

Martin Dammann is not a conceptual artist. Nevertheless, his artistic strategies are strongly influenced by conceptual considerations. Dammann is primarily concerned with exploring a field of meanings and contents, working out in different genres and media and investigating how content and meaning can attach to objects and images.

For years, the lynchpin of his artistic activity has been the "Archive of Modern Conflict" in London, for which he buys private war photographs from estates, private individuals and photo and military collectors worldwide.

Among his best-known works are the large-format, colour-intensive watercolours that transfer selected motifs from the archive's holdings to image. Dammann makes his selection intuitively, always in search of the Benjaminian spark of reality.

In this endeavour, the process of transformation is the central moment. A moment that cannot be expressed or described in language, but only felt, seen, comes to light through the concentration of the depicted scene and through the re-accentuation of the representation itself in terms of colour and material.

In the last decade Dammann's own photo collection has become more and more central to his practice. Various photo series have been chosen by the artist just to be enlarged and gathered. Others have been presented as large photo installations. His series entitled "Soldier Studies" which depicts cross-dressing in the Wehrmacht, became widely known through international exhibitions as well as their publication by Hatje Cantz in 2018.

New Viewings is premiering "Rheinlandbesetzung"/ The Occupation of the Rhineland.

Barbara Thumm



Rheinland
2021
Installation view
MDa-21-007

About a photo convolute depicting French colonial soldiers during the „Occupation of the Rhineland“, 1918 to 1930.

by Martin Dammann, Berlin, October 2021

Sometime ago an album was offered to me with photos of French colonial soldiers during the occupation of the Rhineland. These photos were taken by at least 3 different photo studios in Mainz (French: „Mayence“). They must have been collected in the 1920ies by a German who wrote a book (which is part of the convolute; „Kampf um den Rhein - 12 Jahre Not und Gefahr“ Mainz, 1930, published by Druck und Verlag der Mainzer Verlagsanstalt und Druckerei A. -G.). The name of the author is unclear yet some of the photos are used in the book. Though working with war photography for more than 20 years I have never seen such material before.

1918, in the wake of World War One and the treaty of Versailles French, American, Belgian and British forces occupied large parts of German territory between the French and Belgian frontier and the Rhine. Born out of a conflict - World War One - it created more conflict as well as contradicting interpretations. The Allied justification for the „Rheinlandbesetzung“ was to ensure the punctual payments of the huge reparation payments which the treaty of Versailles imposed on Germany. Yet there was an ongoing suspicion by many Germans that France and to some degree also Belgium would try to transform the occupied territories into independent political unities under the auspices of France, in order to prevent Germany from ever again becoming a threat.

In that heated atmosphere one aspect of the occupation provided a focal point for the German conservative and nationalistic press: The deployment of French colonial troops in the occupied territories. It was felt as a deliberate humiliation by many Germans and was exploited widely by German conservative media. Its emotionalized heatwaves are comparable to the ones caused by the current disputes about migration, a multicultural society, colonialism and xenophobia.



Rheinland
2021
Installation view
MDa-21-007

But there is also a distinct difference. These men were deployed by a Colonizing European country and therefore they can be seen as the victims of an imbalance of powers. Yet at the same time they were occupying forces in another European (and formerly colonializing) country. That is another imbalance of power, this time with the Colonial soldiers being on the side of might.

These photos, especially the studio portraits allow an insight into who these soldiers from Senegal, Morocco, Algeria and Indochina were. And how they wanted to be seen.

The album consists of 225 photos of various sizes and papers. Out of these 68 photos are studio portraits of Colonial soldiers, evidently made for their personal use. 156 others are professional photos of French and French colonial troops entering Mainz in 1918, during maneuvers and defilees and during the retreat in 1930. Some further photos are of a more general character, depicting Mainz and events during the time of the occupation. Many photos have studio prints or stamps.



Rheinland
2021
Installation view
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Rheinland
2021
Installation view
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Rheinland 1
2021
Laminated photo print in aluminium frame
170 x 115 cm
Edition 3 + 2 APs
MDa-21-008



Rheinland 2
2021
Laminated photo print in aluminium frame
170 x 115 cm
Edition 3 + 2 APs
MDa-21-009



Rheinland 3
2021
Laminated photo print in aluminium frame
170 x 115 cm
Edition 3 + 2 APs
MDa-21-010



Rheinland 4
2021
Laminated photo print in aluminium frame
170 x 115 cm
Edition 3 + 2 APs
MDa-21-011