



Journey 11

## FEATURE

All images © Katja Liebmann  
 Courtesy Hackelbury  
 Fine Art London

REMEMBRANCE  
OF THINGS PAST

Drawing on a mix of low-tech and inventiveness, with a background in painting, **Katja Liebmann** makes images that go beyond mere photography. Here she talks with Tracy Calder about her work and how time creates change.

In the 1990s Katja Liebmann would cause quite a stir when she travelled on public transport. 'I turned a large cardboard box into a pinhole camera and made long exposures, disturbing commuters on crowded buses to Piccadilly Circus,' she recalls. 'I did this several times a day for weeks!' At the time Katja was studying for an MA in printmaking at the RCA (Royal College of Art), having moved to the UK from Germany. Born in 1965 in Halle an der Saale, she grew up in Berlin and studied art both in the capital and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Nuremberg. >



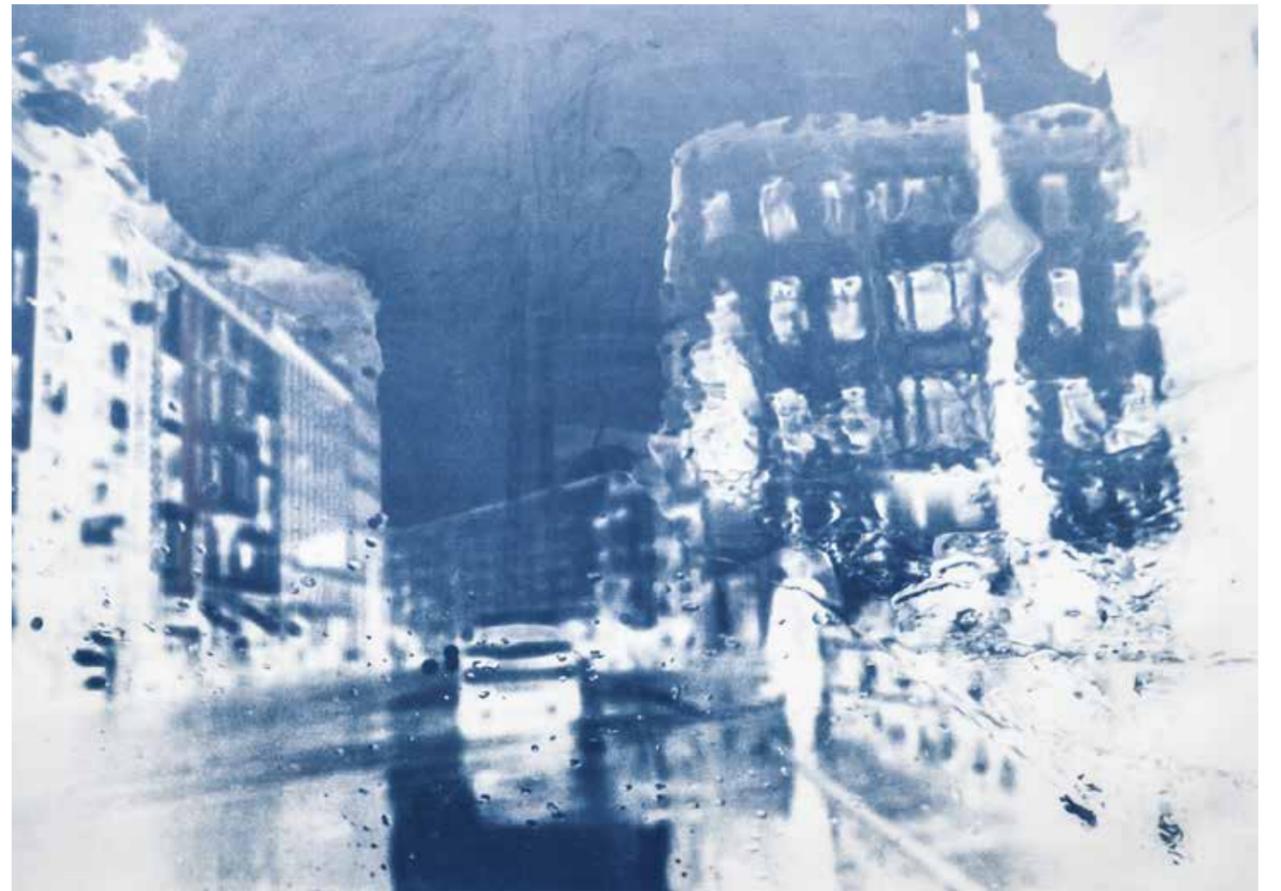
Journey 9



Berlin Ride V



Winter Journey II



Berlin Ride I



London 1

‘This background in painting and printmaking led to an interest in photography as a visual medium. ‘I turned to photography as a way of realising ideas that were impossible to paint or draw,’ she explains. ‘Photography is great for documenting the process of change over a long period of time – how a face changes when it’s pictured every single day, for example.’ These and other early experiments proved rewarding, but from the outset she adopted an unusually fluid approach to the medium. ‘To me, photography is a means of support – no more, no less,’ she

discloses. ‘I use whatever visual medium seems most appropriate to the idea or artistic concept.’ Ever playful, Katja’s first ‘conscious’ photograph was taken through the keyhole of her studio in Berlin, having blocked out all the light from the room and utilised the keyhole as a shutter. ‘I just wanted to discover the medium for myself, to reconstruct it in my own way,’ she reveals.

This ability to fuse multiple mediums is something that Katja has perfected over the years, but looking at her oeuvre it’s clear that painting has

always been a catalyst for her creativity. ‘I use a painterly approach because it feels less technical and more human,’ she suggests. ‘To my mind, in painting lies a more poetic approach to the world.’ With a passion for painting – and for classic artists such as Rembrandt, Turner and Caspar David Friedrich – Katja began exploring early photographic processes, and soon found parallels between the disciplines. ‘The cyanotype process has a beautiful painterly aspect to it,’ she remarks. ‘Coating sheets of handmade paper using a big Japanese brush, printing the image in sunlight, and then



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rinsing it with water – to me there’s much more to it than just technique.’

During her time at the RCA Katja read numerous books on early photographic processes, including Vandyke brown printing, cyanotypes, palladium and salt printing. Looking back, you can see how her approach as an artist has been shaped by these influences. ‘First I taught myself painting, then printmaking, and then photography,’ she explains. Working in a variety of mediums, Katja is quick to point out that she has no preference. ‘I don’t have a favourite technique,’ she says, ‘if I did it

would restrict my artistic approach.’ As a result, she switches between drawing, etching, photography (often using handmade cameras), and other mediums, depending on the idea and desired result.

Time, transience, movement and memory are all common themes in Katja’s work. Her series *Gotham City*, for example, features the artist wearing a Batman mask as she roams the streets of New York City. For this project she used a plastic toy camera, shooting multiple-exposures, so the distinction between city and

superhero becomes blurred. ‘The technique calls to mind questions of multiple self-hood, while the mask references the anonymity granted by an urban environment,’ she explains. (*Gotham City* was acquired by the Saatchi Collection in 1998 – the same year that Katja was nominated for the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize.) The series *Winter Journey* (2010) is equally intriguing, comprising seven cyanotypes made on etching paper, recording a journey through a winter landscape of skeletal trees, houses and empty fields. The compositions are random, and yet there is a feeling the >



Brussels 3 (Kiosk)

◀ decision of when to release the shutter has been made by the heart rather than the eye. There is a sense of impermanence about the work, as though just seconds later everything changed: the light, the landscape, and perhaps even the mood of the artist.

Photography is often seen as a way of freezing time or preserving significant moments, but Katja's work embraces impermanence, and the idea that life is in a state of constant flux. 'My work can be summed up as: developing photos,

developing time, developing time like a picture,' she explains. Her use of home-made pinhole cameras and toy cameras means that she cannot entirely predict the results either – there is always an element of chance involved. 'Using self-made or low-tech plastic cameras I have to be patient and accept every image as a gift,' she reveals. 'You need to be stubborn to get satisfying pictures. But images made with these tools have a different charisma to traditional photographs: they are modest, yet incredibly intense. This kind

of image-making has more to do with my perception of reality. It's a more painterly approach to photography.' Katja's low-tech images are like memories translated into physical, tangible form. 'Memories are low tech and malleable: raw material and recollection at the same time,' she adds.

For her recent show at HackelBury Fine Art in London, Katja revisited some of her early work, leading to fresh insights. Sifting through her



Gotham City 1002

archive (particularly the negatives) she found that while the material had not changed, she had. 'I felt a different kind of appreciation towards the work,' she reveals. 'I appreciated the special character of the images and the way that the processes I chose helped to communicate complex concepts relating to time, space and movement, simply.' She also began to view the archive as a well of raw material that could be mined for future projects. 'It is subject to a different view than it was in

the nineties,' she reveals. While the past seemed soft, toned and dream-like to the artist, the present feels crisper and more merciless. 'I realised I can't do these soft, toned pictures any more. I have to find ways to process the archive material as a person of today,' she explains.

By paring things back and utilising the modest simplicity of early analogue processes, Katja has produced work with a contemporary twist. In a world where speed is often prioritised over quality,

and photographs threaten to replace our memories entirely, her work is a reminder that time is passing, so what we do with it matters. 'When you try to visualise time, you become more modest and grateful,' she concludes. 'The work changes you – I have learned so much about myself.'

**To see more of Katja's work visit [katjaliebmann.de](http://katjaliebmann.de), follow her on Instagram @katja.liebmann, or visit the next show at Galerie Dittmar in Berlin from 29 November 2019 to 31 January 2020.**