Thomas Struth, *Pantheon, Rome* (1990)

The differing phases of Thomas Struth's career, distinct as they might appear here in this retrospective (which tours from Zurich and Düsseldorf, and covers the years 1978 to 2010), are united by a conservative faith in the centrality of art and its enduring values against the depthlessness of spectacle culture, to which photography nevertheless contributes. The series which immediately faces us on entering the Whitechapel's survey, 'Audience' (2004), comprises large-scale photographs of the crowds of tourists at Florence's Galleria dell'Accademia gathered to view Michelangelo's *David*. Monumentality and detail is given to the gestures and expressions of people who have come to look at this sculpture, which remains just out of frame. This, like a number of Struth's museum photographs, could be seen as a variant of street photography – with the museum providing a means to observe aspects of contemporary social life. It is life observed at a potential point of meaningfulness: a number of spectators in the series appear genuinely moved, open-mouthed as they look upwards.

El Capitan, Yosemite National Park   (1999)

Audience 1, Florence (2004)

Much of the rest of the lower-floor gallery is taken up by large-scale photographs whose impact is very much caught up with the awe of its subject matter: ranging from the shimmering facades of Times Square to the reverential calm of a Venetian church interior, centred upon Giovanni Bellini's luminous altarpiece (*San Zaccaria, Venice*, 1995). The sunlit rock formation of El Capitan in California's Yosemite National Park is replete with invariable allusions to the central figure of American landscape photography, Ansel Adams, who also turned to this rock formation. Only Struth's picture is in colour, monumental in scale, and framed by lines of cars and tourists who have also stopped to take in the breath-taking view. In *Space Shuttle 1, Kennedy Space Center, Cape Canavarel*   (2008), Struth muses upon a technological sublime, the size of the spacecraft accented by the forest of scaffolding beneath its underbelly in an untypical and unfamiliar view distinct from its more common representations. Photographs taken at the Max-Planck-Institute für Plasmaphysik in Garching and Griefswald (2009), investigating the physical principles underlying a nuclear fusion power plant, offer glimpses into an unimaginable technological complexity, replete with an aura of futurity in contrast to the retrospective looking his museum pictures entail.

Space Shuttle 1, Kennedy Space Center, Cape Canavarel   (2008)

In *Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo* (1999), the animation of Delacroix's painting 1830 *Liberty Leading the People* is set against the formality of the static audience set before it. The unusual public display of the actual painting, illuminated upon a white board within a darkened interior and before stationary viewers, gives the whole presentation a cinematic edge. Struth also offers smaller-scale, subtle meditations on museum pictures. In his photograph of Vermeer's *Woman with a Lute*, hung towards a corner in a room at London's National Gallery, the quietude of the painting's location corresponds to its subject matter. In his picture of Dürer's Christ-like self-portrait at Munich's Alte Pinakothek, from 2000, Struth also includes himself in the picture. One German artist contemplates another, across five centuries and two mediums, only one does not show his face: Struth remains to the side of the frame, with his back to camera, absorbed in Dürer's face-on portrait.

The Ma Family, Shanghai (1996)

Such attachment and a relation to a longstanding pictorial tradition is integral to Struth's own ongoing project of mostly large-scale family portrait photographs, of friends and acquaintances, taken in natural light, with the sitters all facing the camera and usually set within their homes and among their possessions (1987–2007). The photographs' intensity is very much to do with the ritualized nature of their production: people are lifted out of their day to day for the formal ceremonial portrait. Picturing families of differing nationalities but from predominantly first-world economic positions – a family in Lima is the notable exception – resurrects the ideal of a benign and civil bourgeois portraiture. The scale and detail of the large-format works allows us to see each sitter's face, a scrutiny uniquely facilitated by the medium. Because we are so habituated to the smiling faces of commercial photography, they might strike us as initially inexpressive or deadpan. But the series is in fact replete with certain energies, to do with the various attachments and identifications that bind the differing individual family groups. They possess a latent expressivity. Struth's portraits also avoid the spectacle and exoticism of the portrayal of the abject other so common to photography.

Photographs of the jungles of Australia, Japan, China and Florida involve the closest engagement with Modernist form. The all-over layers of dense vegetation

creates a formlessness that parallels abstract painting; as a reference point for these pictures, Struth cites Brice Marden's 'Cold Mountain' calligraphic paintings (1989–91). The landscape pictorial tradition is disassembled, since these are no longer landscapes in the sense of landscape as a cultural convention of viewing nature. Nature is not framed as a tourist spectacle as it is in the picture of Mount Capitan. Before the dense screens of foliage in his 'Paradise' (1998–2007) series we have a loss of perspective and confront the fundamental alterity of nature. Their incommensurability bring them close to his pictures of technology.

Crosby Street, New York/Soho   (1978)

The 'Paradise' works resist connotation and put us up against a pure photographic seeing, just the dense accumulation of details of natural phenomena, out of time and bereft of any social or historical information. Without perspective and order they are the opposite of the modest-sized black and white, central perspective views of empty European and American city streets, Struth's earliest works (dating from 1978), that bring the exhibition to a close. While carrying affinities with the system-based and comparative photography of his Dusseldorf teachers, Bernd and Hilla Becher, they actually originated before he was taught by them and in the class of Gerhard Richter (the artist and his young family are among his group portrait photographs). Nevertheless there is a historical and specific photographic framework for this early work – caught up in an archival and taxonomic documentary style. Mostly empty or with the minimum distraction from people,

they bear certain affinities with Eugène Atget's early-20th-century Parisian street views. Struth's photographs carry information about the ideals and realities of urban space and city planning, bearing an accumulation of traces of history and social use.

Coenties Slip, New York/Wall Street   (1978)

In 'Audience' we have a surfeit of details, to do with the information we are given about people's clothing, age, gestures, expressions. But here everything is put under the spell of art and lifted from the quotidian and somewhat kitschy reality of the summer dress sense of the global art tourist. In many senses 'Audience' is a litmus test of art's continued contemporary impact, we look to these people for signs of art's continued power and value. Photography matters as contemporary art now, as Michael Fried has recently argued, but it is an art that has of course not yet been able to endure like that of Michelangelo, Dürer or Bellini. In his museum photographs, the detail, colour, lighting and composition of his wall-sized photography can pictorially augment the aesthetic qualities of the art it centres upon. Struth raises the status of his photography through such a relationship and maintains a distinction and separation from the tawdriness of spectacle culture. Such a distinction is integral to all his work, underpinned by faith in the value of the photograph as a lasting picture.

Mark Durden