

On prolonged walks, Marianne Engel discovers situations that oscillate between being vague and obvious. Whatever she comes across—the remains of civilization, flowers, bushes, forest clearings or rivers—her motifs always look as if they had been spontaneously generated. There is something mysterious and miraculous about their implied self-organization that makes you wonder whether they are meant to conjure the presence of an unknown creative force within the chaos of unbridled nature. Their impact is such that they suddenly produce a feeling of familiarity while also reminding us that there just might be a higher order.

The appearance of one thing within another has the quality of a vision, a revelation. Although Engel no longer lends her figures a spectral appearance through multiple exposures, as she did in her early work, the atmosphere of her images is as mysterious as ever. The presence of spirits and other ghostly features inevitably calls to mind alchemy and the occult, mysticism and the esoteric. Such implications may well apply when it comes to breaking down the barrier between life and death, but it would be wrong to read the artist's photographs as visual ciphers of the supernatural. On the contrary, what we see revealed in these pictures is the pure presence of things themselves. The artist often—and rightfully—speaks about contingency in this context, meaning, philosophically speaking, that everything is happenstance, or rather that there is no compelling reason for things to be as they are, or even to be at all. Existentialism would talk about the meaningless of the world and, hence, of human existence, which leads either to suicide or to existentialism's proposition that meaning must necessarily be an individual agenda.

Contingency in Engel's art is exciting in two respects: first, it is a very special experience and secondly, it eliminates the boundary between life and death, inasmuch as death suddenly becomes meaningless. Contingency, interpreted as the absence of all good reasons in the world, is initially an experience of the abyss but, at the same time, of overcoming it: "So I was in the park just now. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I couldn't remember it was a root anymore. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me. Then I had this vision."¹

Sartre's words inevitably invoke descriptions of the sublime, where sensations of awe, horror and helplessness also play an important role. The sublime, however, is a pleasurable experience, for humankind can face the overpowering superiority of nature as a cognitive species. Our inferiority as sensual beings is compensated by awareness of our superiority as moral beings. If we interpret Sartre's loss of words in the above quotation as the loss of reasonable knowledge, then the experience of contingency would be comparable to a sublime moment without the comfort of human superiority as embodied by reason: "The essential thing is contingency. ... But no

necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not a delusion, a probability which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, consequently, the perfect free gift. All is free, this park, this city and myself. When you realize that, it turns your heart upside down...”²

Contingency as a permanent condition is almost unbearable, but that does not undermine its significance as a moment in which all meaning bows to the sheer presence of things. The premise that there is no meaning to things, that everything simply is, applies to human beings as well; consolation would then be found, on one hand, in the connectedness with all other (meaninglessly present) things in the world and, on the other, in the singularity of the human being as being uniquely capable of this kind of experience.

Such associations are of great significance in Marianne Engel’s photography. The artist finds her subject matter by seeking out situations and moments of relevance, which, when captured, are invested with a permanence that makes them accessible to the viewer. Within the context of contingency, it is above all the elimination of the boundary between life and death that plays an especially important role. Rather than being limited to the horror of such an experience, these moments become a point of departure for a view of the world in which all objects are shown to have a modest but unmistakably justified existence. The self-evident presence of animals, plants, people and objects is manifest, in these pictures, in the incontrovertible equality with which all things coexist side by side. It is this fundamental connectedness that ultimately quickens the things of this world and not any claim to a mysterious metaphysics.

Marianne Engel’s studio is a serendipity of stuffed animals, dried flowers and objects preserved in jars, which occasionally make an appearance in one of her rare installations. This may seem morbid at first sight, but the suggestion of vanitas and memento mori themes is deceptive: the dead animals and withered plants enjoy a venerable physical existence beyond death, for they neither evoke its horror nor do they seek to draw our attention to it. On the contrary, even after death, the beautiful objects bear eloquent, self-evident witness to the experience of life. They do not remind us of their own death but rather of the sentient vitality of those who can still perceive them.

1 Jean-Paul Sartre,
Nausea, New Directions,
1969, pp. 126–27.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 131.