

TROY BRAUNTUCH: Life After Dark

ROSETTA BROOKS

For the German mystics of the 19th century, the meaning of the cosmos was concealed in microcosmic natural fragments of the universe, such as the shell, the fossil and the grain of sand. Here, in the minutiae of nature, lay the secret handwriting of God, revealed for those who cared to look. In the 1980s, the cultural fragments in the work of Troy Brauntuch take on a similar significance and mesmeric power. Seemingly incidental, fragmentary and partially obscured, Brauntuch's images - comprising an oeuvre that spans more than a decade - are like hieroglyphs of a mysterious universe of the mediated image. Often without some central object of attention, these images attract the gaze only to confront it with the illusion of emptiness.

The German Romantics' fascination with detail is recalled in a deceptively simple Brauntuch work (UNTITLED, 1982) in which two elliptical shapes float midway up a diptych of black canvases. As one looks, the blackness gradually yields to a delicate tracery of white pencil shading, and the oblique disc shapes are revealed to be the caps of a pair of



TROY BRAUNTUCH, UNTITLED / OHNE TITTEL, 1985,
PASTEL ON PAPER / PASTELL AUF PAPIER, 40 x 26" / 101,6 x 66 CM.

seated uniformed men apparently in rapt attention on something hidden in the darkness by which they are absorbed. Their closeness suggests a physical intimacy and yet they seem isolated, bound together only by their mutual confrontation of the deep blackness into which they are gazing.

The question that the picture poses is not what they are looking at but what we are looking at. The viewer is torn between an irresistible attraction to contemplate the sublimity that the image evokes, and a corresponding resistance provoked by a frustrating lack of information to cling to; we are presented with an image of division. In the embracing blackness that isolates the figures in their separate voids, our gaze comes to rest on the differences, the slightest details in the angle of the hats or the minute variation in the drapery.

Caspar David Friedrich's *TWO MEN BY THE SEA AT MOONRISE*, painted over 150 years ago, evokes a comparable combination of isolation and absorption in the void, with a similarly symmetrical composition around a pair of central figures. Standing on identical, lonely rocks, two men contemplate moonrise which, like a vast central eye, spreads out from the center of an almost symmetrical composition. Only the identical angle of their hats breaks up the mirror symmetry of the painting. But the sense of mystery attached to the sublime is not felt in the yawning space surrounding the figures; rather it seems tied to apparently incidental details of the picture.

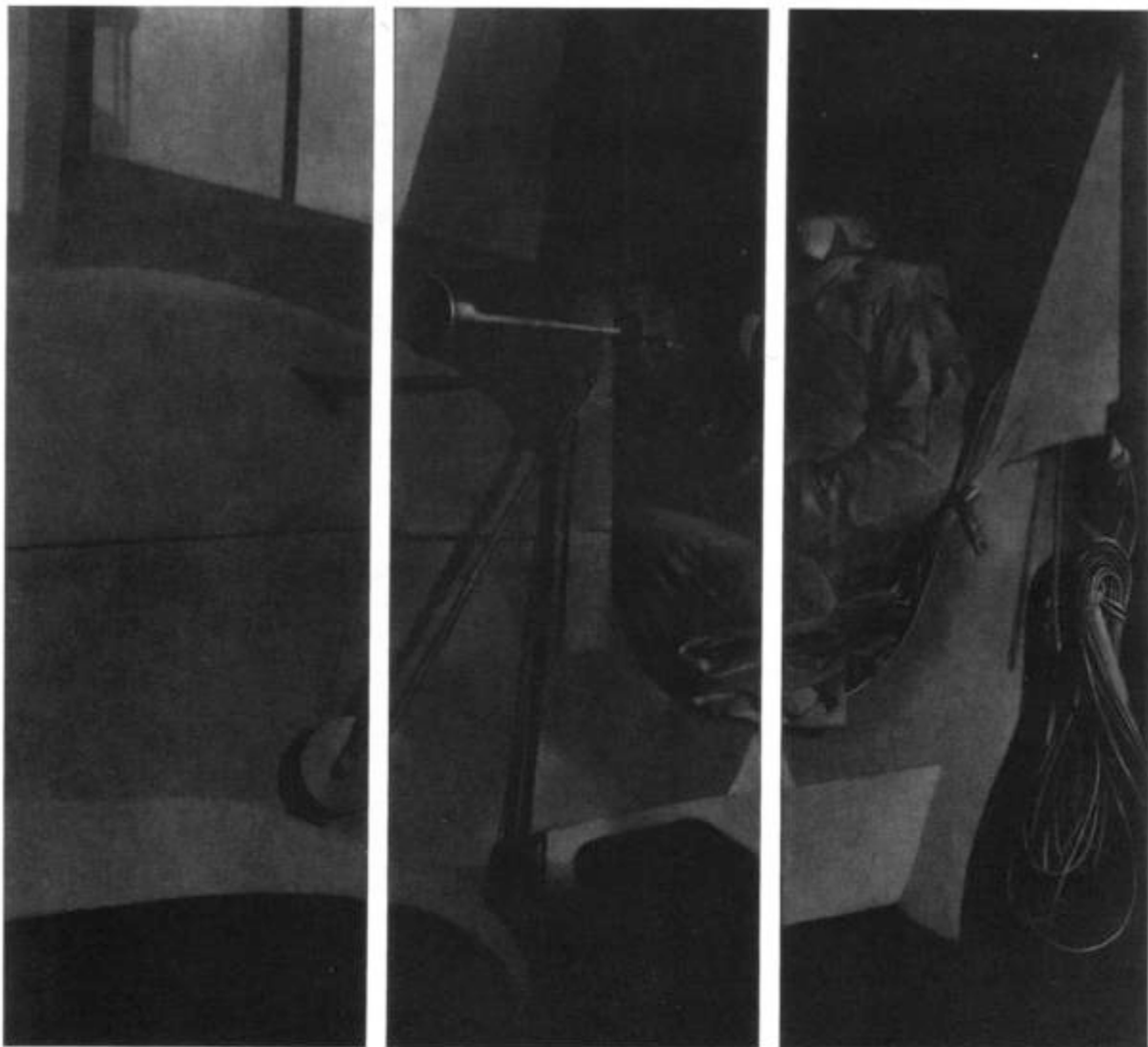
Brauntuch's art is compelling because, in his fascination for the incidental, the fragment of the image, he restores to painting the allegory of vision pioneered in the 19th century by the German Romantics. Isolated and suspended in time, these fragments become images again in the Romantic sense: embodiments of the imaginary in the real and of the mythic in the everyday. We peer into the depths created by the cultural fragments and reflect on the mysteries that underlie the universal presence of the image in a late twentieth century world. Brauntuch's shadow-world of images, literally cut off from their original source, suggests a world drained of life. Forgotten images, salvaged from the brink of oblivion, appear only to reveal their fragmentary disjunction. The living and the dead, the real and the staged, intermingle beneath the surface of these drawings.

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Blackness in Brauntuch's art is both an allure-ment into the depths as well as a barricade that ex-cludes vision and limits perception. His work estab-lishes an interplay between the forces of enticement and exclusion, creating an ambiguous space of fas-cinated entrapment for the gaze. The faintness of Brauntuch's white or gold pencil drawings puts them at the limits of the perceptible (and of the reproducible), allowing ambiguities of recognition to abound. The works suggest the sensation of try-ing to find one's way in the dark, of doubting one's vision, one's ability to discern the contours between the real and the imagined. Our experience of his art is tinged by the fear of an unexpected encounter in the black of the night. Just as the darkness height-ens our awareness, so too are our senses sharpened in the intimate depths of a Brauntuch painting. A shaft of light glancing across a marbled torso, the shadow of an old vase or a Doric column emerging from a murky background – glimpses like these suddenly become living presences, ghostly spec-ters. Inanimate, disembodied spirits disturb these stilled-life settings, dusty corners of accumulation and preservation.

Vaguely familiar segments of images from another era are decontextualized, broken up and transformed into floating apparitions. The fascina-tion of a Brauntuch work is its power of arresting life, of stilling the flow of pictorial history. His im-ages become partial erasures, forever hiding the in-formation that might tell us the whole story; they communicate only the mystery of their existence. The works are disquieting perceptual delays of the automated reflexes developed in the age of film, photography, and TV, delays through which spatial perception unfolds and coheres. Ultimately, it is the limits of illusionism, the apparent impenetrability of the image that lures us back into the depths.

At times the illusion of concrete, visual informa-tion ensnares the viewer, lulling us into a false sense of confidence. In several works we catch glimpses of uniformed, military men, ominous figures of con-trol, partially visible through the shadowed gray-ness. But finally the faint white pencil markings on the black cotton ground create only ghost-like presences which dissolve back into the shadows.



TROY BRAUNTUCH, *UNTITLED / OHNE TITEL*, 1983.

PENCIL ON COTTON / FARBSTIFT AUF BAUMWOLLE, 98 x 111" / 249 x 282 CM.

tion of surveillance or voyeurism pervades the scene. Echos of a sinister ambiance resonate in *UNTITLED* (1983), where a group of uniformed men, lurking in the background, oversee a naked man on his hands and knees scrubbing the floor with soap. Is this a prison bathhouse of enforced cleanliness or a primordial cavern of sensual excess?

In the exotic underworlds of Brauntuch's newer work there is always an element that disrupts the

paradisaal aura. There is a perpetual conflict within the image between visibility and obscurity, between the hidden and the explicit and between the open and closed. We remain locked in an image culture which itself is caught between creating images of prison and paradise. Brauntuch's worlds of images are sealed off, exclusive and lost, the better to be seen in the light of their own unreality, reflected by the dark aura of fascination.