

Erwin Blumenfeld (1897-1969)

Photographs, Drawings and Photomontages

15 October 2013 – 26 January 2014





Untitled (Kneeling man with tower), 1920
Collection Henry Blumenfeld



Charlie, 1920
Collection Helaine and Yorick Blumenfeld

Bringing together over three hundred works and documents dating from the late 1910s to the 1960s, this exhibition, the first in France to showcase the multilayered aspects of Erwin Blumenfeld's oeuvre, encompasses the various media explored by the artist throughout his career: drawing, photography, montage, and collage.

The life and work of Erwin Blumenfeld (Berlin, 1897–Rome, 1969) provides an impressive record of the socio-political context of artistic development between the two World Wars, while highlighting the individual consequences of emigration.

Erwin Blumenfeld, a German Jew, only spent a few years in his country of birth. It was only in 1919, when he was in self-imposed exile in the Netherlands, that Blumenfeld began to take a deeper interest in photography, particularly the photographic process and above all the artistic possibilities offered by darkroom experiments. For a short while, he ran an Amsterdam-based portrait studio that doubled as an exhibition space, before moving to Paris in 1936, where the art dealer Walter Feilchenfeldt helped him rent a studio in the rue Delambre. That same year, his photographs were exhibited at the Galerie Billiet, while the following year saw his first beauty cover, for *Votre Beauté* magazine. In 1938 he received a visit from leading fashion photographer Cecil Beaton, who helped him to obtain a contract with the French *Vogue*. Blumenfeld travelled to New York, returning in

1939, shortly before the outbreak of war, to become *Harper's Bazaar's* fashion correspondent in Paris. In 1940 he was interned as a German Jew in France, first in Montbard, then in Loriol, Le Vernet, and Catus. He made a daring escape with his family in 1941, returning via Casablanca to New York, where he subsequently lived and worked until his death. It was in New York that Blumenfeld's astonishing career as a much sought after, highly paid fashion photographer really took off, first of all in the studio he shared with Martin Munkácsi, then from 1943 in his own premises. The contract he signed with the publishers Condé Nast in 1944 marked the beginning of ten years of remarkable photography and cover shots for various magazines in the company's stable. Following on from his experimental black-and-white shots of the 1930s, he began playing with colour. The present exhibition includes, besides photographs, both magazine work and early experimental films made for the Dayton department store in Minneapolis, his leading advertising customer. Not until 1960 did Blumenfeld return to Berlin for a visit. He devoted the following years to finishing his autobiography, begun in the 1950s. The work was completed in 1969 with the help of his assistant Marina Schinz, but was only published in 1975, initially in French translation, then in the original German in 1976. His book *My One Hundred Best Photos* was also released posthumously, in 1979.



Untitled (Self-Portrait), Paris, c.1938
Collection Helaine and Yorick Blumenfeld



Untitled (Audrey Hepburn, actress), New York, 1950s
Switzerland, private collection

Drawings, Montages, and Collages

Between 1916 and 1933 Erwin Blumenfeld produced a fairly limited number of drawings and montages. As a young man he was very interested in literature, writing poems and short stories. And as early as 1915 he mentioned that he was interested in writing an autobiography.

Almost all of his montages and collages include drawings and snippets of language. He plays with written and printed words and typography, juxtaposing names, concepts, and places to create ironic commentaries and provocative titles. His collages typically combine drawing, language, and cut-outs of original or printed photographs. He also often used letter stationery to form a background, leaving bare spaces.

In 1918 Blumenfeld made the acquaintance of the Dadaist George Grosz; two years later he and Paul Citroen wrote to Francis Picabia in the name of the *Hollandse Dadacentrale*, but neither was present at the First International Dada Fair in Berlin in 1920. That same year, Blumenfeld began using the pseudonyms Erwin Bloomfeld and Jan Bloomfield, as documented in his Dadaist publications and in some of his collages. The drawings in the present exhibition, most of which have never been shown in public, were produced in Berlin and the Netherlands. Only a handful of them are dated. They are quick sketches

from life or from imagination, rough cartoons and acid caricatures, in pencil, ink, watercolour, or coloured pencil—whatever was to hand. Blumenfeld was clearly fascinated by the quality and immediacy of drawing as a medium, and, as these works reveal, it certainly stimulated his playful side.

Self-Portraits

Blumenfeld took his first photographs as a schoolboy, using himself as one of his first subjects. The earliest date from the 1910s, but he continued taking self-portraits to the end of his life. The young man with the dreamy gaze turned into the louche bohemian with a cigarette, then the carefully staged photographer experimenting with his camera. His self-portraits are not the product of excessive vanity, but rather playful experiments, with and without masks, models, and other grotesque objects such as a calf's head, all used to create witty images.

Portraits

Blumenfeld's first steps in professional photography were in portraiture. He started "learning by doing" in the early 1920s in Amsterdam, where he had opened the ladies handbag store Fox Leather Company. This is where he took portraits of customers, using a darkroom in the back of the store. Comparison of the contact sheets from the time with the blow-ups taken from them clearly shows, right



Untitled (Nu, Lisette), Paris, 1937
New York, Collection Yvette Blumenfeld Georges Deeton /
Art + Commerce, Gallery Kicken Berlin, Berlin



Untitled (Natalia Pasco), New York, 1942
Collection Henry Blumenfeld

from the outset, the importance in Blumenfeld's work of the finishing in the lab. The final images display extremely tight framing, high levels of contrast, and lighting that creates dramatic, even devilish, effects. When he arrived in Paris in 1936 his first photographs were portraits, featuring among others Henri Matisse and Georges Rouault. Although he quickly entered the Paris fashion scene, he retained a strong interest in portraiture throughout the remainder of his life.

Nudes

Blumenfeld's earliest, highly narrative nudes date from his time in the Netherlands, but the subject only became a passion during his Paris years from 1936 on, when he discovered the work of French avant-garde photographers. His admiration for them is particularly evident in his nude photographs, as is the influence of Man Ray's work. The bodies of the women in these images were surfaces onto which he projected his artistic imagination. He cut them up, solarised them, and transformed them into abstract imagery through the play of light and shadow. The faces of his nudes from the 1930s are only rarely visible, the women remaining somewhat mysterious entities. The nudes Blumenfeld produced in the 1950s after he had settled in New York tended to be more concrete, illustrative works.

Architecture

The black-and-white architectural photographs that Erwin Blumenfeld took in the 1930s feature buildings and urban spaces from various experimental and abstract perspectives. The Eiffel Tower, for instance, is captured in sharp reliefs of light and shade, while the photographs of Rouen Cathedral are intended to draw the viewer's visual attention to the building's specific forms. Blumenfeld expresses his artistic vision and his knowledge of Gothic architecture by focusing on the abstraction of details.

During the 1950s and 1960s Blumenfeld used a 35mm camera for cityscapes. The exhibition showcases three of these colour slide projects for the first time. They feature New York, Paris, and Berlin—three places that made a mark on his art and also shaped his career.

The Dictator

In 1933, according to his autobiography, Blumenfeld reacted to Hitler's rise to power in Germany with a photomontage. This outstanding piece of work, probably his most famous photograph, symbolizes and anticipates the dictator's dehumanization. Following on from the political themes in some of his early collages, he here combined different negatives—a skull and a portrait of Hitler—to make a single print. In one of these montages he included a swastika, while in a different portrait "bleeding eyes" were added later on the surface.

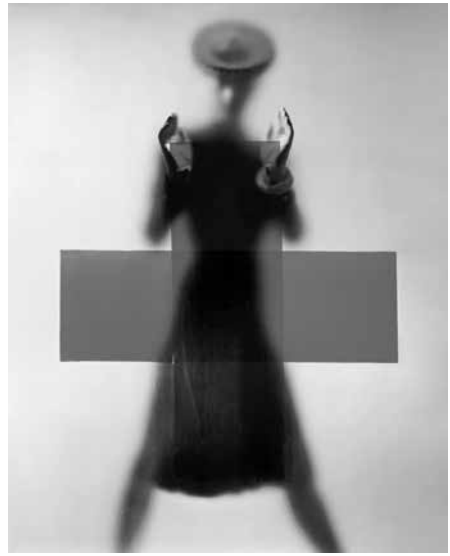


The Minotaur or the Dictator, Paris, c.1937
New York, Collection Yvette Blumenfeld Georges Deeton /
Art + Commerce, Gallery Kicken Berlin, Berlin

Later on, in Paris, he photographed a calf's head, using this subject to compose different images. One in which he placed the animal's head on a woman's torso was titled *The Minotaure* or *The Dictator*. This image, which does not refer to a specific figure, is obviously intended to be allegorical. In 1941 Blumenfeld was able to escape from the Nazis with his family to New York.

Fashion

Blumenfeld's move to Paris in 1936 marked the beginning of his career as a fashion photographer, although he had already had contacts with magazines in Paris while living in Amsterdam. The work that appeared in French publications in the late 1930s raised Blumenfeld's profile as a modernist photographer and brought him to the attention of the famous British photographer Cecil Beaton, who visited him in his studio in 1938 and helped him sign his first contract with the French edition of *Vogue*. When Blumenfeld made his first trip to New York following his sensational set of fashion photographs on the Eiffel Tower, he came home with a new contract as Paris fashion correspondent for *Harper's Bazaar*. He was only able to file his reports for a year before he was interned in various prison camps across France. In 1941 he was able to escape from German-occupied France to New York with



Untitled (variant of a cover photograph of Vogue, "Do your part for the Red Cross"), New York, March 15th, 1945
Collection Henry Blumenfeld

his family. In the first half of the 1950s, he drew on his experiments in black-and-white photography to develop an exceptionally original artistic repertoire, reflected in his use of colour and his fashion work.

Ute Eskildsen
Curator of the exhibition

Translated from German by Susan Pickford

chronology

1897

26 January: Erwin Blumenfeld is born in Berlin.

1907

Receives a camera as a gift.

1913

His father dies of syphilis. Blumenfeld leaves school and begins an apprenticeship at a women's clothing store.

1915

Becomes, with his long-time friend Paul Citroen, a regular at the Café des Westens, a favorite hangout for artists, and becomes acquainted with artists associated with the gallery Der Sturm.

1917–18

Sent to the Western Front in France as an ambulance driver. His plan to desert to the Netherlands fails and he is sent back to the front, where he learns of the death of his younger brother Heinz. In December 1918, he manages to enter the Netherlands clandestinely.

1919–20

Sets up an art gallery in Amsterdam Paul Citroen, appointing themselves directors of the Hollandse Dadacentrale.

1921

Marries Lena Citroen. They would have three children together: Lisette (1922), Heinz (1925) and Frank Yorick (1932).

1923

Sets up the Fox Leather Company, selling leather handbags, in Amsterdam. He also uses the premises as an art studio.

1924–31

Travels to Berlin and Paris.

1932

Embarks on an intense period of photographic work. He displays his portraits of women in his shop window. First exhibition in Amsterdam.

1933–34

Completes his famous Hitler photomontage, which he referred to as the "face of horror". Exhibitions in the Hague and Rotterdam.

1935

The Fox Leather Company goes out of business and Erwin opens a photographic studio. His work is featured at the "Exposition internationale de la photographie contemporaine" at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. *Photographie. Arts et métiers graphiques* becomes the first magazine to publish his photographs.

1936

Leaves for Paris. Exhibits at the Galerie Billiet and rents a studio in Montparnasse, where he

photographs figures. He also receives his first advertising commissions.

1937

First cover for the magazine *Votre Beauté*.

1938

The photographer Cecil Beaton puts him in touch with French *Vogue*, which offers him a contract.

1939

Leaves for New York over the summer and returns with a contract with *Harper's Bazaar*.

1940

The family is split up and interned in several camps in France. Blumenfeld manages to obtain a family visa for the USA.

1941–43

The family flees to New York. Blumenfeld is immediately commissioned to work for *Harper's Bazaar* and his first colour cover is printed. His photographs are also published in *Cosmopolitan*, *Life*, *Look*, *Pageant*, and *Vogue*, among others.

1944

Signs a contract with Condé Nast. Shoots numerous covers for *Vogue* and other magazines in the Condé Nast stable until 1955.

1948

Participates in the exhibitions "In and Out of Focus. A Survey of Today's Photography" at MoMA, New York and "Seventeen American Photographers" at the Los Angeles Museum. Numerous trips across North and Central America and Europe.

1955

His work with *Vogue* comes to an end. Begins work on his autobiography.

1958

Experiments with filming advertising material.

1960

First trip back to Berlin since the 1930s. Photographs the city with a Leica.

1961

Begins selecting photographs for a book project to be entitled *My One Hundred Best Photos*.

1969

Completes his illustrated autobiography.

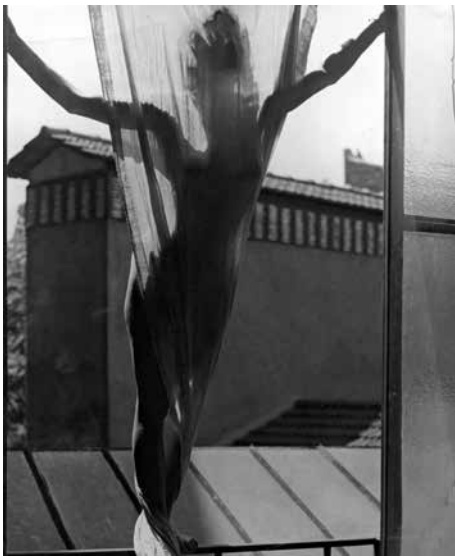
4 July: dies of a heart attack in Rome.

1975

The first edition of his autobiography is published in French translation as *Jadis et Daguerre*.

1979

My One Hundred Best Photos is published in German and French.



Untitled (Margarete von Sivers on the Roof of Blumenfeld's Studio at 9 Rue Delambre), Paris, 1937
New York, collection Yvette Blumenfeld Georges Deeton / Art + Commerce, Berlin, Gallery Kicken Berlin



Untitled (Green dress), 1946
Collection Henry Blumenfeld

related events and publications

Tuesday 15 October 2013, 6pm

I guided tour by Ute Eskildsen, curator of the exhibition (in English)

Tuesday 15 October 2013, 7pm

I screening of the documentary *The Man Who Shot Beautiful Women* (BBC, 2013, 60', in English), with Nick Watson and producer Remy Blumenfeld. Documentary telling the story of photographer Erwin Blumenfeld who became one of the world's most highly paid fashion photographers and a key influence on the development of photography as an art form. The first ever film about his life and work uses exclusive access to Blumenfeld's extensive archive of stunning photographs, fashion films, home movies and self-portraits to tell of a man obsessed by the pursuit of beautiful women, but also by the endless possibilities of photography itself.

Saturday 26 October, 30 November, 28 December 2013 and 25 January 2014, 11am and 3.30pm

I Children First!: visit and workshop
"S'appropriier et assembler" (in French)

Tuesday 29 October 2013, 6pm

I Young Visitors' Tuesday Tours: tour of the exhibition by a Jeu de Paume lecturer (in French)

Saturday 30 November 2013, 2.30pm

I screening of the documentary on Erwin Blumenfeld and architecture in Paris, Berlin and New York (directed by the Musée Nicéphore Niépce, 2013), presented by François Cheval, Director of the Musée

Saturday 18 January 2014, 11am–6pm

I one-day workshop "Façonner la féminité : la mode, la photographie et la société de consommation" ["Fashioning Femininity: Fashion, Photography and Commodity Culture"], directed by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, art historian and critic (in French)

How has photographic representation in print media helped fashion the "New Woman" of twentieth-century modernity? Insofar as photography plays a crucial role in democratizing fashion, refiguring the erotic, and reinforcing the links between fetishism, fashion, and commodity culture, the central purpose of this workshop is to examine the complex links between photographic depiction and the cultural and sexual imagination.

I publication: *Erwin Blumenfeld. Photographs, Drawings and Photomontages*, directed by Ute Eskildsen, co-published by Jeu de Paume / Hazan, paperback, 21.5 x 27.5 cm, 256 pages, €35

I app: *Blumenfeld*, available for free via the Apple Store and Google Play

Jeu de Paume – Concorde

exhibitions

15 October 2013 – 26 January 2014

■ **Erwin Blumenfeld (1897–1969). Photographs, Drawings and Photomontages**

■ **Natacha Nisic. Echo**

■ **Satellite Programme 6, Exhibitions**

– **a projection. Suite for Exhibition(s)**

and Publication(s), fourth movement

until the end of March 2014

■ **Virtual Space, Print Error: Publishing in the Digital Age**

<http://espacevirtuel.jeudepaume.org/>

upcoming exhibitions

11 February – 18 May 2014

■ **Robert Adams. The Place We Live**

■ **Mathieu Pernot. The Crossing**

■ **Satellite Programme 7, Nika Autor**

practical information

1, Place de la Concorde, 75008 Paris

access via the Tuileries Gardens, Rue de Rivoli entrance

www.jeudepaume.org

<http://lemagazine.jeudepaume.org>

information +33 (0)1 47 03 12 50

Tuesday (late opening) 11am–9pm

Wednesday to Sunday 11am–7pm

closed Monday, 25 December and 1 January

■ **exhibitions:** admission: €8.50; concessions: €5.50

free admission to the exhibitions of the Satellite Programme

Young Visitor's Tuesday: free admission for students and visitors under 26 every last Tuesday of the month from 5pm to 9pm

■ **guided tours and workshops:** free admission on presentation of the exhibition ticket of the day

Tours for individual visitors with guides

from the Jeu de Paume

Wednesday and Saturday at 12.30pm

Family Tours

Saturday at 3.30pm (except for the last of the month)

by reservation on +33 (0)1 47 03 12 41/rendezvousenfamille@jeudepaume.org

Children First!

tour and workshop for 7 to 11 year olds

every last Saturday of the month at 11am and 3.30pm

by reservation on +33 1 47 03 04 95/lesenfantsdabord@jeudepaume.org

Young Visitors' Tuesday Tours

every last Tuesday of the month and 21 January at 6pm

■ **screenings:** €3 per session; free on presentation of exhibition ticket on a first-come, first-served basis

■ **one-day workshops:** €5.50; free on presentation of exhibition ticket on a first-come, first-served basis

Jeu de Paume – Château de Tours

exhibition

9 November 2013 – 1 June 2014

■ **Vivian Maier (1926–2009),**

A Photographic Revelation

upcoming exhibition

21 June – 2 November 2014

■ **Gilles Caron. The Conflict Within**

practical information

25 Avenue André-Malraux, 37000 Tours

information +33 (0)2 47 70 88 46

Tuesday to Friday 2pm–6pm

Saturday and Sunday 2.15pm–6pm

closed Monday

free admission

guided tours: Saturday at 3pm

This exhibition has been organized in partnership with:

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TimeOut **VOGUE** **inter** **fip**
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