

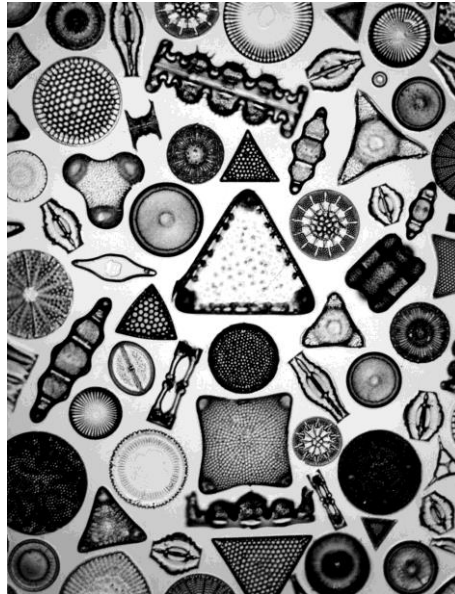
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HYPERALLERGIC

Butterfly Ovaries and Cockroach Stomachs: Microphotographs as Art

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If it hadn't been for Carl Strüwe, a German graphic designer and self-taught photographer, the world may have never come to appreciate the unlikely beauty of a cockroach's stomach. While scientists had been using microphotography in their research for years before him, Strüwe is widely considered the first to experiment with the fine art potential of the medium. From 1926 to 1959, starting with an image of a whale jawbone, Strüwe took 280 photographs through microscopes in an ongoing project he called *Formen des Mikrokosmos* (Forms of the Microcosmos). A selection of these images is now on view in an exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery.

Instead of framing his images as scientific evidence, Strüwe used his designer's eye for composition and pattern to highlight the microscopic world's staggering artistry. Since microscopes produced circular images, Strüwe jury-rigged a rectangular lens frame to present his photos in the standard format of Western paintings. He cut black pieces of paper into rectangles to place atop the specimens in his slides, then positioned his camera over the microscope's lens to photograph what lay beneath, magnified at 2,000 times. Eventually, he taught himself to use multiple exposures to compile disparate images into a single tableaux.

With their focus on abstracted patterns and shapes, these photographs evidence the influence of contemporaneous art movements such as Cubism, New Vision, and Constructivism. They also suggest how, in turn, technologies that allowed for new ways of seeing influenced the rise of such movements. As the Brooklyn Museum put it in a press release for 1949 solo show of Strüwe's work, his photographs "often remind us of modern artists such as Klee or Kandinsky and yet they do not encroach upon the field of painting. Rather they suggest possible sources and explanations for modern abstract art, unearthing a whole world of beauty invisible

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to the naked eye.” Strüwe himself, in a 1955 book, cited Fernand Léger, Paul Klee, Willi Baumeister, and Paul Cézanne as influences in his artistic studies of “sphere, cone and cylinder.”



The photographer never gained much fame outside of Germany during his lifetime, and in 1945, bombs destroyed his studio and many of his prints in the city of Bielefeld. But nearly a century after his first experiments, Strüwe’s work remains a singular contribution to the intersection of science and art. Even when current electron microscopes can magnify matter millions of times, a notched butterfly proboscis curled under Strüwe’s comparatively primitive equipment is a mesmerizing sight.

Carl Strüwe: Microcosmos continues at Steven Kasher Gallery (515 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 4.