“My great grandmother was the classic Native American. My mother’s grandfather actually crossed the Atlantic. He was a gold prospector and married a Native American and later brought her back with him to Germany. I was always told I had inherited my face from this ancestor of mine.”

Gisèle Freund

En face: Gisèle Freund was born in winter 1908 in Berlin and died in spring 2000 in Paris. Tom Fecht captured these unpublished portraits of the 92-year-old photographer during an intense three-hour photo session in the early afternoon of 18 March, 1999, in his studio in Paris-Montparnasse. They turned out to be the last. Only now has the artist finally edited and printed his final selection with a maturing distance of 15 years.

Tom Fecht lives and works in Germany and France. He studied cybernetics, engineering, and art history in New York and Berlin. He launched his artistic career in 1992 at Documenta IX. In the late 1990s, Fecht embraced photography as his preferred medium. Since then, he has produced an extensive body of portrait and landscape work. Since 2012 he prints only one unique copy of every new image. His work is featured in numerous museum exhibitions and collections, including the National Galerie and Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin; Hamburger Kunsthalle; Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn; Royal College of Art, London; Helmhaus, Zurich; and MuCEM, Marseille.

The catalogue with an introduction by Hans Belting and texts by Hans Irrek and Stéphan Levy-Kunetz will include a full index of works (2017). All photographs are limited to editions of 5 prints and 2 artist’s proofs. Please contact the gallery for further details and works currently available.
The photo fascinated me before I knew why. In an attempt to understand the impression the image made on me, I asked myself some questions. The eye often sees more than words can express. It is not about simply describing the image in front of me but rather dealing with the curiosity it aroused. I see a still life though I know the work is a portrait. It is a portrait because it depicts a person, a person, alone with itself. The woman withdraws within herself without noticing my gaze; it seems. If she is striking a pose, it is a repugnant pose. She is enveloped in a darkness, in which she will become invisible. To the viewer, the space in which she is left to herself becomes an image that replaces this space. This metamorphosis of space within an image recalls the enigmatic Early Netherlandish portraits where dark backgrounds become an abyss engulfing a body. The side light is also reminiscent of these paintings. It falls at a sharp angle from above, painfully attacking the face and hands, before being swallowed by darkness. Only the bare skin, with its folds and wrinkles, offers firm resistance to the flow of light. The woman appears captured against her will by this light that reveals her to our gaze.

The balanced relationship between the woman and the frame gives the impression of a painting. It is as if the woman has been placed within the picture. The light enters from the outside, like the viewer’s gaze. It first settles on the woman, floating over to her cane close by and eventually lands on an object in the depths of space—perhaps a glass of wine on a table. The woman braces herself with her arms, allowing her to pose as a still life. With her right hand she digs into the tired skin of her forehead for support. Her expression is one of rejection rather than sadness and thus she evades our sympathy. Strands of hair follow his own spontaneous impulses. No mise-en-scène, no stiff choreography conditions the work. Natural side light dominates these compositions while the sitters’ body language seems to follow his own spontaneous impulses. No mise-en-scène, no stiff choreography conditions the work. The side light is also reminiscent of these painters. It falls at a sharp angle from above, painfully attacking the face and hands, before being swallowed by darkness. Only the bare skin, with its folds and wrinkles, offers firm resistance to the flow of light. The woman appears captured against her will by this light that reveals her to our gaze.

The dark, almost black surroundings from which she emerges, generate a stage without boundaries. The works are framed behind non-reflective glass thus allowing the eye to penetrate the deep abyss of the photographic gelatin print. In the depths of this darkness nothing of its intense detailing is lost. Here the vibrating chromatism and the grainyness of the silver crystals seem to interact.

Invariably Julia Margaret Cameron’s portraits spring to mind. In her picture of Sir John Herschel (1867), the sitter’s countenance emerges from the darkness as a mere outline, almost minimally. Here, the camera also works with a small and often blurring field simply exploiting the little light which falls on his face and necktie while playing on the astronomer’s unruly hair. In her own words Julia Cameron captured the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man.

In Tom Fecht’s case, Gisèle Freund literally steps out of her own shadow while seeming to disappear into a universal darkness at the same time. For a moment we see faces just before vanishing into nothingness, and solid facial landscapes in which the essence of a lifetime is engraved in another. Freund’s physiognomy plays an important role here. The dark, almost black surroundings from which she emerges, generate a stage without boundaries. The works are framed behind non-reflective glass thus allowing the eye to penetrate the deep abyss of the photographic gelatin print. In the depths of this darkness nothing of its intense detailing is lost. Here the vibrating chromatism and the grainyness of the silver crystals seem to interact.

Gisèle Freund en face also captures the bottomless universe of a dark matter that essentially carries the sitter beyond what is seen within the frame. When Freund looks back at us through her black mask or her ancestor’s Native American face, it emphatically shows how, from the dignity of old age, not only one’s own disappearance ensues. Much more, it is the notion of Gisèle Freund’s imminent death itself that she silently allows to be captured. This unusual constellation requires confidence, some kind of discretion. She seems free, almost detached in front of the lens. Behind his cameras Fecht varies the small and often blurring field simply exploiting the little light which falls on his face and necktie while playing on the astronomer’s unruly hair. In her own words Julia Cameron captured the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man.

The sequence of portraits taken by Tom Fecht in early 1999 can be described as exceptional in every sense. These last pictures of Freund have an almost diagrammatic intensity. Through the choice of a true-to-life scale, Gisèle Freund confronts the viewer 1:1—the resultant intimacy of these pictures and their effect is truly indescribable. She seems free, almost detached of the lens. Behind his cameras Fecht varies the small and often blurring field of depth, recalling a prototypical element in Gisèle Freund’s own style to work. Natural side light dominates these compositions while the sitters’ body language seems to follow his own spontaneous impulses. No mise-en-scène, no stiff choreography conditions the image; we see merely a spontaneous reaction to a situation that is neither performed nor stage-set. A plethora of feelings, combined with a high concentration of emotional and expression, are revealed in just a few pictures. Within this sober interplay we are confronted with the existential solitude of a woman in old age.

These wonderful last pictures of Gisèle Freund can also be seen in the tradition of chiaroscuro painting based on strong contrasts of light and shadow. Bathed in warm shades of sepia tones these prints recall the chromatics of photography’s early pioneers.

Hans Belting: a German art historian and theorist of medieval and Renaissance art, as well as contemporary art and art theory. Most of his numerous books have been translated into English. He recently published Faces: Eine Geschichte des Gesichts (A History of the Face), Munich 2013. His text refers in particular to one of Fecht’s portraits entitled Camarade Obscuro I, the complete sequence includes seven photographs on 8x10 inch film. It has been captured with a prototypical camera obscura, a classic view camera still being constructed by Deardorff & Sons in Chicago in 1952.

Hans Irrek: a German essayist and curator. His publications on photography and art and design classics include essays on Andreas Gursky, Axel Matut, Mike Meidison, Isamu Noguchi, and Oscar Niemeyer. He is a member of the advisory board of the Photo Book Museum, Germany. The text has been extracted from his yet unpublished contribution for a catalog exploring Fecht’s portrait work along with the contemporary discourse on age and dignity in photography.