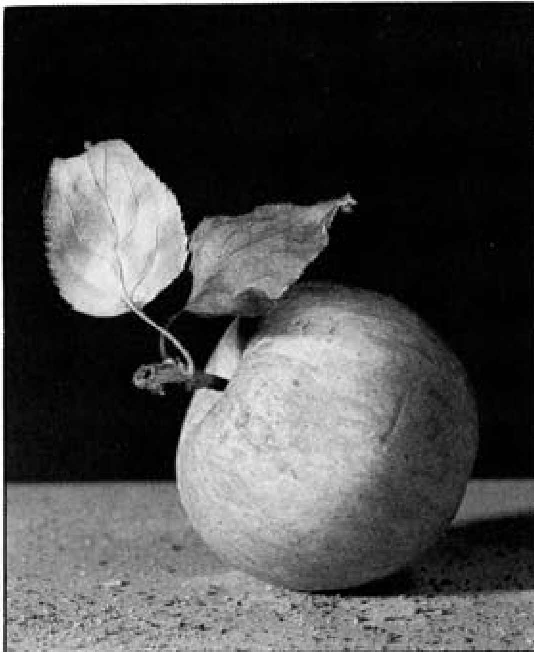
Froese is best known for multiple-image panoramas of tiny dramatic scenes that he stages using dead insects as the performers. Enlarged into photographic polyptychs, these post-mortem antics are like theatre of the absurd in miniature. Little particles of dust and grit on the narrow ledge where the (in)action takes place become like rubble in a derelict interior, where epic moments of confrontation, struggle and defeat are enacted by dead bugs in a metaphoric commentary on the absurdity of life. A single insect often performs multiple roles. By rearranging and rephotographing the same subject, as in *Rhopography #13*, 2000, a surprisingly varied repertoire of expressive postures can be coaxed from the same tiny dead actor.

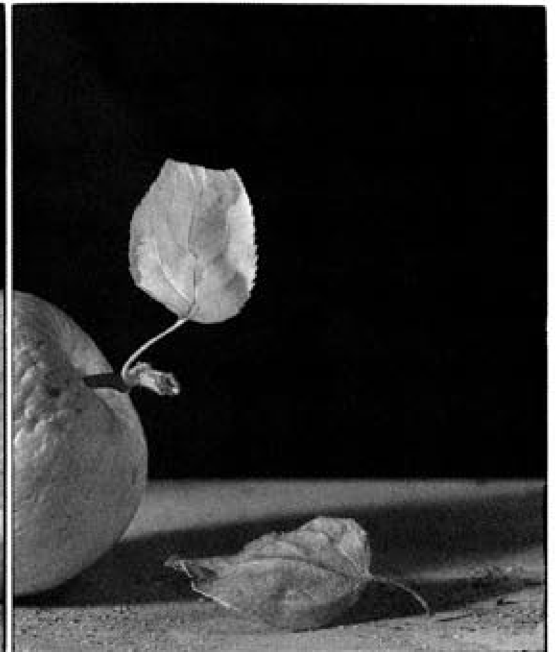
The pictures are bleak and grotesquely funny. They are also exceedingly odd. The sharp focus on the shiny armour of beetles and the bristling hairs of flies is fascinating and repellent, and what the creatures appear to be doing is unexpectedly dramatic when viewed on this scale. It is a world we only get to see because of photography. At first glance it is a familiar world because natural history programmes on TV have made it easy for us to intrude into the private lives of insects, but Froese's grim, ash-grey tableaux have little to do with nature. In contrast to the scientific truth that documentary photography claims to record, he presents meticulously constructed fictions. It is not really the lives of insects that he examines under the magnifying lens, but the contentious notion of truth in photography.

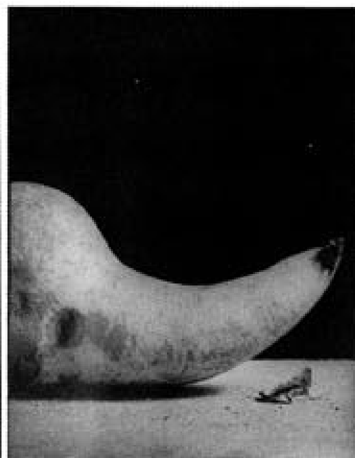
Part of the reason for Froese's rejection of computer manipulation in his work is the fact that we have no reason to believe in the verity of a digital image, whereas the belief that the camera never lies is still a potent myth in the traditional photographic process. People trust a conventional photographic record, which provides Froese with a much better opportunity to exploit and confound their credulity. He calls his ongoing body of work Rhopography, meaning the depiction of the unimportant. The title comes from the Greek word *rhopos*, which refers to small, trivial bits and pieces. The camera subjects are quite ordinary, but have been assigned roles in a narrative that transforms them. Because we have quickly come to accept that digital technology can do pretty well anything, its spectacular visual effects seem unremarkable. The plain and humble settings of scenes from Rhopography, however, have an intense intimacy that recaptures the sense of wonder in photographs and heightens their identity as precious objects.

The starting point of Froese's approach to photography is the European still life tradition, in which meticulously composed studies of everyday objects were treated as allegories of life, death, pleasure and decay. Observing the world's minutiae in such close detail and imposing a much broader meaning was the principal pursuit of some of the finest painters in the 16th and 17th centuries. Froese's initial interest was in Flemish still life painters, then in 2002 as artist in residence at the Australia Council's Barcelona studio, he was able to acquire a more thorough knowledge of the tradition in Spain.

The painter to whom he devoted most attention was the celebrated Toledo master of still life Cotán.[2] Cotán set his compositions against a black background within a shallow square niche or window frame, an arrangement that lends itself particularly well to the tightly restricted field of focus that Froese has until now established as an important aspect of his approach to making photographs. The black background and strongly directional lighting in the paintings gives them an almost photographic







opposite page: ***Phopography #34*, 2003**. 3 silver gelatin prints, 40 x 90 cm o/a.
above: ***Phopography #33*, 2003**. 3 silver gelatin prints, 40 x 90 cm o/a;
left: ***Phopography #26*, 2002**. 3 silver gelatin prints, 40 x 90 cm o/a;
bottom left: ***Phopography #29*, 2002**. 3 silver gelatin prints, 40 x 90 cm o/a. All images courtesy Esa Jaske Gallery, Sydney and the artist.

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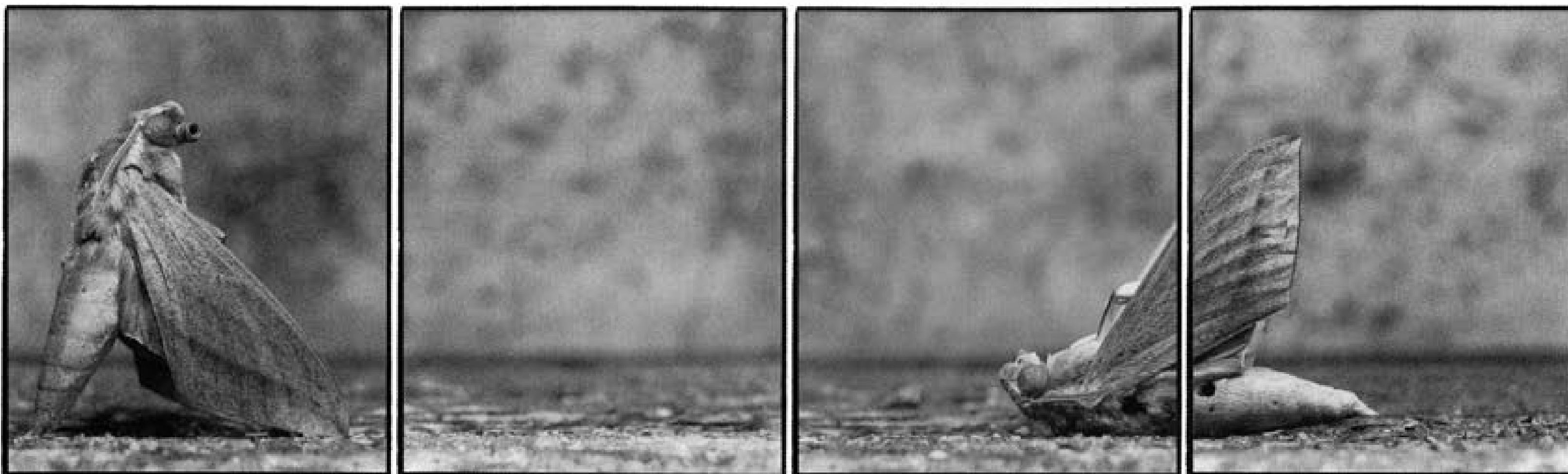
illusionism. Cotán also devised the very influential way of painting still life in which the objects—fruits, vegetables and occasionally birds—are suspended by strings. The result was a kind of exquisitely choreographed aerial ballet, often creating a hyperbolic curve across the composition, which has led to a belief that perfect geometry was integral to the symbolic meaning.

This precision is reflected in Froese's careful setting up of his camera subjects, always a very time-consuming business. He leaves nothing to chance, and visualizes the end result before devising the complicated sequence of set-ups required to achieve it. The depiction of objects in his photographs is often done in two halves, using separate adjacent prints. This requires the viewer to read the pictures differently from paintings, which conventionally depict objects whole, a protocol that the camera cuts across automatically. The recurrence of truncated bodies and partial objects in photography is part of its character, and Froese's division of objects between two frames is a constant reminder of and reference to the apparatus that produced the image. The cinematic effect created by an object that continues into the adjacent print further emphasises the fact that we are observing the camera in action.

Froese uses several tricks to invent scenes and objects with his camera. Negatives are often flipped to create symmetry. A simple example of this is a triptych showing an artichoke, *Rhopography #26* from 2002, in which the mirroring of the object across two prints flattens the pictorial space into an abstract pattern on the left side of the triptych's composition, while the entire vegetable sits fully rounded on the right. To give the impression that everything occupies the same continuous space, the lighting set up has been reversed on one side of the double artichoke, so the shadow falls as it



above: ***Phopography 13*, 2000**. 4 silver gelatin prints, 50 x 160 cm o/a. Courtesy Esa Jaske Gallery, Sydney and the artist.
below: ***Phopography #8*, 1999**. 4 silver gelatin prints, 50 x 160 cm o/a. Courtesy Esa Jaske Gallery, Sydney and the artist.

would if the object had actually existed. This work is riddled with visual contradictions, heightening the viewer's awareness that things are not as they should be. Froese describes this sense as an 'itch' and believes in the need for ambiguity in an image, commenting that 'an image that explains itself is dead'.[3]

Another 2002 triptych, *Rhopography #29*, shows an object recalling the bull's skull that often appears in Picasso's paintings, sculptures and prints. Froese produced this by again printing two different negatives of the same pear side by side, right side up and back-to-front. It is usually human skulls that appear in the most severely allegorical of still life paintings, a reminder of the vanity and brevity of human existence. Froese more often treats this theme by alluding to the tradition of showing fruit ravaged by insects and decay. Spanish painters from the golden age of still life, unlike their Italian and Flemish contemporaries in Italy seldom did this. Cotán's paintings have in fact been interpreted as symbols of the bounty and perfection of God's larder, from which fruit fly and rot have been banished. Cotán favoured produce that would not go off while he was painting it. Photography, however, is ideally suited to recording the gradual deterioration of fruit and vegetables over time, and Froese makes the most of this. The effects of the Queensland climate are part of the process, further defining the regional character of his work.

Froese went to Spain primarily to study Spanish still life painting, but while resident in Barcelona encountered a reverential attitude toward food in Spanish culture that helped explain the obsessively loving depiction of produce in the country's art. Possibly the experience of widespread poverty and famine have made food an almost sacrosanct subject. Froese's photographs of food that has become smelly and disgusting are unorthodox and transgressive in the context of the traditions he observed in Spain. His work has attracted interest there, and he has been offered an exhibition at the Kowasa Gallery in Barcelona in November this year.

Depicting things that should really be thrown away is an essential element of Rhopography. Things that people overlook (or prefer not to look at) are carefully arranged, magnified and studied. Just as traditional still life painting became a way of displaying virtuoso technique by transforming ordinary objects into eloquent subject matter, Froese's photographs exploit traditional processes to make viewers think more carefully about what they see. ■

Joachim Froese is a Brisbane-based artist. Timothy Morrell is a freelance writer and curator living in Brisbane.

notes

1. 'From today, painting is dead', attributed to French painter Paul Delaroche on seeing the first daguerreotype in 1839.
2. Juan Sánchez Cotán, 1560-1627.
3. Conversation with the writer 23 February 2004.