Brandt
BILL BRANDT
PERSPECTIVE OF NUDES
(revisited)
Bill Brandt emerged as one of Britain’s foremost photographers during his lifetime. German by birth, he settled in London in 1934 and made Britain and the British his major photographic subjects. His first photo-book, *The English at Home* (1936) presented a chronicle of British life, contrasting the customs and trades of the rich and the poor. The introduction to the book describes Brandt “not only as an artist but an anthropologist,” an observer whose “detached curiosity” reflected the nation back to itself in all its shocking detail – “people as they are, in their real and unescapable surroundings.” The book points to many of the visual themes that preoccupied Brandt in the first half of his career – people going about their daily business, city life by day and night, work, leisure, industry.

In the 1940s Brandt worked under the auspices of the British government, making pictures for illustrated magazines such as *Lilliput* and *Picture Post* that captured daily life under the duress of war. His haunting photographs of the London Underground transformed into makeshift shelters for ordinary Londoners during the Blitz are among his most iconic of the period. Those picked out for publication and exhibition at the time often show peaceful scenes of sleepers, tinged by surreal touches – a doll in a make-shift cot in the Liverpool Street tube tunnel, a sleeper in

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a stone coffin in Spitalfields Crypt. Brandt’s images circulated widely during the war, deployed by a government in need of fitting visual messages to mediate the social experience of the war and communicate with the world about the British cause.

**Landscape and the body**

In the mid 1940s and immediate postwar era, Brandt moved away from the socio-political images of depression-era and wartime Britain and became focused on a more subjective engagement with the landscape and the body. We might take his famous picture of *Stonehenge Under Snow* as marking a point of departure in his photojournalistic career. The photograph was commissioned for the cover of *Picture Post* in April 1947 to mark the deadly winter crisis and fuel shortage of that year. While capturing a newsworthy moment in time, the image also represents a timeless view of a mythic ancient symbol of the nation. Its artful and elegiac composition points to Brandt’s interest in strong contrast, silhouette, and the use of large expanses of the picture space where visual detail is reduced to almost nothing. These kinds of aesthetic choices increasingly came to the fore first with landscapes, then with the nude, where space and body become shapes in the interplay of shadow and light.

The landscape became a major project for Brandt in the postwar years, culminating in 1951 in his book *Literary Britain*, a visual

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journey that situated Britain’s great poetic and literary heritage in the land. The publication of the book coincided with the Festival of Britain, a time in the postwar era when the nation focused on its own history, culture, and geology.

Brandt was interested in landscape for its own sake, and as a setting for sculptural compositions. Geological artefacts on the beach, ancient shapes and outcroppings mark many of his landscape photographs and lead also to the nudes photographed on the beaches of East Sussex and Normandy. The beach provided Brandt with an evocative setting for blending body and nature. A pair of knees are arranged like boulders stacked on top of each other. The fingers of a hand blend into a bed of pebbles; a torso and elbow echo the shapes of the cliffs.

The publication of Perspectives of Nudes in 1961—a collection of photographs produced in the 1940s and 1950s—marks the point at which Brandt’s stature as an art world figure came onto assured footing. The publication not only attracted press attention—including a multi-page feature in Life that juxtaposed his nudes with photographs of a carved stone figure by Aristide Maillol—but also an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, hastily organized by Edward Steichen to coincide with the book. Installation images show a dramatic display of large format prints, unframed and unglazed, hung on a dark painted wall. Like the double page juxtapositions in the book, the curatorial arrangement creates a surreal sequence of body fragments that appear almost abstract.

**Printing for exhibition**

In 1969, Brandt had a full-scale retrospective at MoMA, curated by John Szarkowski. A few years later, he was offered commercial representation by Marlborough Gallery. Brandt began to print to meet these new outlets for his work—large scale prints for exhibitions, matted and signed prints for sale. He did not abandon the long-standing interests of his early career—illustrated magazines and books remained his primary expressive channels. Between 1936 and the year of his death, Brandt published at least one photo-book per decade, as well as contributing dozens of photo-essays and hundreds of individual photographs to the illustrated press.

In the later decades of his career, the relationship with the Marlborough Gallery was an increasing focus. Brandt was Marlborough’s first photographer—a significant detail that reflects the stature of the artist by the mid 1970s. Marlborough showcased the breadth of Brandt’s work in major solo exhibitions at the gallery’s New York and London locations in 1976. The exhibitions presented Brandt with the opportunity to reimagine decades of work through the creation of new prints. Notably, the prints he made for this purpose were “finished works”, conceived

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8. The Marlborough exhibitions ran from March 27 to April 17, 1976 in New York, and November through December 1976 in London.
and produced specifically for exhibition as opposed to prints made for pre-press – a significant departure from the dominant strain of Brandt’s print output prior to that moment. In general, these later prints are larger in scale, more matte, and with a fine-grained texture, features that were purposefully geared for display. Invariably signed and usually mounted, these “Marlborough” prints were acquired by influential collectors and museums, notably the Victoria and Albert Museum. In other words, Brandt’s prints of the 1970s were the vehicle for his newfound artworld success.

The Marlborough prints

Untouched for over forty years, Marlborough’s trove of prints made by Brandt in the 1970s presents a new opportunity to understand and evaluate the entirety of the artist’s career. The selection of thirty-five nudes, included here and presented by the gallery in New York from March 12 to May 8, 2021, is an apt starting point. From the 1940’s onwards, the nude was a fundamental and enduring scaffold for Brandt’s expression. Unlike his other preoccupations, including landscape, photojournalism, and portraits, the nude for Brandt was less an avenue for commercial success and more a potent platform for creativity, experimentation, and discovery. With its wide angle lens and broad depth of field, Brandt’s “police camera” distorted limbs and (mostly) interior perspectives. These images, claustrophobic, dreamy, dark, sexual, are among Brandt’s most identifiably surreal. By the late fifties and through the 1960s, Brandt often moved the figure outdoors, frequently attracted to the strongly directed light and low, long, horizons of the seaside. Body parts, fingers, knees, breasts, elbows, appear close-up, with anatomical specificity distilled down through deliberate overexposure. The most sculptural of Brandt’s work, nudes from this period present a monumentality through the generalization of form. Later work, through the 1970s often combines overtly surrealist influenced sexuality with a reductive approach to form.

Understanding Brandt as an artist requires an understanding of the physical print. Throughout his life, Brandt printed for specific occasions: for magazines, for his own books, and later for the market and exhibitions. For Brandt, photography was a cumulative project. Alongside making new pictures, he also referred continually back to past work. As evidenced by his books, exhibitions, and the corpus of works made for Marlborough, the early pictures never went away. He reprinted his 1930s pictures of the North and his 1940s pictures of the war alongside and in dialogue with his nudes, for his photo-books and in groups of prints produced for sale or for exhibition. He made no distinction between these bodies of work – the old and new folded together stylistically and aesthetically along the arc of his changing printing styles. Regardless of when a photograph was originally taken, at any given time it would be treated like new work. Produced with attentiveness and care, the Marlborough prints are no exception.

Close inspection of many of these works show close-in surface manipulations, fully consistent with Brandt’s decades-long preoccupation with retouching and etching to refine contours and key detail.

The late prints that Brandt produced for exhibition represent crucial historical markers that track Brandt’s ascent in the art world and demonstrate the role he played in the history of photography in Britain. They express his changing visual language and reconcile Brandt’s aesthetic with the new demands and expectations placed on photography as it was drawn into an art world context.

**Acknowledgement**

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1.

*Hampstead, 1945*
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/4 x 11 1/2 in. (33.7 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/4 x 11 1/2 in. (33.7 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
2.

Micheldever, Hampshire, November 1948
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 3/8 in. (34.0 x 28.9 cm)
Sheet: 13 3/8 x 11 3/8 in. (34.0 x 28.9 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
3.

The Haunted Bathroom, Campden Hill, London, 1948
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/4 x 11 3/8 in. (33.7 x 28.9 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/4 x 11 3/8 in. (33.7 x 28.9 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
4.

*Campden Hill, London, 1949*

Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto
Campden Hill, London, April 1949
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
St. Cyprien, France, October 1951
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/8 x 11 5/8 in. (33.3 x 29.5 cm)
Sheet: 15 1/2 x 12 in. (39.4 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto, verso
7.

*Hampstead, London, 1952*

Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 1/2 in. (34.0 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto
8.

*London*, March 1952
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
Belgravia, London, February 1953
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
10.

_Campden Hill, August 1953_
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 1/2 in. (34.0 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 3/8 x 11 1/2 in. (34.0 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
11.

*East Sussex Coast*, April 1953
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
12.

_Nude_, 1954
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/4 x 11 1/4 in. (33.7 x 28.6 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/4 x 11 1/4 in. (33.7 x 28.6 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
London, 1954
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
14.

*St. John’s Wood, London, December 1955*

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
15.

*London, 1956*

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
16.

*London (Multiple Exposure)*, 1956
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto
17.

London, April 1956
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto, verso
London, July 1956
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 1/2 in. (34.0 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 3/8 x 11 1/2 in. (34.0 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
19.

*East Sussex Coast, 1957*

Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 3/8 in. (34.0 x 28.9 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto
20.

*London, 1957*

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
21.

_Taxo d'Aval, France, 1957_

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/4 x 11 1/4 in. (33.7 x 28.6 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/4 x 11 1/4 in. (33.7 x 28.6 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
22.

Vasterival Beach, Normandy, May 1957
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 5/8 x 11 5/8 in. (34.6 x 29.5 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto
Belgravia, London, February 1958
Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto
London, 1958
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
London, March 1958
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
26.

*Baie des Anges, France*, 1959
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
27.

*Baie des Anges, France, 1959*

Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 5/8 x 11 3/4 in. (34.6 x 29.8 cm)
Sheet: 15 1/2 x 12 in. (30.4 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto, verso
28.

_Baie des Anges, France, 1959_

Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 5/8 in. (34.3 x 29.5 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto, verso
29.

_Baie des Anges, France_, October 1959

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 3/4 x 11 3/4 in. (34.9 x 29.8 cm)
Sheet: 13 3/4 x 11 3/4 in. (34.9 x 29.8 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
30.

*East Sussex Coast*, 1959
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
31.

*East Sussex Coast, 1960*

Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
East Sussex Coast, 1960
Gelatin silver print mounted on museum board

Image: 13 3/8 x 11 1/4 in. (34.0 x 28.6 cm)
Sheet: 13 3/8 x 11 1/4 in. (34.0 x 28.6 cm)
Mount: 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm)

Signed lower right recto
33.

*East Sussex Coast, July 1977*

Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto
34.

_East Sussex Coast, 1979_

Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (34.3 x 29.2 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto
35.

_Hampstead, London, 26 February 1979_

Gelatin silver print

Image: 13 1/8 x 11 1/8 in. (33.3 x 28.3 cm)
Sheet: 16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)

Signed lower right recto
BILL BRANDT
Public Collections

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Tate Gallery, London, England
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England
Yale Center for British Art, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
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