

Walter Binder:

Herbarium

Photograms of Anita Pfau

Young Hippolyte Bayard observed in his father's orchard how sunlight clearly imprinted the letter "B" on the surface of peaches as they ripened. The letters, cut out from black paper, were glued to their surface. He discovered to his amazement that the surface exposed to light darkened its color naturally, however, where light was prevented from penetrating, it retained its original pale color. Thus, the fruit were decorated in a special way with his father's initials, giving them his stamp of quality for the market.

All this happened around 1820 in Breteuil-sur-Noye, France, where Bayard accidentally identified the existence of photograms. Later, he was celebrated as one of the pioneers of photography. His early attempts with photography, and with photograms which he had labeled "Dessins Photogéniques", remain some of the most interesting works in the early stages of photography.

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Anita Pfau has worked intensively with photograms over the last seven years. The undisturbed experimentation with grass, leaves and flowers, and with light in the darkness and in the silence of the laboratory, is the counter point to her love of spacious landscapes, light and air.

Explorations with photograms are in harmony with her inner self. The actual creation without the use of a camera nor a lens, the lack of exacting results, and the uniqueness of each photogram are the driving forces behind every new project. The direct and playful handling of grown forms of vegetation and the ability to manipulate light in quantity and quality within varying intensities and time spans open to her a rich field for experimentation on the light sensitive level, often leading to mysterious and captivating designs.

For Anita Pfau the fascination with photograms is the search for her very personal expression, straddling the divide between photography and painting. She creates her works of art through the medium of a dialog with leaves and flowers, and with the most elementary means of photography. Her primary goal is not the exact

duplication of nature, as attempted in an exemplary way by Karl Blossfeldt, the most well known photographer for vegetation. Anita Pfau's commitment is in the creation of her personal artistic articulation. What fascinates her in addition to these "shadow projections" is the transformation of the material reality of her objects into graphic elements. With a great deal of imagination, she composes these elements into pictures radiating in darkness.

Her photograms are vivid because of the consciously controlled purity of the images and are compelling because they overcome the material representation to form an independent expression. Subtle harmonies may suggest a musical resonance to the observer, as if reverberating sounds were optically transposed. It is the transparent clarity of her formal language that appeals to us. It is also her structuring of plants, whose labile equilibrium may transmit inner oscillations, or unsteady, implicit alterations of vegetation. New dimensions are insinuated by the use of multiple exposures, displacements, or concealments of individual parts of a design, leading the observer to entirely different spatial plateaus.

In her laboratory, Anita Pfau not only uses the technique of photograms in order to bestow expression to her works of art, she often adds a technique rarely used nowadays, called solarisation, to highlight the silhouette of a plant. Man Ray rediscovered this old method in 1925. In this process, an additional brief exposure during the developmental phase of the photogram is used to darken, or reduce to its linear outline, the otherwise bright shadow of an object. One could be deluded to believe that an invisible circle of light, the aura of the reproduced object, is beginning to glow, like a corona of the sun in dark space. "By provoking accidental changes, by precisely analyzing the results, and by making use of them in a more or less controlled manner" (Man Ray), one can achieve charming transformations with unexpected esthetics full of surprises.

Anita Pfau states: "A formative element in the implementation of photograms for the creation of the "Herbarium" is solarisation. What otherwise would be a pale shadow is reduced to a brilliant outline, the shadow itself turns dark, and the play between negative and positive representation gains a new dimension. These techniques, the photogram as well as the solarisation, require a great deal of experience and constant experimentation. The fact, that the work is performed in a dark room, aids in the creation of a special atmosphere evoking intuition. The origination of the

artwork in the laboratory resembles a process of alchemy and is in conscious contrast to the photo technical possibilities of modern times."

Anita Pfau's photograms, often divided into a lower and an upper section, may refer to heaven and earth, day or night, allowing us to envision growth and transience. Her "Herbarium" leads us into a harmonious sphere, beyond the visual, where we are enchanted with sublime designs of nature.

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"Art does not reproduce the visible, but makes visible."

Paul Klee, Berlin 1920

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