



Tom Fecht *Gisèle Freund en face (Reincarnation)*, Paris 1999
C-print 85 x 100 cm, UltraSec. Edition of 5 + 2 AP

“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 Tom Fecht captured these unpublished portraits of the 91-year-old photographer during an intense three-hour photo session in the early afternoon of 18 March, 1999, in his studio in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.

GISÈLE FREUND

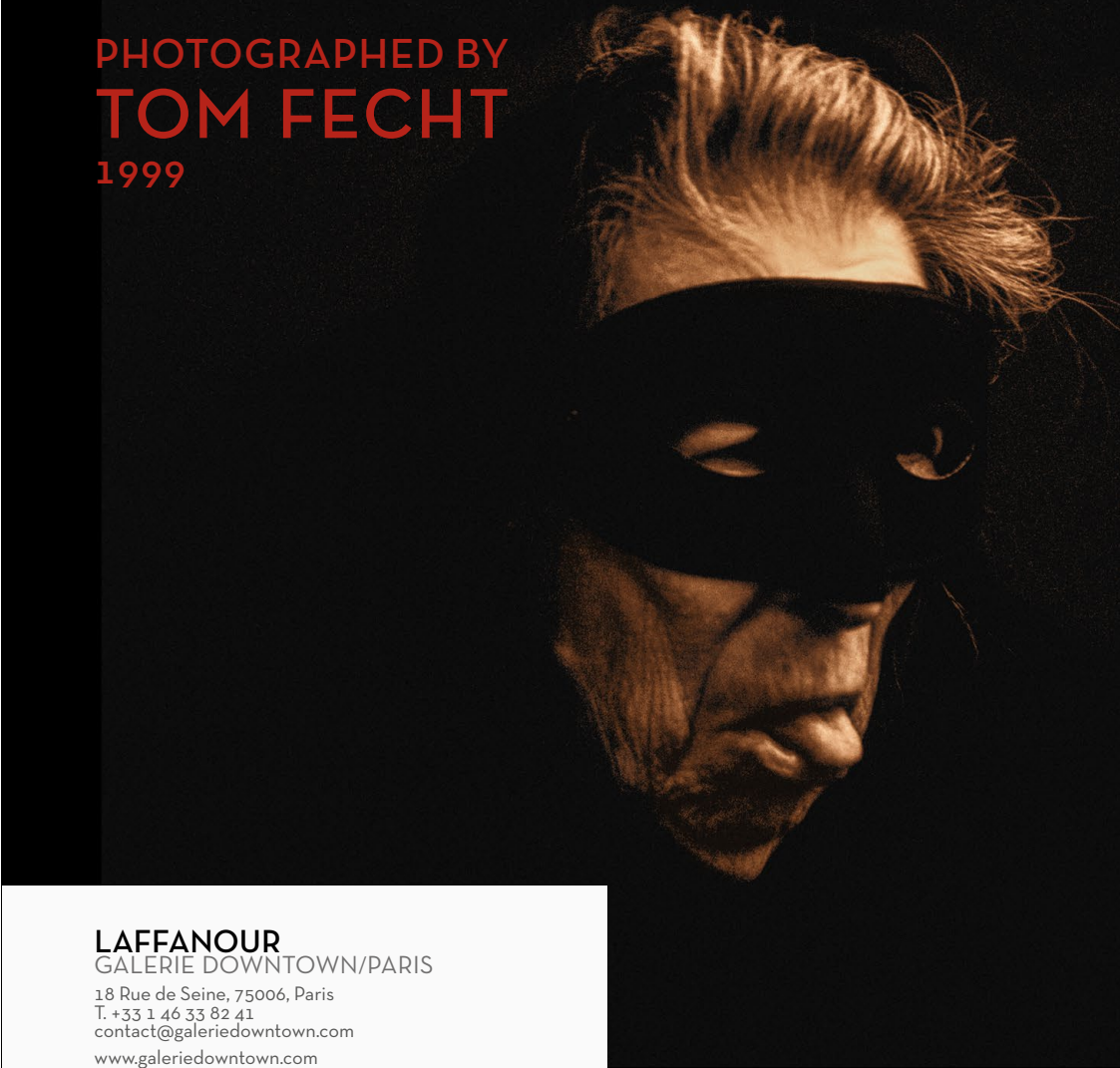
en face

1908 - 2000

PHOTOGRAPHED BY

TOM FECHT

1999



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Gisèle Freund *Selfportrait (with Rolleiflex)*, Mexico 1952

“I believe personality is mirrored in our face, even if we’d rather hide it.”



Tom Fecht *Portrait Gisèle Freund*, Paris 1999
Camerade Obscura I, C-print 147 x 120 cm, Ultrasec. Edition of 5 + 2 AP

“I’m a dreamer. That’s been my salvation all my life.”

Hans Belting: Gisèle Freund en face

On a photographic study by Tom Fecht

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 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 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, floats 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 poise 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 fall into the void. The gout-ridden hand has long been divested of its original function. The woman is not only stricken by age. It is the drastic withdrawal into old age which characterizes her posture. The body, unable to carry itself without a cane, becomes an impediment the woman no longer wants represented. Impassively, she abandons herself



Tom Fecht Camarade Obscura I - IV and VII, Paris 1999
Seven studies of Gisèle Freund en face, C-prints 147 x 120 cm each, UltraSec



Julia M. Cameron John Herschel, London 1867 © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY / RMN
Robert Mapplethorpe Gisèle Freund, Paris 1980 © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, NY. Used by permission
Gisèle Freund André Malraux, Paris 1935 © RYN Paris, Fonds MCC / IMEC

Hans Irrek: The Last Face

Gisèle Freund’s Adieu to the camera

Almost twenty years after Gisèle Freund’s death one may ask why there are so few pictures of the photographer herself, given the eventful biography of the *grande dame* of French photography. After all, following her spectacular exhibition at the Musée d’art moderne in Paris in 1968, the photographer and her world-famous portraits came to the attention of a wide international public. Iconic photographs such as her picture of the young André Malraux, or Virginia Woolf lost in thought, reflect Freund’s aspiration to capture the true character of the sitter just at the moment the camera is no longer consciously perceived. That unconscious instant, that unchecked moment on which she placed such value, is rare when it comes to portraits of herself. Just how difficult it was to capture the photographer is revealed in Robert Mapplethorpe’s somewhat conservative portrait, staged in 1980 in front of a bookshelf at Freund’s home in Paris.

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 traumatic 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 in front of the lens. Behind his cameras Fecht varies the small and often blurring depth of field, recalling a prototypical element in Gisèle Freund’s own style to work. Natural side light dominate 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 means of expression, are revealed in just a few pictures. Within this sober interplay we are confronted with the elementary 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 chromatism of photography’s early pioneers.

to a light that barely reaches the corporeality she has already renounced.

We need not know the woman’s identity. And yet once we do, our interest shifts towards a new concern. The work portrays Gisèle Freund in the isolation of old age. A male photographer immortalises a world-famous female photographer on film. The sudden intimacy of the image indicates they must have come to an agreement. The eyes that Gisèle Freund directed so inquisitively at the world, to wrest every secret from it, turn away from that very world. In this image she herself has become the motif, and counters our gaze with defiance. The chromaticism, bathing the image in warm shades, is reminiscent of Freund’s magnificent photographic work from 1939. A young woman at the time, she was commissioned by *Time and Life* to create portraits of the famous writers of her era, while exploring enthusiastically color photography that had just been discovered. But in her case, the world was lit up and the homes of her sitters too. Their faces entered into a dialog with the photographer’s gaze. In Tom Fecht’s case the staging is completely different. He shows forlornness in a galaxy in which the physiognomy of private space has already been effaced. Like a varnish, a brown veil enshrouds the body, garment and objects. It shifts the image into a worldly distance that separates it from us today.

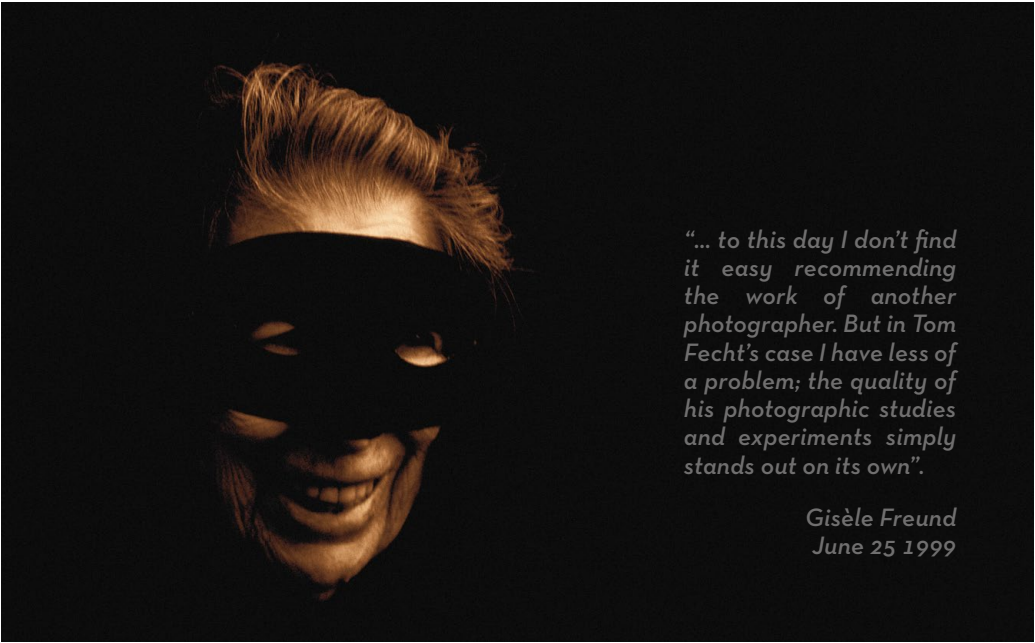
Hans Belting is a German art historian and theorist of medieval and Renaissance art, as well as contemporary art and image theory. Most of his numerous books have been translated into English. He recently published Faces - Eine Geschichte des Gesichts (A history of the Face), Munich 2013. His text refers in particular to one of Fecht’s portraits entitled Camarade Obscura 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 is a German essayist and curator. His publications on photography and art and design classics include essays on Andreas Gursky, Axel Hütte, Mikael Olsson, 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.

Inevitably 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 minimalistically. Here, the camera also works with a small depth of 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 Tom Fecht to be captured. This unusual constellation requires confidence, some kind of discreet complicity between the two photographers based on an unspoken agreement. Seen in this way, these pictures are also an undisguised and emotionally stirring farewell from the great love of her life: the camera.



Tom Fecht Gisèle Freund en face (Masquerade), Paris 1999 (Detail)