

Jessica Backhaus

Cut Outs

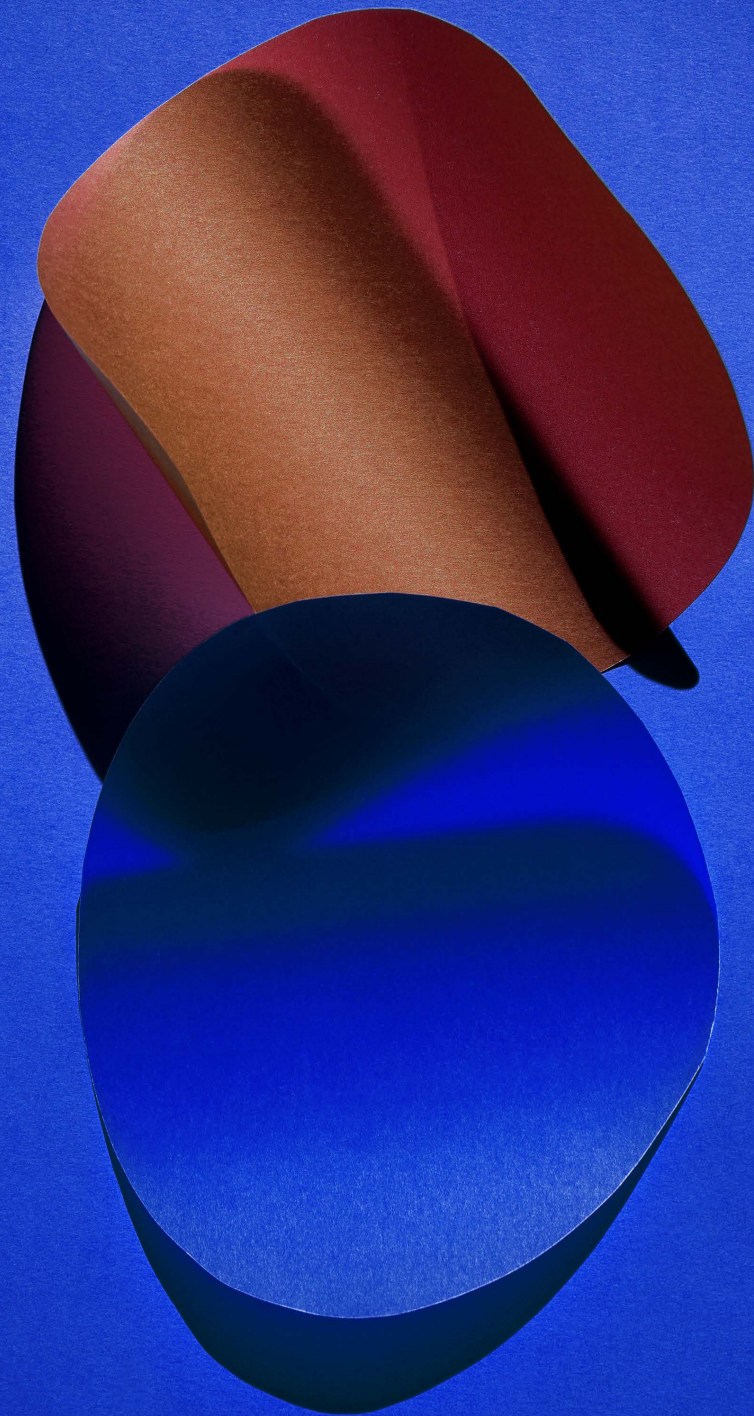
Guided by intuition, Jessica Backhaus (b. 1970, Germany) overlaps shapes of various sizes, cut out from transparent coloured paper, arranging them in rich contrasts against a monochrome background. Complex constellations that exude a meditative serenity. In the heat of the sun, the flimsy pieces rear up, cast shadows, and change shape, creating compositions that gradually take on a life of their own – which she then captures with her camera.

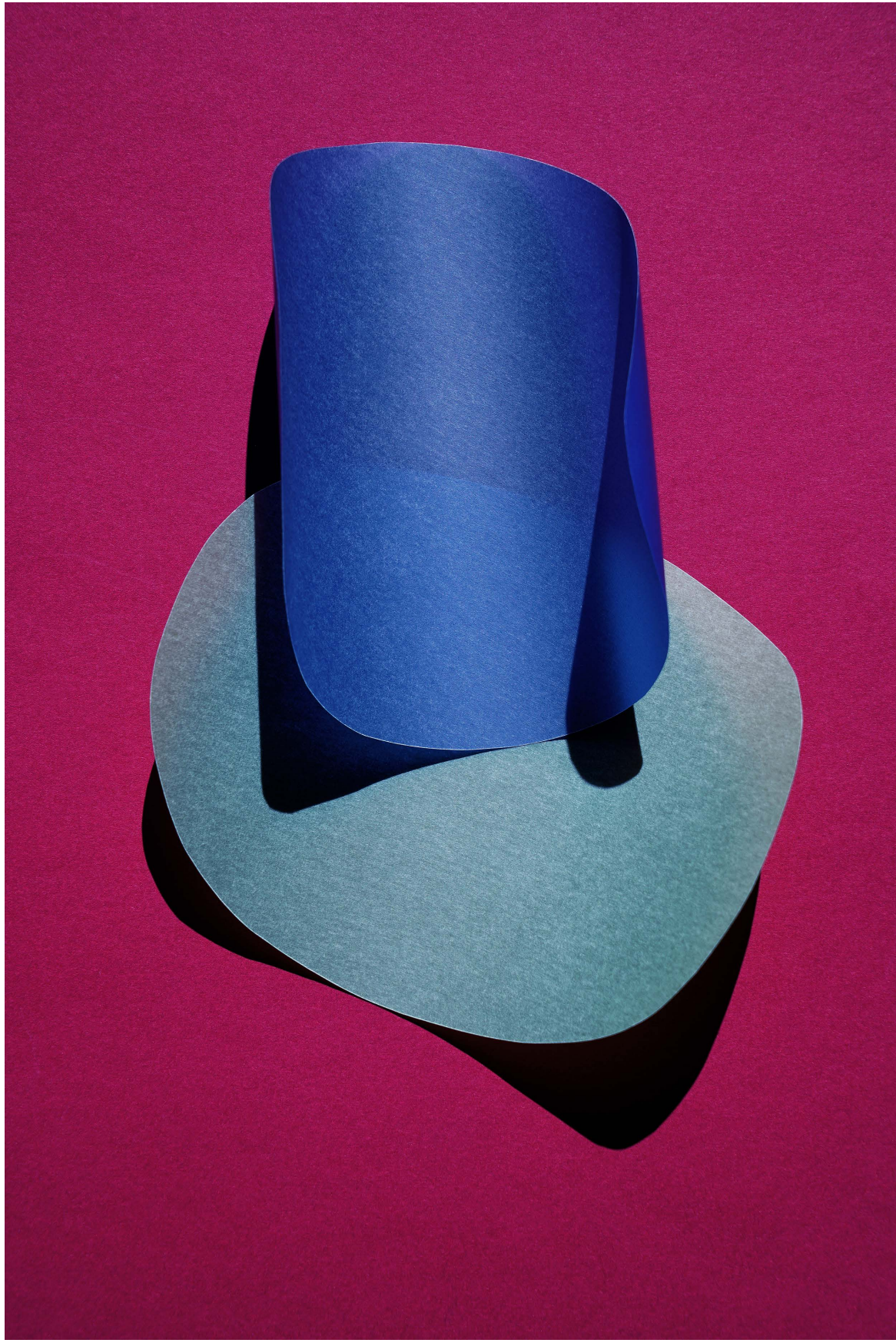
Jessica Backhaus makes minimalist compositions that echo experiments from the earliest days of the photography – specifically Henry Fox Talbot's 'The Pencil of Nature' (1844–46) – but they also reference modernist experiments executed in the 1930s such as the exploration of abstract forms and the interplay between light and shadow as produced by American photographer Minor White, who sought to photograph things not only for what they are but also for what they may suggest.

"Abstract art is the premise of a liberation from the old pictorial formula," noted French artist Sonia Delaunay in 1949, who co-founded the Orphism art movement, one of the earliest styles to approach complete abstraction, noted for its use of strong colours and geometric shapes. For her new book 'Cut Outs', Jessica Backhaus took inspiration from this optimistic prophecy as expressed by Delaunay in her days, regarding "that colour has a life of its own, that the endless combinations of colours bear poetry."

Already in the 18th century, Goethe - the famous German poet, playwright and scientist – had introduced a theory of colours, based on the workings of the human eye. As well as a colour wheel, he included aesthetic qualities, establishing a kind of colour psychology. He associated red with 'beautiful', orange with 'noble', yellow with 'good', green with 'useful', blue with 'common' (and, apropos, violet with 'unnecessary').

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“The endless combinations of colours bear poetry”

These six qualities were assigned to four categories of human cognition: beautiful and noble (red and orange) to the rational (Vernunft); good and useful (yellow and green) to the intellectual (Verstand); useful and common (green and blue) to the sensual (Sinnlichkeit); and, closing the circle, both unnecessary and beautiful (purple and red) to the imagination (Phantasie).

Although Goethe’s theoretical notions have been debunked by modern science, combining colour schemes to arrive at aesthetic effects is still widely practiced – and Backhaus’s cut outs could be seen as part of this tradition. But, first and foremost, her latest series of colourful abstractions should be seen as the logical continuation of the minimalism of her ‘Trilogy’, published in book form in 2017 and comprising the three series ‘Beyond Blue’, ‘Shifting Clouds’ and ‘New Horizon’.

“Those photographs beguile the eye with sparse compositions that focus on essentials while exploring myriad shapes and materials. The current works, too, are quiet images that derive their incisiveness from reduction,” Katharina Scriba writes in her essay in ‘Cut Outs’ (Kehrer, 2021). For one, these new experiments by Backhaus certainly extend the idea that art should have its own reality and not be an imitation of some other thing. In the minimalism of these cut outs, no attempt is made to represent an outside reality; the artist wants the viewer to respond only to what is in front of them.

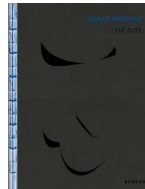
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Jessica Backhaus is represented by Robert Morat Galerie in Berlin, Galerie Anja Knoess in Cologne, Petra Becker/ International Art Bridge in Meggen, Bridgette Mayer Gallery in Philadelphia, MiCamera in Milan, Wouter van Leeuwen Gallery in Amsterdam and Carlos Carvalho Arte Contemporanea in Lisbon.

Forthcoming presentations of her work in 2021 include Photo Basel (June), The Eye Sees Arles (July) and Paris Photo (November). A solo exhibition of the Cut Outs is scheduled for Spring 2022, Robert Morat Galerie.

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