

Johannes Bosgra

PX3 Prix de la Photographie Paris 2020 First Place Winner in Nature – Murmurations

Swarms of starlings flit rhythmically across a deep blue sky, silhouetted like tiny black specks in musical motion, in Johannes Bosgra's captivating 'Murmurations' series. Possessing an uncanny and abstracted painterly quality, the richly saturated images were taken in March this year at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I saw a swooping mass of 100,000 starlings giving an intricate aerial display, in coordinated patterns, at a nature reserve close to my home in Friesland, in the north of the Netherlands," Bosgra, 41, says. "It was breathtaking. After researching these swarms, I learned that they gather just before dusk at their sleeping site. So I went to the same nature reserve every evening to see where the starlings were flying to and tried to position myself exactly below the largest flocks."

Utterly mesmerised by the unfolding choreography, Bosgra did not seek to merely document the behaviour of the swarms but to render their ballet in a more artistic, personalized way. "I wanted to celebrate the perfection of nature but also create work in my minimalist style," he says. "In the abstract forms in my images, I emphasize the essence of the rhythm and flowing energy of the starlings. By pointing my camera completely upward, I could isolate the swarm from the ground and use the monochrome blue hour sky as a canvas."

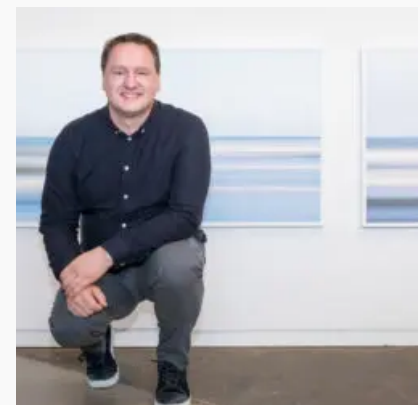
Indeed, Bosgra is passionate about classical music and desires to convey the profound emotions that it evokes in him in his photography. Through collaborations with composers and musicians, he has worked on "gesamtkunstwerke" – or 'complete works' – marrying his visual art with classical music. For instance, last year Bosgra created an immersive videowork of his ongoing 'Stripes' series, comprising minimalist seascapes, for the composer Philip Glass and the pianist Feico Deutekom which was displayed in two concerts at Amsterdam's Meervaart Theater.

Perceiving landscape in a musical sense, Bosgra, who is a keen pianist, says: "When I see a landscape, I hear music in my head and vice versa; they flow into each other. Seeing the starlings dancing through the sky, changing direction at any moment to escape a falcon attack, I heard a pulsating quick-dance rhythm and totally engulfing string music. Later, when they swooped harmoniously, I felt a slower rhythm, with whimsical flutes and clarinets. A ballet like Khatchaturian's 'Sabre Dance' would best accompany the fast movements while 'Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune' by Debussy would suit the more harmonious movements."

Surprisingly, perhaps, Bosgra rarely photographs birds or other animals and usually focuses purely on landscapes. "The 'Murmurations' series came as a surprise," he says. "At first, I just wanted to capture the spectacle of the starlings but as I was editing the images I saw the potential for an abstract series and decided to go back every evening."

Certainly, the series, which was exhibited in September at the Moscow International Foto Awards and during the San Francisco Bay Month of Photography, is a joyful celebration of life despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

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