

Matthew Brandt

An imagined conversation:

Friend A: What do you mean it's made out of bees?

Friend B: Yes, it is a photograph of bees made out of bees. Hence the title: *Bees of Bees*.

A: How is that even possible?

B: Well, the artist, Matthew Brandt, mixed bee parts with a liquid that solidifies when it is exposed to light. He spread that mixture on a sheet of paper, placed a large photographic negative on top, and put it in his darkroom. When he exposed it to light, the bee parts that received light through the photographic negative adhered to the paper. The portion of the mixture that did not receive light did not adhere and was washed away, leaving a photograph made out of bees.

A: I'm still having difficulty imagining this.

B: If you look at the back of the card, you will see a detail from a work from this series. Does that help?

A: Yes it does; thanks! So I am beginning to understand HOW it was made, but not WHY it was made. Why would the artist do this?

B: Brandt often incorporates the subject matter of a photograph into the photograph itself. For example, in his *Lakes & Reservoirs* series, he took a photograph of a lake or a reservoir and then submerged the photo in water taken from that lake or reservoir until the colors started to bleed. In his *La Brea* series, he photographed animal skeletons that had been excavated from the La Brea tar pits in Los Angeles, then used tar from those same tar pits as the pigment for the photographs. He even made "salted paper print" photographs of friends using body fluids of the people he photographed to get the salt needed to make the prints. These are just a few examples; there are a number of others.

A: Body fluids!? Yuck!!

B: I know it sounds strange, but they are really quite beautiful. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has acquired a couple of those portraits, along with other works by Brandt, for its permanent collection.

A: Well, I must say I'm becoming intrigued. I'd love to see some of those works.

B: If you Google the artist's name, you will find lots of images on the web from those series, plus others. Or you could go to his website: www.matthewbrandt.com. There are also a number of interviews of him on YouTube.

A: What would prompt him to think of doing things like this?

B: He grew up in a photography studio. His father, David Allan Brandt, is a successful and innovative commercial photographer, and Matthew spent untold hours as a child in his father's studio, helping out. He learned the photographic process so thoroughly that he found himself thinking about ways to break the rules.

A: But why bees?

B: Over the past decade or two, there's been a devastation of bee hives—something known as colony collapse disorder. When Brandt found a large group of dead bees, he didn't know what to do with them, but he felt they should be honored in some way. So he took them to his studio. After thinking about it, he decided to make photographs of bees out of the bee carcasses. So Brandt's concern about environmental devastation is part of this series too.

A: I find that quite moving. But I also have a very practical question: is the work archival? Won't it fall apart over time?

B: Brandt is a superb technician, so he made the work to be as archival as possible. The work reproduced on this card was made in 2012, and it has been exhibited extensively in the US and abroad—even as far away as Japan—and the bees are still holding firm. However, even if some of the bee parts were to fall so that bee carcasses gathered at the bottom of the photograph, that would still seem appropriate somehow: a return to the state of collapse in which Brandt originally found the bees. Plus, there is a significant branch of contemporary art that focuses on works of art that are ephemeral, that disappear over time, so this body of work will still have significance regardless of what happens to the bees.

A: You mentioned that this work has been exhibited internationally. Is the artist well known?

B: Yes, Brandt is generally recognized as one of the most important process-oriented photographers of his generation. I already mentioned the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His work has also been shown and collected by many other leading museums in the US and Europe.

A: I'm just astounded by all of this. I find it fascinating.

B: I'm happy to hear that. I hope you will keep following his work over time. He's only 39 years old, and he's full of ideas. I love the way his mind works, and I always look forward to seeing what he comes up with next.