

Brandt

BILL BRANDT
PERSPECTIVE OF NUDES
(revisited)

Bill Brandt

Perspective of Nudes

(revisited)

WITH AN ESSAY BY

Martina Droth and Paul Messier

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Bill Brandt, *Self Portrait with Mirror*, 1966

HIGH CONTRAST Bill Brandt's Nudes

Martina Droth and Paul Messier

Early career

Bill Brandt emerged as one of Britain's foremost photographers during his lifetime. German by birth, he settled in London in 1934 and made Britain and the British his major photographic subjects. His first photo-book, *The English at Home* (1936) presented a chronicle of British life, contrasting the customs and trades of the rich and the poor. The introduction to the book describes Brandt "not only as an artist but an anthropologist," an observer whose "detached curiosity" reflected the nation back to itself in all its shocking detail – "people as they are, in their real and unescapable surroundings."¹ The book points to many of the visual themes that preoccupied Brandt in the first half of his career – people going about their daily business, city life by day and night, work, leisure, industry.

In the 1940s Brandt worked under the auspices of the British government, making pictures for illustrated magazines such as *Lilliput* and *Picture Post* that captured daily life under the duress of war. His haunting photographs of the London Underground transformed into makeshift shelters for ordinary Londoners during the Blitz are among his most iconic of the period. Those picked out for publication and exhibition at the time often show peaceful scenes of sleepers, tinged by surreal touches – a doll in a make-shift cot in the Liverpool Street tube tunnel, a sleeper in

1. Raymond Mortimer, "Introduction," in Bill Brandt, *The English at Home*, B.T. Batsford, London, 1936, p.4, p. 7.

a stone coffin in Spitalfields Crypt. Brandt's images circulated widely during the war, deployed by a government in need of fitting visual messages to mediate the social experience of the war and communicate with the world about the British cause.

Landscape and the body

In the mid 1940s and immediate postwar era, Brandt moved away from the socio-political images of depression-era and wartime Britain and became focused on a more subjective engagement with the landscape and the body. We might take his famous picture of *Stonehenge Under Snow* as marking a point of departure in his photojournalistic career. The photograph was commissioned for the cover of *Picture Post* in April 1947 to mark the deadly winter crisis and fuel shortage of that year.² While capturing a newsworthy moment in time, the image also represents a timeless view of a mythic ancient symbol of the nation. Its artful and elegiac composition points to Brandt's interest in strong contrast, silhouette, and the use of large expanses of the picture space where visual detail is reduced to almost nothing. These kinds of aesthetic choices increasingly came to the fore first with landscapes, then with the nude, where space and body become shapes in the interplay of shadow and light.

The landscape became a major project for Brandt in the postwar years, culminating in 1951 in his book *Literary Britain*, a visual

2. *Picture Post*, April 19, 1947, cover.



Bill Brandt, *Stonehenge Under Snow*, 1947

journey that situated Britain's great poetic and literary heritage in the land.³ The publication of the book coincided with the Festival of Britain, a time in the postwar era when the nation focused on its own history, culture, and geology.

Brandt was interested in landscape for its own sake, and as a setting for sculptural compositions. Geological artefacts on the beach, ancient shapes and outcroppings mark many of his landscape photographs and lead also to the nudes photographed on the beaches of East Sussex and Normandy. The beach provided Brandt with an evocative setting for blending body and nature. A pair of knees are arranged like boulders stacked on top of each other. The fingers of a hand blend into a bed of pebbles; a torso and elbow echo the shapes of the cliffs.

The publication of *Perspectives of Nudes* in 1961 – a collection of photographs produced in the 1940s and 1950s – marks the point at which Brandt's stature as an art world figure came onto assured footing.⁴ The publication not only attracted press attention – including a multi-page feature in *Life* that juxtaposed his nudes with photographs of a carved stone figure by Aristide Maillol⁵ – but also an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, hastily organized by Edward Steichen to coincide with the book.⁶ Installation images show a dramatic display of large format prints, unframed and unglazed, hung on a dark painted wall. Like the double page juxtapositions in the book,

3. Bill Brandt, *Literary Britain: Landmarks, Landscapes and Houses of the Great Writers and Poets*, London: Cassell, 1951.

4. Bill Brandt, *Perspective of Nudes*, London: Bodley Head; New York: Amphoto, 1961.

5. "Nudes Are Back," *Life*, October 6, 1961, 149–51.

6. *Diogenes with a Camera V*, exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961

the curatorial arrangement creates a surreal sequence of body fragments that appear almost abstract.

Printing for exhibition

In 1969, Brandt had a full-scale retrospective at MoMA, curated by John Szarkowski.⁷ A few years later, he was offered commercial representation by Marlborough Gallery. Brandt began to print to meet these new outlets for his work – large scale prints for exhibitions, matted and signed prints for sale. He did not abandon the long-standing interests of his early career – illustrated magazines and books remained his primary expressive channels. Between 1936 and the year of his death, Brandt published at least one photo-book per decade, as well as contributing dozens of photo-essays and hundreds of individual photographs to the illustrated press.

In the later decades of his career, the relationship with the Marlborough Gallery was an increasing focus. Brandt was Marlborough's first photographer – a significant detail that reflects the stature of the artist by the mid 1970s. Marlborough showcased the breadth of Brandt's work in major solo exhibitions at the gallery's New York and London locations in 1976.⁸ The exhibitions presented Brandt with the opportunity to reimagine decades of work through the creation of new prints. Notably, the prints he made for this purpose were "finished works", conceived

7. *Bill Brandt*, exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1969

8. The Marlborough exhibitions ran from March 27 to April 17, 1976 in New York, and November through December 1976 in London.

and produced specifically for exhibition as opposed to prints made for pre-press – a significant departure from the dominant strain of Brandt’s print output prior to that moment. In general, these later prints are larger in scale, more matte, and with a fine-grained texture, features that were purposefully geared for display. Invariably signed and usually mounted, these “Marlborough” prints were acquired by influential collectors and museums, notably the Victoria and Albert Museum.⁹ In other words, Brandt’s prints of the 1970s were the vehicle for his newfound artworld success.

The Marlborough prints

Untouched for over forty years, Marlborough’s trove of prints made by Brandt in the 1970s presents a new opportunity to understand and evaluate the entirety of the artist’s career. The selection of thirty-five nudes, included here and presented by the gallery in New York from March 12 to May 8, 2021, is an apt starting point. From the 1940’s onwards, the nude was a fundamental and enduring scaffold for Brandt’s expression. Unlike his other preoccupations, including landscape, photojournalism, and portraits, the nude for Brandt was less an avenue for commercial success and more a potent platform for creativity, experimentation, and discovery. With its wide angle lens and broad depth of field, Brandt’s “police camera” distorted limbs and (mostly) interior perspectives. These images, claustrophobic, dreamy, dark, sexual, are among Brandt’s

most identifiably surreal. By the late fifties and through the 1960s, Brandt often moved the figure outdoors, frequently attracted to the strongly directed light and low, long, horizons of the seaside. Body parts, fingers, knees, breasts, elbows, appear close-up, with anatomical specificity distilled down through deliberate overexposure. The most sculptural of Brandt’s work, nudes from this period present a monumentality through the generalization of form. Later work, through the 1970s often combines overtly surrealist influenced sexuality with a reductive approach to form.

Understanding Brandt as an artist requires an understanding of the physical print. Throughout his life, Brandt printed for specific occasions: for magazines, for his own books, and later for the market and exhibitions. For Brandt, photography was a cumulative project. Alongside making new pictures, he also referred continually back to past work. As evidenced by his books, exhibitions, and the corpus of works made for Marlborough, the early pictures never went away. He reprinted his 1930s pictures of the North and his 1940s pictures of the war alongside and in dialogue with his nudes, for his photo-books and in groups of prints produced for sale or for exhibition. He made no distinction between these bodies of work – the old and new folded together stylistically and aesthetically along the arc of his changing printing styles. Regardless of when a photograph was originally taken, at any given time it would be treated like new work. Produced with attentiveness and care, the Marlborough prints are no exception.

9. For a history of Bill Brandt’s relationship with the Marlborough Gallery see Audrey Sands, “Photography at Marlborough Gallery,” in Martina Droth and Paul Messier, eds, *Bill Brandt | Henry Moore*, London and New Haven, Yale Center for British Art, 2020, pp. 114-7.

Close inspection of many of these works show close-in surface manipulations, fully consistent with Brandt's decades-long preoccupation with retouching and etching to refine contours and key detail.

The late prints that Brandt produced for exhibition represent crucial historical markers that track Brandt's ascent in the art world and demonstrate the role he played in the history of photography in Britain. They express his changing visual language and reconcile Brandt's aesthetic with the new demands and expectations placed on photography as it was drawn into an art world context. ■

PLATES

Acknowledgement

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1.

Hampstead, 1945

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/4 x 11 1/2 in. (33.7 x 29.2 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/4 x 11 1/2 in. (33.7 x 29.2 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



2.

Micheldever, Hampshire, November 1948
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 3/8 in. (34.0 x 28.9 cm)
Sheet: 13 3/8 x 11 3/8 in. (34.0 x 28.9 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



3.

The Haunted Bathroom, Campden Hill, London, 1948
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/4 x 11 3/8 in. (33.7 x 28.9 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/4 x 11 3/8 in. (33.7 x 28.9 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



4.

Campden Hill, London, 1949
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto



5.

Campden Hill, London, April 1949
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



6.

St. Cyprien, France, October 1951
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/8 x 11 5/8 in. (33.3 x 29.5 cm)
Sheet: 15 1/2 x 12 in. (39.4 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto, verso



7.

Hampstead, London, 1952
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 1/2 in. (34.0 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto



8.

London, March 1952

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



9.

Belgravia, London, February 1953
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



10.

Campden Hill, August 1953

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 1/2 in. (34.0 x 29.2 cm)

Sheet: 13 3/8 x 11 1/2 in. (34.0 x 29.2 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



11.

East Sussex Coast, April 1953

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



12.

Nude, 1954

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/4 x 11 1/4 in. (33.7 x 28.6 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/4 x 11 1/4 in. (33.7 x 28.6 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



13.

London, 1954

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



14.

St. John's Wood, London, December 1955
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



15.

London, 1956

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



16.

London (Multiple Exposure), 1956
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto



17.

London, April 1956
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto, verso



18.

London, July 1956

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 1/2 in. (34.0 x 29.2 cm)

Sheet: 13 3/8 x 11 1/2 in. (34.0 x 29.2 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



19.

East Sussex Coast, 1957
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 3/8 in. (34.0 x 28.9 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto



20.

London, 1957

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



21.

Taxo d'Aval, France, 1957

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/4 x 11 1/4 in. (33.7 x 28.6 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/4 x 11 1/4 in. (33.7 x 28.6 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



22.

Vasterival Beach, Normandy, May 1957
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 5/8 x 11 5/8 in. (34.6 x 29.5 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto



23.

Belgravia, London, February 1958
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto



24.

London, 1958

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



25.

London, March 1958

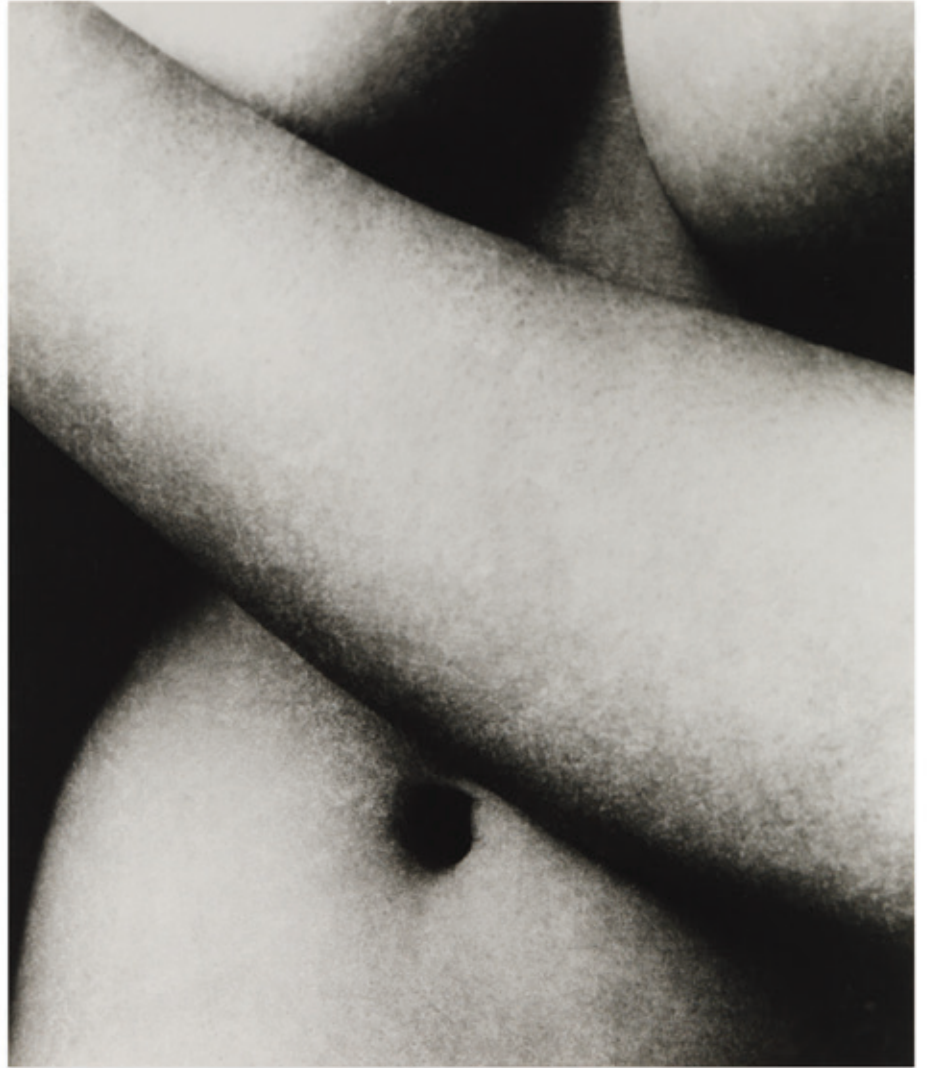
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



26.

Baie des Anges, France, 1959

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto

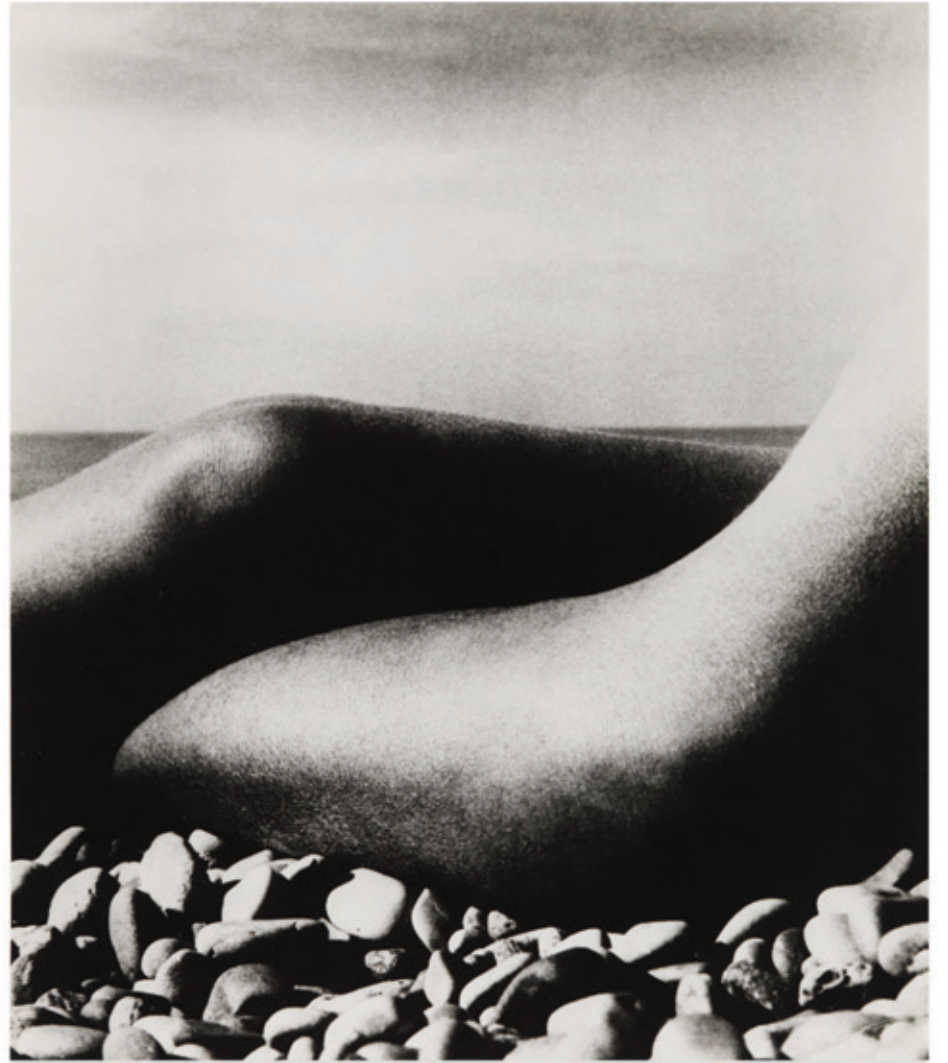


27.

Baie des Anges, France, 1959
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 5/8 x 11 3/4 in. (34.6 x 29.8 cm)
Sheet: 15 1/2 x 12 in. (30.4 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto, verso

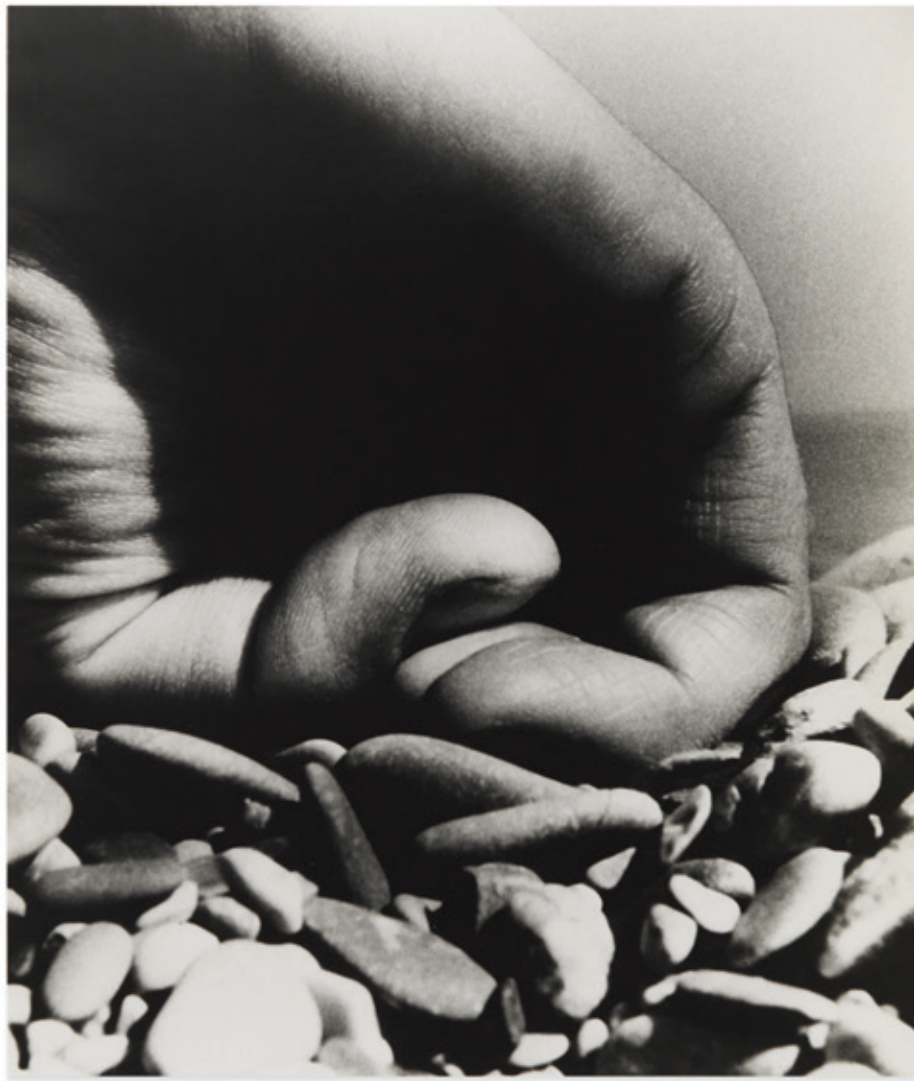


28.

Baie des Anges, France, 1959
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 5/8 in. (34.3 x 29.5 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto, verso

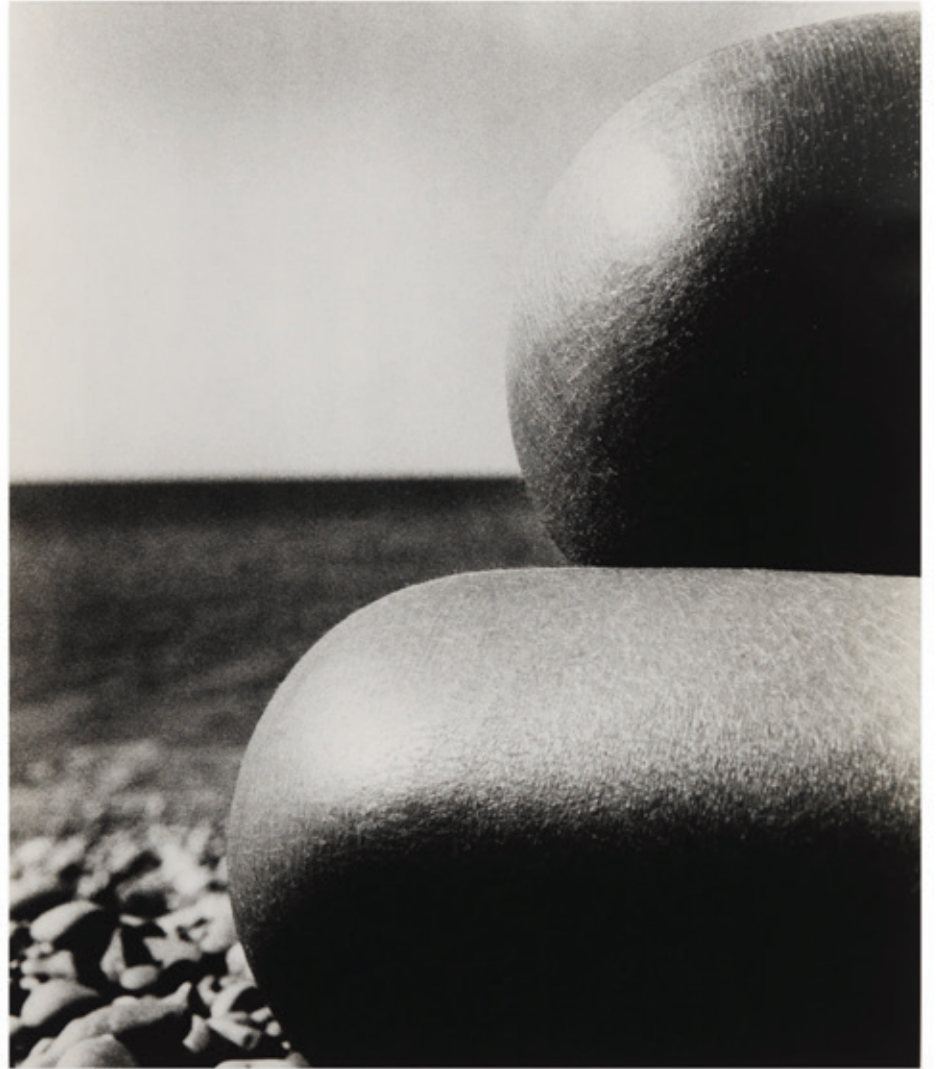


29.

Baie des Anges, France, October 1959
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 3/4 x 11 3/4 in. (34.9 x 29.8 cm)
Sheet: 13 3/4 x 11 3/4 in. (34.9 x 29.8 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



30.

East Sussex Coast, 1959

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



31.

East Sussex Coast, 1960

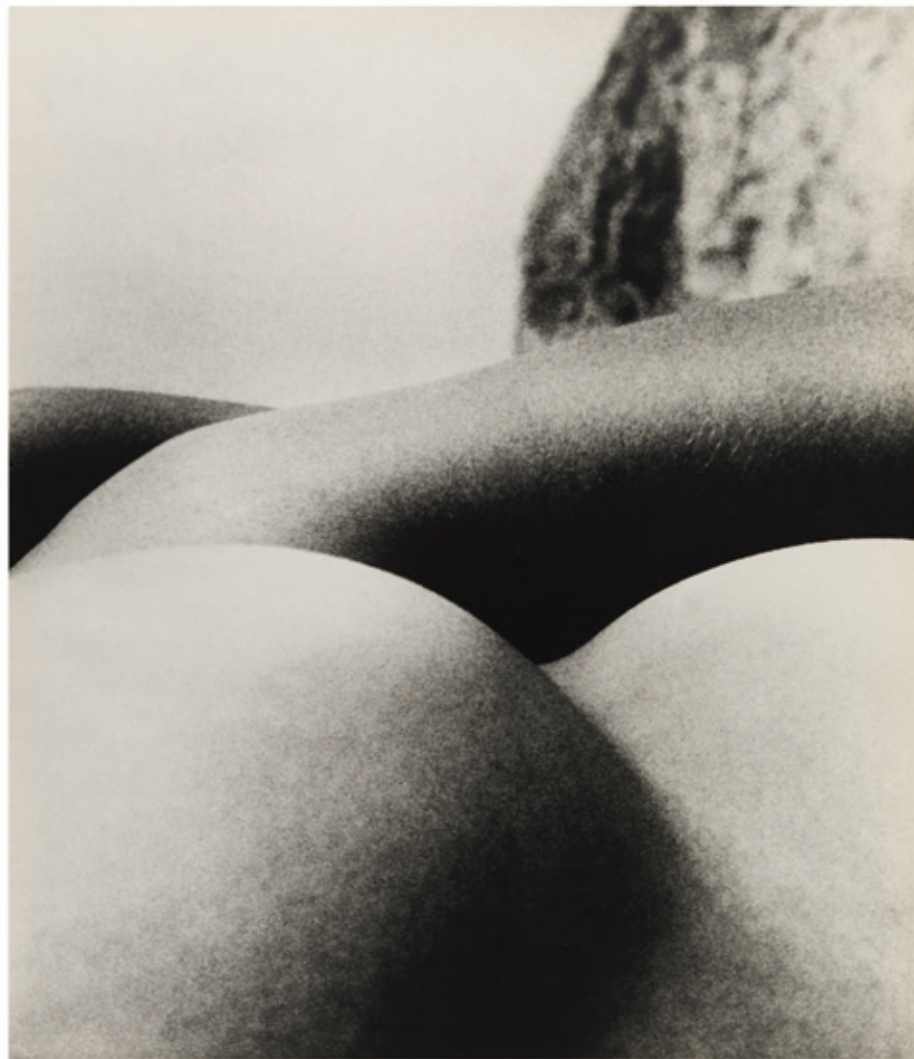
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



32.

East Sussex Coast, 1960

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 1/4 in. (34.0 x 28.6 cm)

Sheet: 13 3/8 x 11 1/4 in. (34.0 x 28.6 cm)

Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto



33.

East Sussex Coast, July 1977
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto



34.

East Sussex Coast, 1979
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto



35.

Hampstead, London, 26 February 1979
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/8 x 11 1/8 in. (33.3 x 28.3 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto



BILL BRANDT

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Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio
Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire
Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas
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Harvard Art Museums, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
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Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago, Illinois
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York
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Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon
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MARLBOROUGH NEW YORK
545 WEST 25TH STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10001
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
+1 212 541 4900

DOUGLAS KENT WALLA, CEO	dkwalla@marlboroughgallery.com
SEBASTIAN SARMIENTO, Director	sarmiento@marlboroughgallery.com
NICOLE SISTI, Assistant to Sebastian Sarmiento	sisti@marlboroughgallery.com
DIANA BURROUGHS, Director	burroughs@marlboroughgallery.com
REN PAN, Assistant to Diana Burroughs	pan@marlboroughgallery.com
ALEXA BURZINSKI, Associate Director	burzinski@marlboroughgallery.com
MEGHAN BOYLE KIRTLEY, Administrator	boyle@marlboroughgallery.com
GREG O'CONNOR, Comptroller	greg@marlboroughgallery.com
DiBOMBA KAZADI, Bookkeeper	kazadi@marlboroughgallery.com
AMY CAULFIELD, Co-Registrar	caulfield@marlboroughgallery.com
BIANCA CLARK, Co-Registrar	clark@marlboroughgallery.com
LUKAS HALL, Archivist	hall@marlboroughgallery.com
MARISSA MOXLEY, Archivist	moxley@marlboroughgallery.com
SARAH GICHAN, Gallery Assistant	gichan@marlboroughgallery.com
JOHN WILLIS, Warehouse Manager	willis@marlboroughgallery.com
ANTHONY NICI, Master Crater	mnywarehouse@marlboroughgallery.com
JEFF SERINO, Preparator	mnywarehouse@marlboroughgallery.com
PETER PARK, Preparator	park@marlboroughgallery.com
ROBERT RICHBURG, Preparator	richburg@marlboroughgallery.com
MATT CASTILLO, Preparator	mnywarehouse@marlboroughgallery.com

MARLBOROUGH FINE ART (LONDON)
6 ALBEMARLE STREET
MAYFAIR
LONDON W1S 4BY
UNITED KINGDOM
+44 20 7629 5161

John Erle Drax, Chairman
Mary Miller, Director
Geoffrey Parton, Director
Frankie Rossi, Managing Director
Debbie Lowe, Assistant to Head of Accounts
Angela Trevatt, Head of Accounts
Joe Balfour, Head of Graphics and Sales Director
Jessica Draper, Sales Director
Laura Langeluddecke, Executive Assistant
Mike Pollard, Registrar
Erin Sleeper, Social Media and Digital Manager
Morgan Ward, Sales and Exhibitions
Will Wright, Associate Director

erle-drax@marlboroughgallery.com

parton@marlboroughgallery.com
rossi@marlboroughgallery.com

trevatt@marlboroughgallery.com

ward@marlboroughgallery.com

GALERÍA MARLBOROUGH MADRID
ORFILA, 5
28010 MADRID
SPAIN
+34 91 319 1414

Anne Barthe, Sales Director
Belén Herrera Ottino, Sales Director
Claudia Manzano, Sales
Nerea Pérez, Press, Auctions
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Juan García, Warehouse

abarthe@galeriamarlborough.com
bherrera@galeriamarlborough.com
cmanzano@galeriamarlborough.com
nperez@galeriamarlborough.com
nrubino@galeriamarlborough.com
glucas@galeriamarlborough.com
cgonzalez@galeriamarlborough.com
jherranz@galeriamarlborough.com
nmorena@galeriamarlborough.com
frosado@galeriamarlborough.com
jgarcia@galeriamarlborough.com

GALERÍA MARLBOROUGH BARCELONA
C/ ENRIC GRANADOS, 68
08008 BARCELONA
+34 93 467 44 54

Mercedes Ros, Director, Sales, Public Relations
Laura Rodríguez, Registrar, Press, Sales, Reception
Ester García, Catalogues, Press, Reception

mros@galeriamarlborough.com
lrodriguez@galeriamarlborough.com
eguntin@galeriamarlborough.com

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Martina Droth is Deputy Director and Chief Curator of the Yale Center for British Art. She is the Chair of the Association of Research Institutes in Art History and co-editor of the online journal *British Art Studies*. Recent curatorial projects include: *Bill Brandt / Henry Moore* (2020-2021); *Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery* (2017-2018); *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837-1901* (2014-2015); and *Caro: Close Up* (2012). Prior to joining the Center, she was at the Henry Moore Institute where her exhibitions included *Taking Shape: Finding Sculpture in the Decorative Arts* (2008-2009) and *Bronze: The Power of Life and Death* (HMI, 2005). Her forthcoming projects include an exhibition of works by Hew Locke.

Paul Messier is the Chair of the Yale Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage and the Pritzker Director of its Lens Media Lab. He has published widely, holds patents for cultural materials characterization, and recently directed an initiative to establish a department of photograph conservation at the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Founded in 1994, his Boston-based private conservation practice serves institutions and private clients worldwide. With Martina Droth, he is co-editor of *Bill Brandt / Henry Moore* (Yale Center for British Art, 2020). He is the 2018 recipient of the Award for Distinction in Scholarship and Conservation jointly presented by the College Art Association and the American Institute for Conservation.

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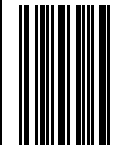
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