

Photography

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It's all about love': how a Swiss photographer's intimate honeymoon pictures caused a scandal



☞ 'She felt absolutely comfortable and, hence, acted perfectly natural' ... Sitting Nude, 1952. Photograph: René Groebli Courtesy of Bildhalle

René Groebli took portraits of Charlie Chaplin and Walt Disney and pioneered new modes of photography. But it was his tender, erotic pictures taken in a Paris hotel room in the 50s that really caused a stir

In 1952, two young honeymooners checked into a small hotel in Montparnasse. An everyday story in the City of Light, perhaps. But the Swiss photographer René Groebli and his wife, Rita Dürmüller, spent their time in Paris cocooned in their room producing a series of photographs – sensual, intimate, enigmatic – that would first shock then beguile viewers, works that can now be seen in a new exhibition in Zurich.

In the honeymoon pictures, Groebli's camera traces Dürmüller's movements – as a shirt drops from her shoulders, the turn of her neck – which, he explains, was a deliberate “artistic approach not only to intensify the depiction of reality but to make visible the emotional involvement of my wife and of me.” Dürmüller is often nude, but not solely, and never explicitly posed. It is clear that she is playing with her husband, that this is fun. And we explore their shared space: the bed curved like a cello, the windows with their opaque lace curtains. There is one graceful snap of Dürmüller hanging up her laundry like a ballerina at a barre.

By today's standards the shots are sweet. But in 1954, when they were first published in book form, they were scandalous, leading to critical letters being sent to photographic journals and damning editorials written in newspapers.

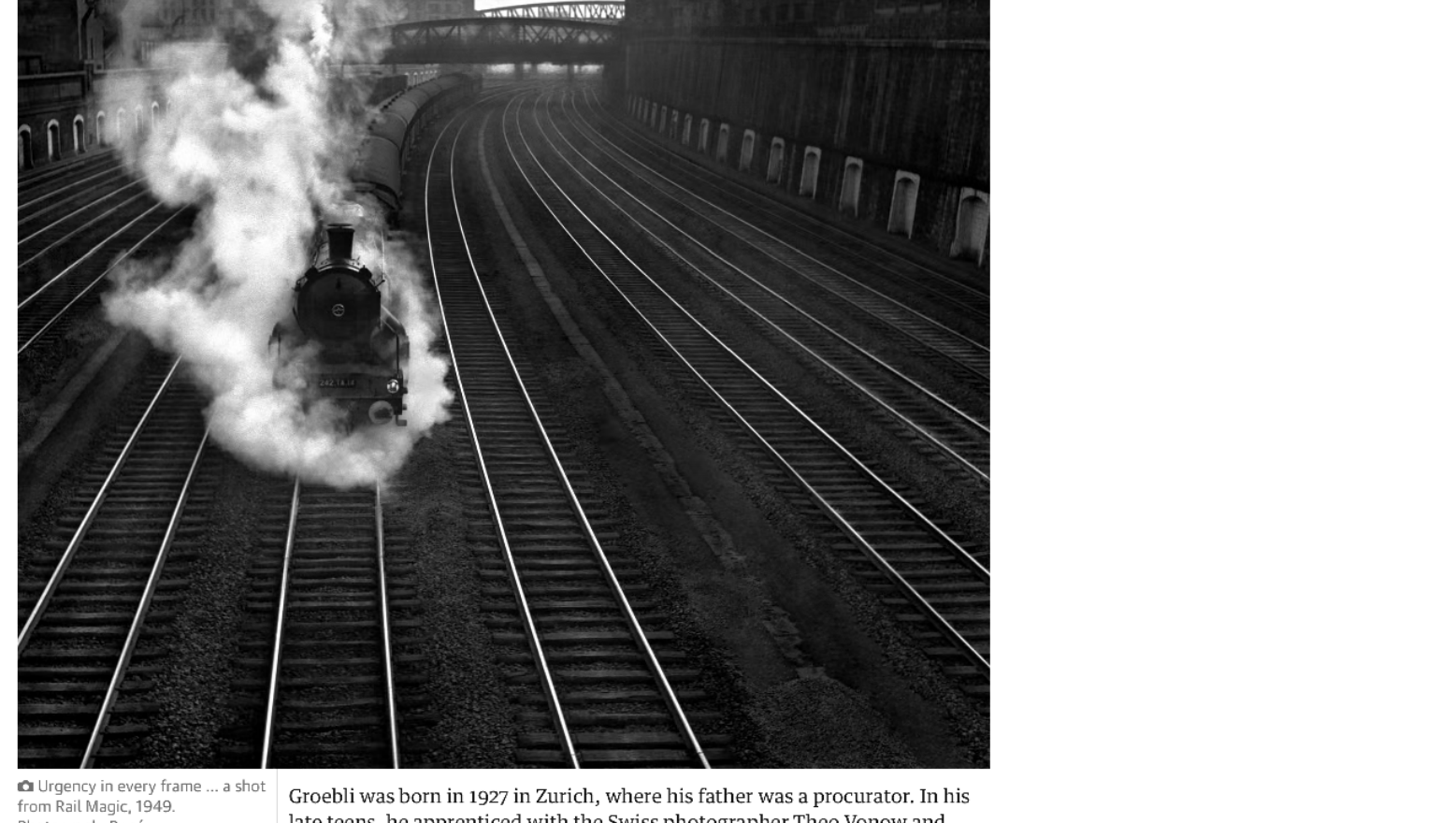


☞ 'It doesn't exhibit my wife as an object of desire' ... Undressing, 1952. Photograph: René Groebli/Courtesy of Bildhalle

The final photograph in the series featured Dürmüller's hand, complete with wedding ring, dangling over the edge of the bed holding a cigarette. Since Groebli's book did not specify that he was married to his subject, some viewers saw this as depicting an extramarital encounter.

Now 98, Groebli is sanguine about the mid-century response. “I wasn't really surprised by the reaction of the media,” he tells me from his home in Zurich. “In those days only artists and people acquainted with the arts were used to nudity. Photography was not commonly perceived as an art yet and photographs of nudes were associated with pornography rather than with artful, tender erotic poesy. It was therefore not surprising that, prejudiced by common perception, the poetic photographic essay could hardly be judged by its artistic value.”

He responded by defining the series himself. “I reacted with the title The Eye of Love. It puts into words what the photographic essay is all about: love. It is not about voyeuristic sex, it doesn't exhibit my wife as an ‘object of desire’,” he says of his spouse, who died in 2013. “Rita loved to create the images when we took those pictures. She took an active creative part in posing and composing. One may sense, while looking at these photographs, that she felt absolutely comfortable and, hence, acted perfectly natural. She was not an actor, but an artist helping to create scenes. The pictures are the result of a collaboration in perfect harmony.”

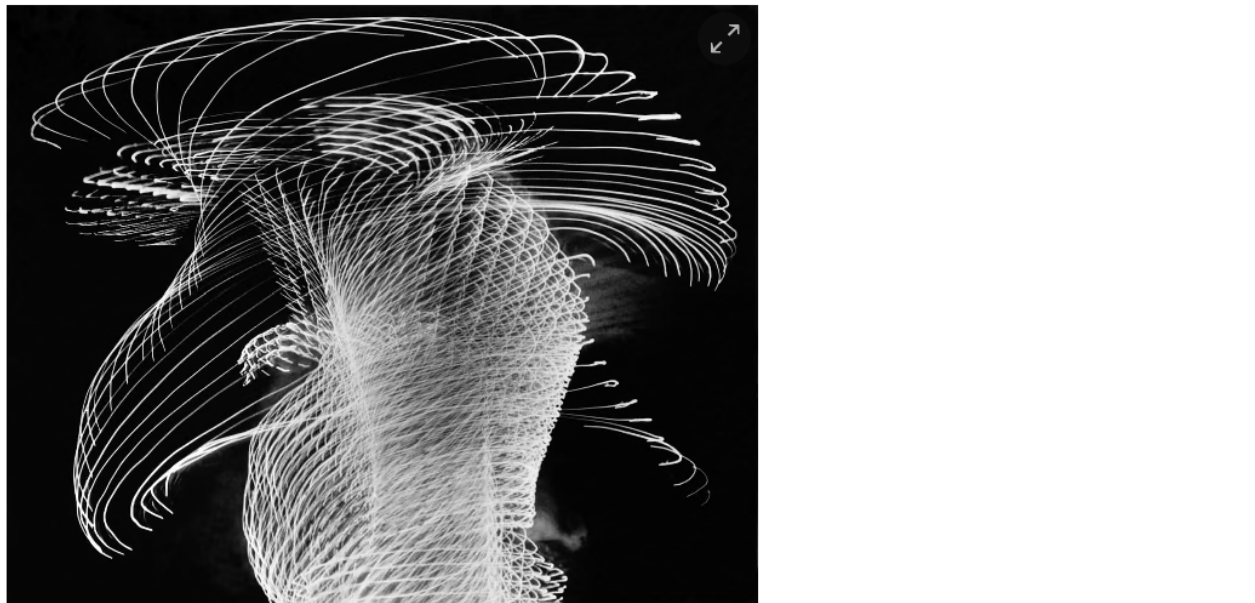


☞ Urgency in every frame ... a shot from Rail Magic, 1949. Photograph: René Groebli/Courtesy of Bildhalle

Groebli was born in 1927 in Zurich, where his father was a procurator. In his late teens, he apprenticed with the Swiss photographer Theo Vonow and briefly studied at the Zurich School of Applied Arts under Hans Finsler, whose rigid, geometric style of photography Groebli rejected for a more fluid approach. Those interests informed his subsequent studies in film and a period training as a documentary cameraman.

In the late 1940s, Groebli published his first photo-essay, Rail Magic, which followed the progress of a steam train as it barrelled from Paris to Basel. Its real subject was speed, its approach impressionistic: steam consumes the sides, drivers lean into the wind. There is urgency in every frame. From the very beginning of his career, Groebli eschewed the cool gaze of the new objectivity movement popular in Switzerland at the time.

His early shots of trains, merry-go-rounds, dancers and bicycles echoed the work of Jacques Henri Lartigue, who had captured a similar whirlwind of pistons and wheels during la belle époque. But where Lartigue's pictures are zany, Groebli's are poetic. “My life as a photographer is all about movement,” he says. “I took my first photographs visualising motion in 1946 and there was no influence from other sources. With respect to Lartigue, it must have been around 1965 that I came across his pictures for the first time. I never met him personally.”

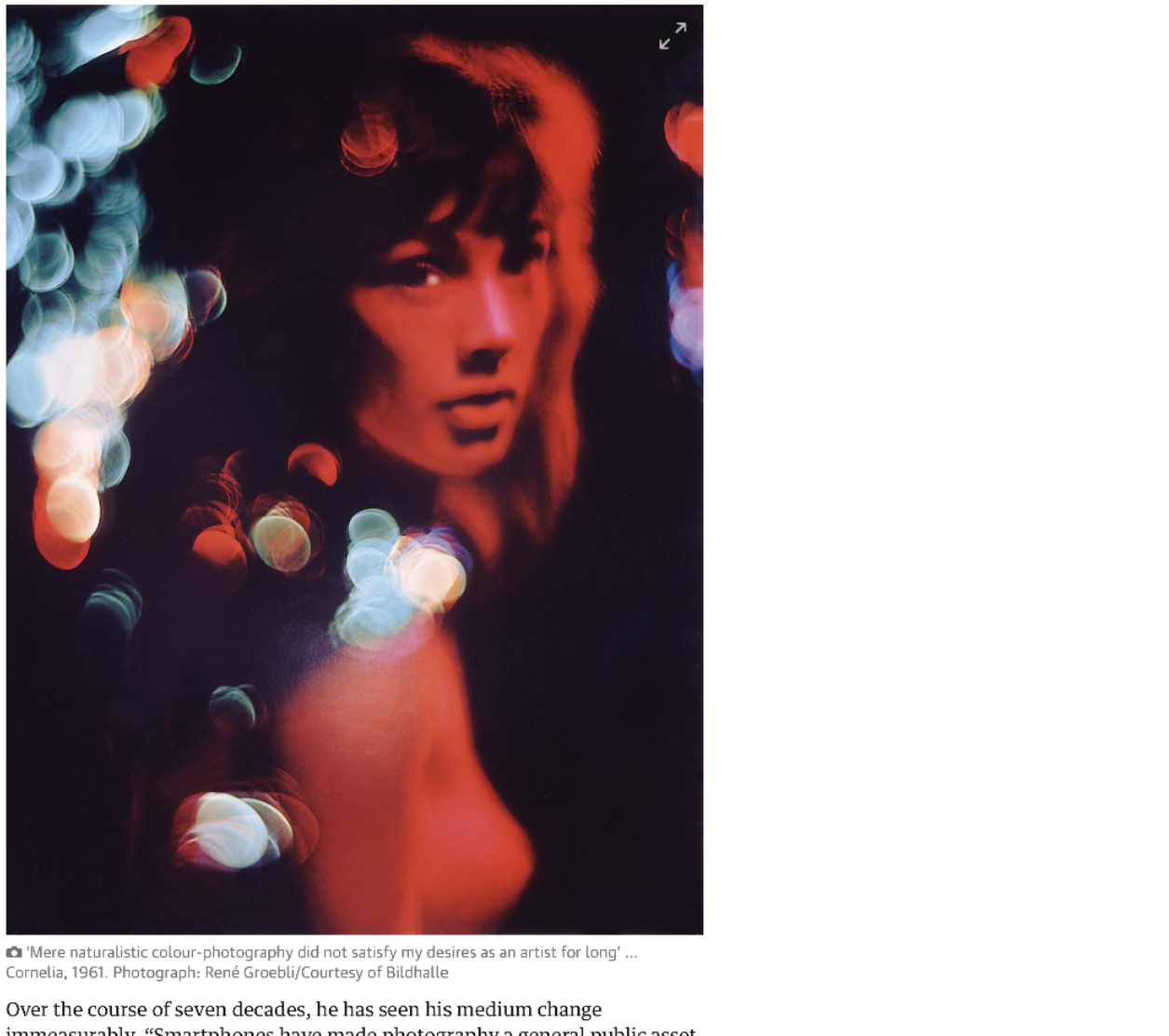


☞ Poetic ... Karussell Zürich Schweiz, 1947. Photograph: René Groebli/Courtesy of Bildhalle

Were there subjects that were simply too fast for his shutter? “Of course, there were extremely fast subjects”, he says. “But in the majority of instances, I intentionally chose the appropriate shutter speed that would provoke blurring or streaking effects.”

In 1951, he married Dürmüller, a graduate in painting from the Zurich School of Applied Arts, and the couple went on their belated honeymoon to Paris the following year. Groebli describes his late wife as “not only lovely but in all respects an inspiring woman.” While initially criticised as being sexually overt, The Eye of Love series was later championed by the American photographer Edward Steichen, who invited Groebli to participate in The Family of Man, the landmark 1955 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Groebli went on to work in photojournalism, advertising and design, took portraits of Charlie Chaplin, Robert Frank and Walt Disney, and in the 1960s pioneered new modes of psychedelic colour-saturated photography using filters and selective dye transfer. “Mere naturalistic colour-photography did not satisfy my desires as an artist for long,” he says.



☞ 'Mere naturalistic colour-photography did not satisfy my desires as an artist for long' ... Cornelia, 1961. Photograph: René Groebli/Courtesy of Bildhalle

Over the course of seven decades, he has seen his medium change immeasurably. “Smartphones have made photography a general public asset. Hence the world is flooded with myriads of pictures daily. A few decades ago, photographers were either professionals or educated enthusiasts,” he says. “As to the future: while analogue means of manipulation were rather limited, [they] expanded through digital photography. And they are definitely exploring with AI. The main issue is and will be to distinguish photographs from pictures generated by AI.”

The Bildhalle exhibition presents an oeuvre shaped by experimentation. But Groebli's most personal works remain those pictures of Dürmüller, taken more than 70 years ago in a Montparnasse hotel, compositions fixed in period and place, yet timeless and universal. And authenticity is perhaps the key factor to their enduring appeal. The viewer believes in the emotions exhibited. As Groebli explains: “I still see, as I did in the early days of our relationship, her love for me and my artistic work, and my love for her.”

● René Groebli: Movement is at Bildhalle Zurich until 31 January