



Kacper Kowalksi

The Aerial Sublime: Being in the World from a Distance

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Being in the World from a Distance

by Erik Vroons

Kacper Kowalksi (b. 1977, Poland) has been observing seemingly infinite landscapes from the sky for over 20 years now. Up in the air, when he's flying in his gyrocopter and simultaneously photographing the world below, he doesn't think much. He just acts, with an instinctive response to the awkwardly beautiful scapes beneath him.

From that unique perspective another, more primal form of existence comes to the surface. When physically removed from the earth, Kacper gets in a position to make depictions of a majestic nature that – even before being identified as such – contain a quality of abstraction which inevitably will do something with us too.

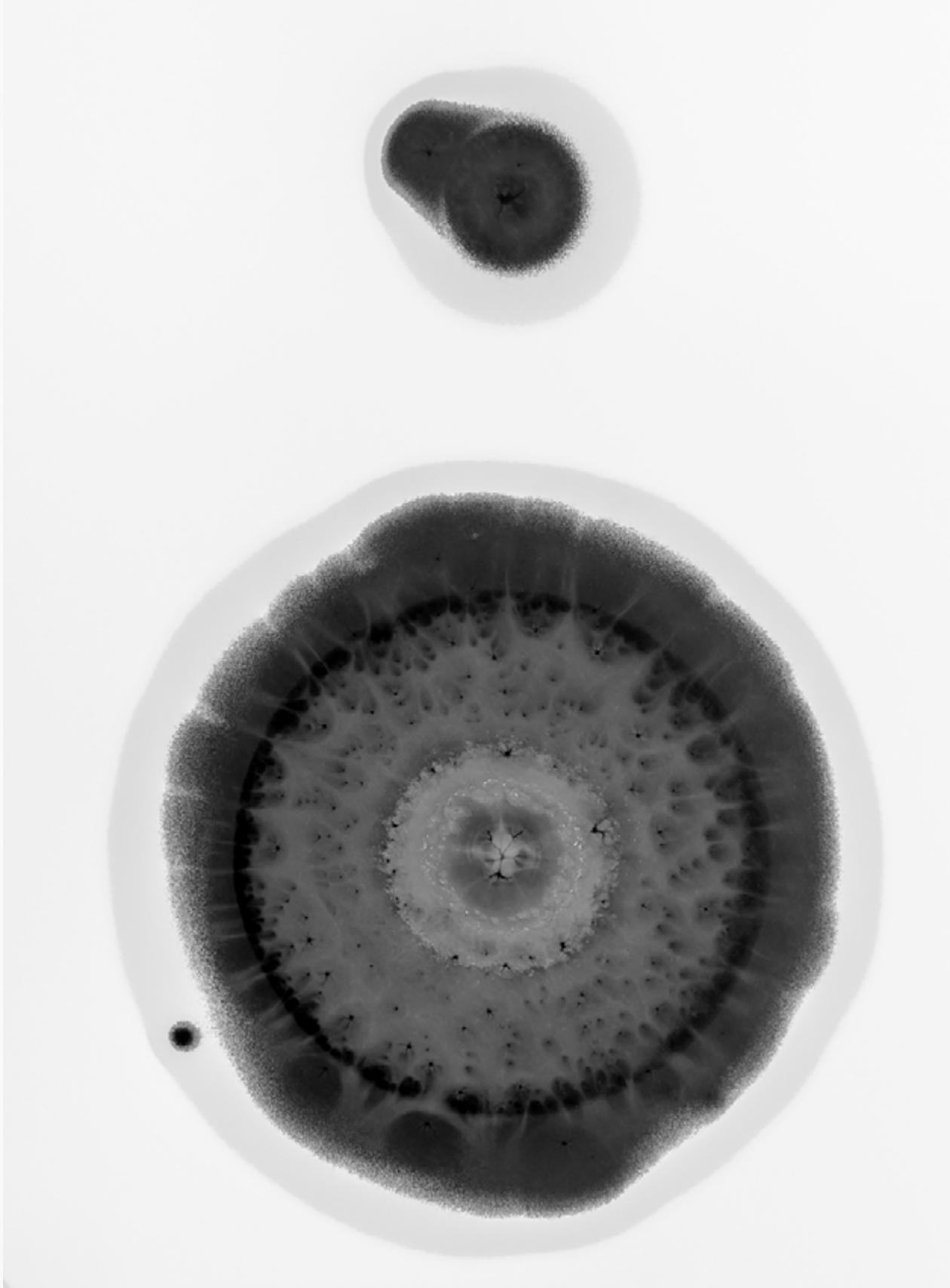
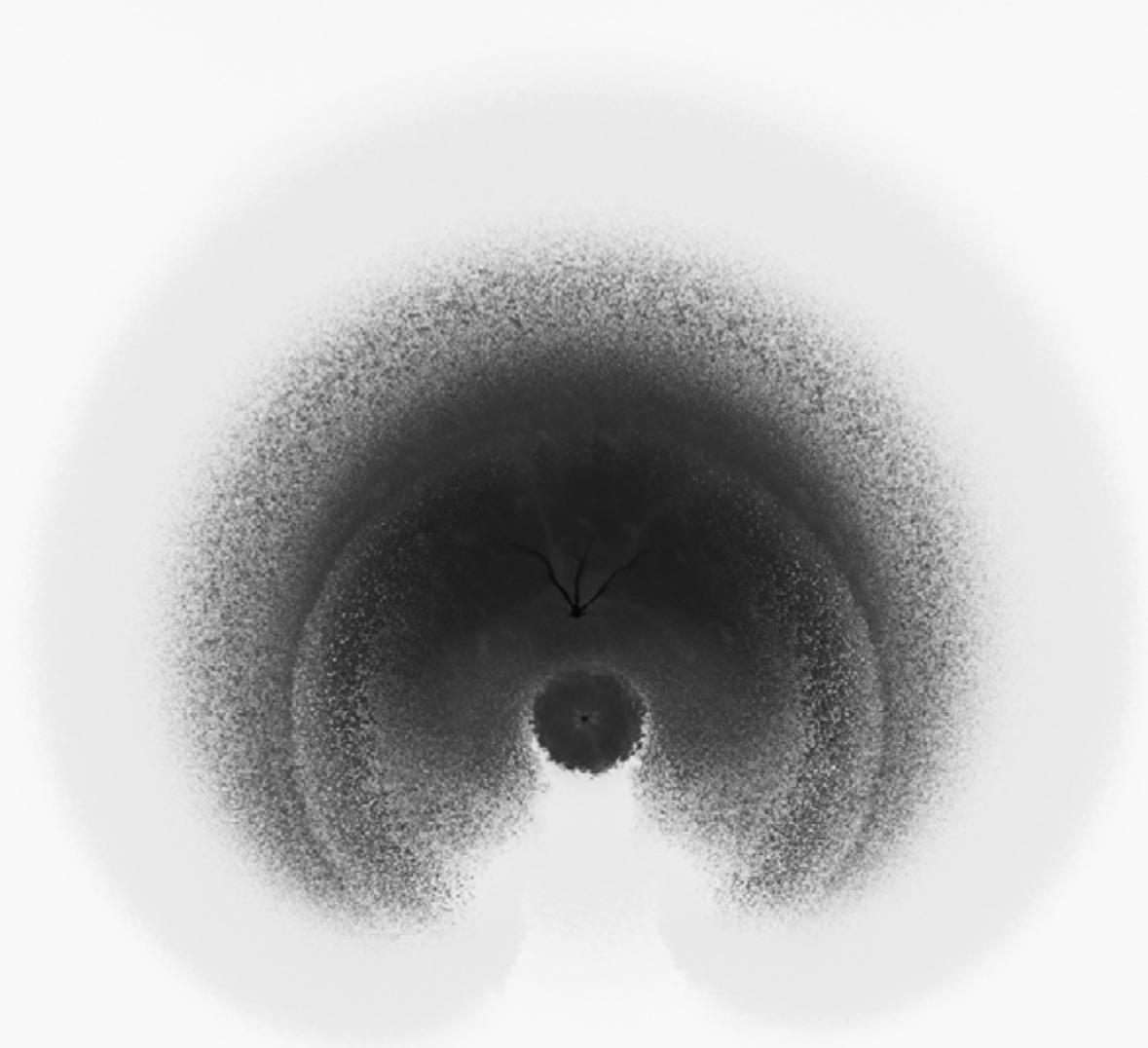
After working in architecture for four years, Kacper Kowalski began to concentrate on flying and photography, taking aerial pictures of natural and urban environments in his native Poland. Temporarily removed from an embedded and immersive connection with his physical, day-to-day world, he entered an unfixed state of awareness in relation to the surface below.

In Kowalski's own words: "I fly at an altitude of 500 feet [approx. 150 metres] and feel the air with my whole body. I am exposed to temperature, smell and all that's available to the senses [...] I enjoy getting tired from the experience, feeling the vibrations of the engine and the wind in my face."

Kacper Kowalski set out to capture snow-covered terrain in Poland from the sky. These eerie, empty landscapes suggest an almost apocalyptic scenario. From the project that eventually came to be titled *OVER* (self-published as a book in 2017), a personal exploration of what it means to spend 20 years with your head in the clouds, and how it feels to return to the ground, Kacper then started to move away from a concern with human activity. The focus is now more on nature continuing its primitive course.

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Having removed himself from the earth, both physically and mentally, he floats over the country and from his open cockpit (or sometimes paragliding) he is faced with the ambiguous forms and shapes as seen from such an altitude. From this extreme vantage point, the landscape transgresses his referential horizon, his primordial 'radar' gets a turbo-boost, and his being transforms into another 'Dasein'.

From this lonely height, Kowalski started to ask himself: "Who am I? What am I doing here?" But also: "What would the world be like without culture, when everything that has been imposed on it has been erased?"

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In the 1850s, when Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (1820–1910, better known under the alias Nadar) began taking photographs from a hot-air balloon, he described the sensation of ascending as a "free, calm, levitating into the silent immensity of welcoming and beneficent space". The world seen from this position – as noted by Nadar – offers not only an admirable spectacle and an immense "carpet without edges", but also "a purity of lines and an extraordinary clarity of sight with the exquisite impression of a marvellous, ravishing cleanliness!"

Ever since this pioneering aerial photography, photographers have been 'scanning' the earth, in an urge to map the world from above. Every square inch of the planet has been documented, it seems, with the support of airplanes and drones; pictures of each new discovery are examined and interpreted in every possible way.

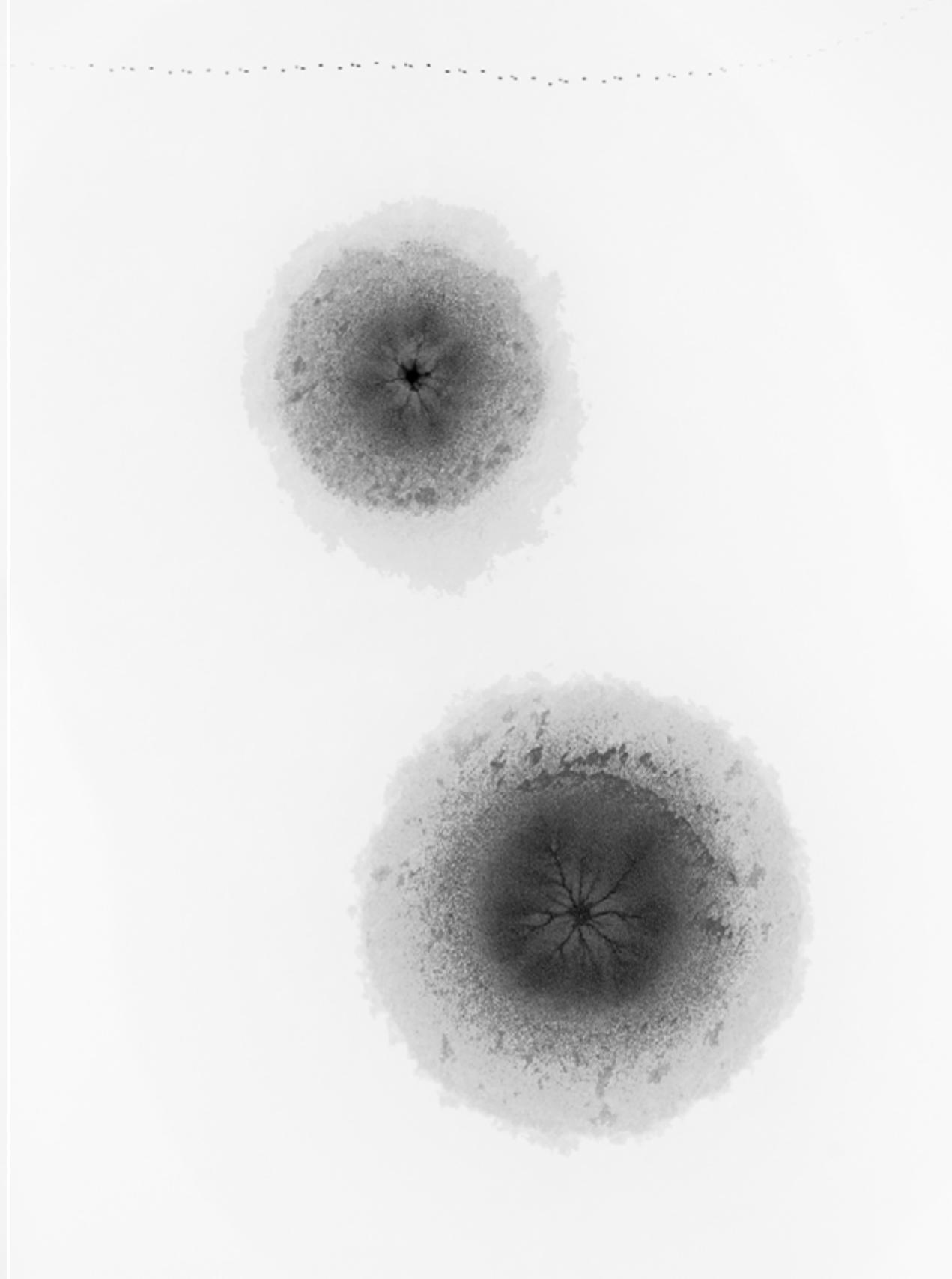
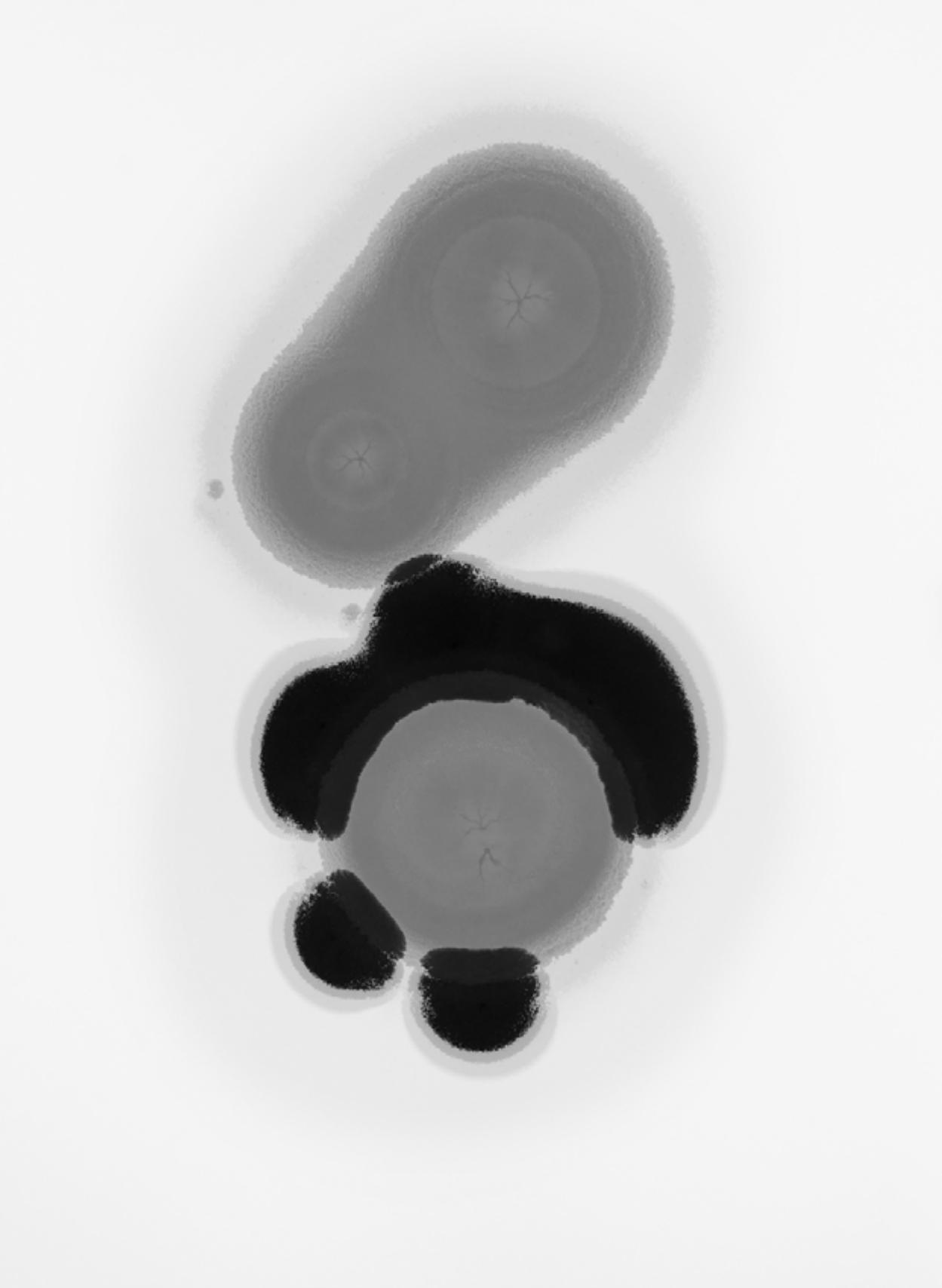
However, Kacper Kowalski's latest work is rather uninformative. Indeed, Poland looks extra-terrestrial when seen from the viewpoint of a bird – especially in winter, when the country is covered in snow.

The flattening (i.e. the suppression of the figural world) is characteristic of the vertical aerial view – especially when captured at a 90° angle. It thus comes as no surprise to find early aviators analogising the view from an aeroplane to the view through a microscope which, by means of the same perpendicular angle, can also be considered an aerial perspective.

Of his experiences as a war pilot, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900–1944) once wrote: "[...] All I can see on the vertical are curios from another age, beneath clear, untrembling glass. I lean over crystal frames in a museum." Clearly, it is important to know the scale of any image under examination, as this can affect how you perceive or interpret what appears in the photograph. Scale, the ratio of the distance between two points on an image to the actual distance between the same two points on the ground, is also a defining factor of 'reading' Kowalski's images. Only once you are aware of the greatness or vastness of the landscapes do they start to inspire awe and veneration. Which makes for a sublime effect.

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Poland looks extra-terrestrial when seen from the viewpoint of a bird

The sublime, arriving from a state of confusion, see-sawing between being horrified and feeling delighted, is often evoked by looking up at vertical forms or terrifying heights looming above. Aerial photographs, by contrast, most commonly evoke the sublime by looking down into the vertiginous depths opening below. But here, in Kowalski's bird's-eye view, there is a postponed moment of recognition that, before anything else, results in a state of bemusement. Indeed, you might wonder: what on earth is it, exactly?

Confronted with abstractions, viewers start to make associative links with existing 'things.' Just as the Rorschach test allows for subjective perceptions of inkblots so we assign a conventional meaning to a symbol (for example, we all agree that a small triangle pointing to the right will start a video or an audio file) the urge to 'bend' visual abstractions towards the known is strong, while nevertheless still leaving an onlooker in a state of oblivion.

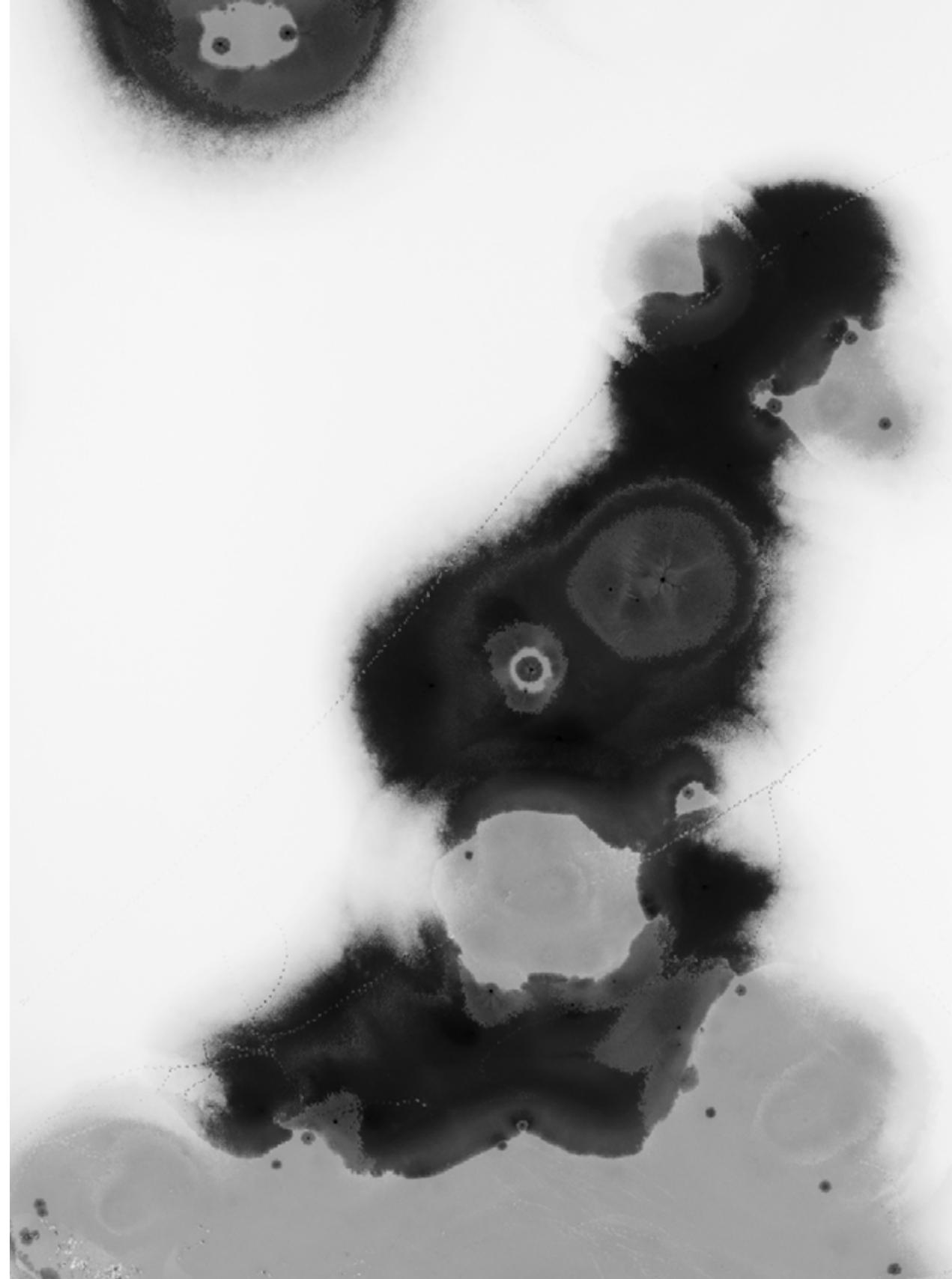
In *The Non-Objective World* (1927), the Suprematist painter Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) compared the development of abstraction in art to the view of the earth seen from an aeroplane as it climbs into the sky: "The familiar recedes ever further and further into the background [...] The contours of the objective world fade more and more and so it goes, step by step, until finally the world – 'everything we loved and by which we have lived' – becomes lost to sight."

This experience has a strong tradition in photography, leading back to one of the most famous early 20th-century photographers: Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946).

'Equivalents' is the title of a series of images of clouds captured by Stieglitz between 1925 and 1934; they are generally recognised as the first photographs intended to free the subject matter from literal interpretation. They are void of any reference points, and deliberately destabilise the viewer's relationship with their familiar ways of seeing. What Stieglitz does, above all, is to divert attention from any kind of pictorial interest towards an awareness of the feelings that these cloud formations evoke. He isolated a fragment of a natural scene in order to remove its inherent context from the viewer, relying instead on light, shadow, texture, shape and form to convey a feeling, sensation or impression.

These 'Equivalents', according to New York Times art critic Andy Grundberg, "remain photography's most radical demonstration of faith in the existence of a reality behind and beyond that offered by the world of appearances. They are intended to function evocatively, like music, and they express a desire to leave behind the physical world, a desire symbolised by the virtual absence of horizon and scale clues within the frame." Likewise, I would say, Kowalski's camerawork not only gives him a heightened apprehension of the terra firma (i.e. the world below him), his rather non-specific pictures also allow all kinds of elucidation.

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Viewers start to make associative links with existing 'things'

This is not so much a celestial elevation, but rather an existential grounding. Furthermore, be it a secondary experience, his photographic impressions confront viewers with their own individual presence too – resulting in an unsettling effect which can't be arrived with when looking at ground-level images of our planet. Specifically, when the moment of recognition is being postponed, due to the abstraction.

'Dasein' – which, as a concept, literally means 'Being-there' – is to be confronted with the inevitability of one's presence. The philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) initially introduced the German expression 'Dasein' as the essence of being human, as an individual. It by now includes issues such as personhood, mortality and the dilemma or paradox of living in relationship with all that exists simultaneously with and in oneself. In short, 'Dasein' defines a kind of existential 'wokeness'.

There is no doubt that the idea of ascension and its associated viewpoint is a powerful theme in Western thought that has strong intellectual links with epistemic models and ideas of truth, clear-seeing, transcendence, etcetera. Aerial photography has given a new dimension to such contemplation and a qualitative remove from Earth, such as exercised by Kacper Kowalski when flying a gyrocopter over these alienating winter wonderlands (a physical exploration that would be denied by using drones), might lead to a renewed relation between the physical human body and its surroundings.

However, in a postponed understanding of what it is we're looking at exactly, how to respond to the rather undefined subject matter of what he captured? Visual literacy, as a set of skills we use every single day of our lives, can help us recognise certain patterns more easily and more quickly. We are clearly biased by experience and often see faces in inanimate objects such as cars, buildings, machines and houses. Onlookers thus immediately start to make assumptions by association, guessing what it could be that they're witnessing.

Fair enough, but what matters here – before any form of recognition or associative pleasure – is the idea, derived from the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, that the highest form of beauty lies not in representing the material world, but in giving way to a more spiritual realm within ourselves. That is, even before consciously seeing the landscapes that they represent, the lines and shapes as seen in these images can trigger another dimension in our individual 'Dasein'. If only it being a humble acceptance of the limits of our understanding when confronted with the mysteries of the world, and ourselves in it.

kacperkowalski.pl

Kacper Kowalski has received numerous accolades for his aerial photography, including several World Press Photo Awards and Picture of the Year International Awards. He is an associate of Panos Pictures for editorial assignments and Atlas represents his work as a gallery. Kowalski lives and works in Gdynia, Poland.

For more information: atlasgallery.com

