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The Sun is the Tongue

Ancient & Modern, London, UK

The windows of Ancient & Modern were taped up with crinkly sheets of UV-filtering film. Inside, sunlight was no longer welcome; it had already done its work on heliographs, photograms, solar polarizations, cosmic images and photomicrographs - further exposure would have risked damaging this fragile material.

With one or two exceptions, the different approaches included in 'The Sun is the Tongue, the Shadow is the Language' could be termed 'cameraless photography'. In the most direct examples, objects were placed onto light-sensitive paper and exposed to sunlight, fixing their fleeting shadows as permanent images. Lourdes Castro, a Portuguese artist now in her 80s, produced dozens of prints in the 1970s from plants in her garden, five of which were displayed here. One image from 1972 of a geranium flower adopts the taxonomic analysis of a botanical illustration, separating the seed head into its component parts, while another allows the blurred shadows of foliage to conjure impressionistic depth and movement.

The breadth of possibilities within Castro's technique was contrasted with the taut limitations of Ernst Caramelle's heliographs. Better known as a painter, the Austrian artist exploits the impermanence of coloured sugar paper, exposing masked sections for years at a time to sunshine through the window of his studio. There is something touching about the quiet patience of such a long-sighted endeavour, a quality that seems to carry through to the small scale and quixotic inconsequence (in the best way) of his blocky, off-balance abstract compositions.

Caramelle's and Castro's projects, with their suggestions of amateur science experiments, were thrown into relief by the inclusion of remarkable images produced by professional scientists - for example, the black and white photographs in which Nobel Prize-winner Carl David Anderson captured protons and electrons whizzing around a 'cloud chamber', or Marietta Blau's impressions of cosmic radiation on photographic plates exposed at night on the peak of the Jungfraujoch in Switzerland. These visualizations of the imperceptibly miniscule and the unimaginably vast situated the practices of the artists in the exhibition within a scale that granted their work both humility and gravitas; after all, what is a year-long exposure compared to the 93 million miles that the sun is from the earth? Nearby, hand-tinted photographs made in 1993 by Li Yuan-Chia, an artist who left his native China for an isolated house on the Scottish border near Hadrian's Wall in the late 1960s, proposed mundane models of cosmic systems with an apple or a blot of birdshit on gravel.

In one grouping of works, reproductions of photographs taken in 1887 and 1899 of the sun's writhing surface hung beside a small untitled painting from 2009 by Luca Frei. The only artist to have been invited to make work especially for the show, Frei offers an elliptical response which, like the other works here, became richer by association with its surroundings. It was also Frei who suggested the exhibition's title - a quotation from the 17th-century German alchemist Michael Maier. The modest, abstract painting was apparently made by applying and then washing off layers of acrylic and gouache; the resulting greyscale image chimed with both the sun-faded paper of Caramelle and forms emerging through chemical solutions in the darkroom.

Travelling between the parallel trajectories of science and art described by the exhibition was Raphael Hefti, whose *A Portrait of the Bullet* (2009) consisted of seven prints rescued from a ballistic manufacturer's archive. Each shows the disturbances created by different types of missile as they are propelled through liquid. It is as hard to reconcile the implicit violence of such processes with their gentle beauty as it is to imagine the heat of the sun when looking at the swirling black and white patterns of its surface, or the speed at which protons were moving in Anderson's cloud chamber. Sometimes cause and effect are as strange to each other as a shadow is to sunlight.

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