

Decades of Land Art and Feminism from Barbara and Michael Leisgen, Pioneers in German Photography



ARTSY

APR 19TH, 2016 8:49 PM



Barbara and Michael Leisgen
Eintauchen #3/3, 1972
Beta Pictoris Gallery/Maus Contemporary

Understanding the significance of German artist couple Barbara and Michael Leisgen calls for understanding another German artist couple, Bernd and Hilla Becher. Based in Düsseldorf, the Bechers were conceptual photographers best known for their “typologies”—black-and-white photographs of imposing industrial structures. In the 1970s, the Leisgens’ emerging practice, characterized by the use of natural elements, was seen as a reaction to the so-called Becher school. At Art Brussels 2016, Beta Pictoris Gallery/Maus Contemporary looks back at that pivotal split in Germany’s modern art history, in addition to offering a look at the Leisgens’ grander artistic trajectory in the decades that followed.



Barbara and Michael Leisgen
Sonnenteilung #3/3, 1994
Beta Pictoris Gallery/Maus Contemporary

Some of those early photographs involve interaction between her human form and the sun, as in *Sauvez le Soleil #3/3 (last available)* (1976). That blueprint set the stage for their follow-up series, “Sunwritings,” in which the camera interacted directly with the sun. That technique resulted in the “burning” of bright lines and shapes into images, as in *Sonnenteilung #3/3* (1994).



Barbara and Michael Leisgen
Gravitation #1/3, 1973
Beta Pictoris Gallery/Maus Contemporary

In their fair booth, the gallery features key works from that reactive period, particularly the Leisgens’ “Mimetic” series, in which Barbara herself is the subject. In photographs such as *Gravitation #1/3* (1973) and *Erinnerung #2/5* (1974), her figure is framed against expansive, empty landscapes, her arms outstretched, her dark hair hanging loose around her shoulders. These early works were experiments in Land Art, with the human body contrasting and complementing the environment.

It's Land Art, yes, but also Performance Art, with Barbara its star. The fact that the Leisgens chose a female figure is important, too. Depending on the interpretation, the woman's figure imitates nature or channels it; either way, this feminist streak runs through the couple's work.



Barbara and Michael Leisgen
Le Serpent #2/3, 1972
Beta Pictoris Gallery/Maus Contemporary

It's no wonder, then, that the Leisgens' work has been so widely collected, including by institutions as prominent as the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, which has published a pair of books on the Leisgens' work. This latest exhibition is one more confirmation of the couple's artistic significance, not only within their native Germany, but now within photography's larger landscape.