

ANDREAS GURSKY'S GLOBAL TOPOGRAPHIES IN GSTAAD

Over the past thirty years, Andreas Gursky has done more than any other contemporary artist to expand the medium's vocabulary, demonstrating that a photographer can make or construct—rather than simply take—photographs about modern life at the scale of epic painting. This winter, at the Gstaad Saanen airport, Gagosian will present a group of Gursky's photographs from the 1990s through today.

You never notice arbitrary details in my work. On a formal level, countless interrelated micro- and macrostructures are woven together, determined by an overall organizational principle.
—Andreas Gursky

Gursky's photographs capture built and natural environments on a grand scale, individual and granular elements whirling into totalities. Though similar in their sweep and scope to early nineteenth-century landscape paintings, his images retain the hard precision of the photographic medium. Gursky constructs startling tableaux out of his methodical observations: detailed photographs of cities, crowds, landscapes, and products are hyper-focused so as to privilege neither foreground nor background. His monumental pictures of our world—magnificently orchestrated, gorgeous in their supersaturated colours—are so improbably detailed that familiar subjects often become unrecognizable.

Born in Leipzig, Germany, Gursky studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf under Bernd and Hilla Becher, the German artist duo known for their serial photography of industrial structures. The Bechers used a standardized, documentary style to examine the commonality and variation within systems. Gursky mastered this principle, and began to extend the possibilities of the photographic document through shifts in perspective and, as technology became more advanced, digital manipulation.

In 1987, after graduating from the Kunstakademie, Gursky held an exhibition in an airport—an environment that, in its systematized modernity,



Andreas Gursky, *Qatar*, 2012, inkjet print, framed: 98 × 132 7/8 × 2 1/2 inches (249 × 337.3 × 6.4 cm)
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Andreas Gursky, *Tokyo*, 2007, inkjet print, framed: 93 1/8 × 163 1/4 × 2 1/2 inches (236.6 × 414.7 × 6.4 cm)
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was a symbiotic setting for Gursky works, as it is today. The works on view at the Gstaad Saanen airport illustrate Gursky's diverse approaches to photography, composition, and contemporary life.

The monumental photograph *Qatar* (2012) documents the sealed, windowless interior of a tank used to transport liquid gas on a ship in the Persian Gulf. Plated entirely in gold-hued metal, the massive container is almost completely empty, having been photographed while undergoing a routine cleaning. This atypical view shifts attention from the object's function as a practical tool to its visual splendor, symbolic of the meteoric economic growth of the Arab state. The print's scale, nearly two and a half by three and a half metres, engulfs the viewer's immediate vision, yet the uniformity of the composition is broken by the inclusion of a small semitransparent white plastic tent under which the silhouette of a single person is visible. Characteristic of Gursky's work, human presence is not depicted to be contemplated as subject; rather, humans are dwarfed

by nature, industry, finance, and the consumer society. Here, Gursky's presentation of the anonymous worker performing labor for the gleaming equipment suggests a recalibration of the hierarchies of value between human and machine.

Ibiza (2016) shows what appears to be the intersection of two rural roads. As power lines overlap with a streetlamp, and a bunch of colorful balloons dangles in front of a utility box, the result is almost abstract—a reminder of the forms, routes, and objects we live with yet don't always notice. Gursky takes this abstraction further in *Utah* (2017), which depicts a stretch of highway and a blur of houses—a liminal space, part of the connective tissue of American society. Based on a photograph that Gursky took on his phone from the window of a moving car, the spontaneity of the image is dramatized by abstracted lines of movement over the Utah mountains.

Shot from a Shinkansen high-speed train, *Tokyo* (2017) captures the city's miniature architecture, the density

and irregularity of its buildings. The image fuses the ceaseless movement of data, people, and mass culture with the stillness of metaphysical reflection. Its heightened perspective yields a dizzying configuration of pictorial space, dissolving any suggestion of the individual humans who inhabit the cityscape into the cool mathematics of coordinated activity. There is no human narrative, only a shifting pattern. Gursky's large-scale photographs evoke the complexity of global connectedness: enormous amounts of information flow in and out of his images like data streams, the chaos of contemporary life competing with the classical need for order. From environmental threats to the earth's rapidly swelling population and infrastructure, Gursky strives to portray the extremes of the present moment.

From February 1 through March 17, 2019, a curated group of photographs by Andreas Gursky will be exhibited at the Gstaad Saanen airport, presented by Gagosian.