

Helmar Lerski (1871–1956) Transformations Through Light

Through June 25, 2010



Aus dem Werk ["From the Factory"]
from *Verwandlungen des Lichts*
["Transformations Through Light"], No. 540
1936
Vintage gelatin silver print
11 3/8 x 9 inches (28.9 x 22.9 cm)



Untitled
from *Verwandlungen des Lichts*
["Transformations of Light"], No. 567
1937
Vintage gelatin silver print
11 1/2 x 9 1/8 inches (29.2 x 23 cm)

Ubu Gallery is pleased to announce *Transformations Through Light*, an exhibition of eighty-eight photographs by Helmar Lerski (1871–1956).

Spanning more than thirty years of his photographic career, the exhibition presents the controlled luminosity for which the artist is renowned. Portraits from five different series, most notably *Verwandlungen des Lichts* ["Transformations Through Light"], demonstrate the way in which Lerski constructively manipulated both natural and artificial light, effectively representing the common as dignified. This body of work upholds the artist's declaration that "in every human being there is everything; the question is only what the light falls on."

Portraits of laborers, street vendors and beggars render a profound sense of greatness, so much so that the viewer cannot easily place the sitter within their "proper" class. Lerski's *Köpfe des Alltags* ["Everyday Faces"] series categorizes people simply as "The Housekeeper" or "American Engineer." Their faces angle upwards in exuberance and through the effects of meticulously focused light, Lerski sculpts his subjects physically, transforming what one would expect to be rough, worn faces into smooth, high-contrast contours.

Lerski's subjects, whether faces or hands, occupy the majority of the composition, often presented with such prestige and dominion that their frame cannot contain them. Consequently, this reinforces the importance of these "everyday" subjects. Additionally, Lerski plays with the nature of the body itself, constructing landscapes of flesh. In the *Arabische Köpfe* ["Arabic Faces"] series, brows are deepened, pores are magnified and crevasses under the eyes are all distorted with a deep chiaroscuro.

Lerski was involved concurrently in the two major, emergent mediums of his time: film and photography. Born in Alsace in the then German city of Strausburg, he became involved in the theater and, in 1896, moved to New York to pursue a career in acting, eventually working at the Irving Place Theater and later the German Pabst Theater. It was in this setting that Lerski first became aware of the unique visual effects achievable with stage lighting. Drawing from his acting experience, he began investigating photography as an artistic medium after meeting his wife, also a photographer. While photographing their colleagues, Lerski experimented with a series of portraits that severely manipulated the lighting effects. The resulting images formed a base for his later success in both commercial and art photography.

His photographs, featured in popular magazines of the period, including *Vogue* and *Die Weite Welt* ["The Wide World"], were also exhibited in the 1929 Stuttgart exhibition, *Film und Foto*, and later Julien Levy's 1932 New York exhibition, *Modern European Photography*.

Gallery hours are 11:00 AM–6:00 PM, Tuesday through Saturday. Ubu Gallery is located at 416 East 59th Street between First Avenue and Sutton Place. For further information or for visuals, please contact Caitlin Suarez or Viera Karpiakova at (212) 753 4444 or info@ubugallery.com.

Please visit our partner, Galerie Berinson, in Berlin at www.berinson.de