

Sean O'Hagan  
On photography



## Brazilian blend: how Geraldo de Barros became a master of montage

Undaunted by a stroke and a 40-year hiatus from photography, De Barros produced a disturbing collage series in his final years

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**Sean O'Hagan**

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All that remains ... Part of the Sobras series by the Brazilian Geraldo de Barros. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and The Photographers' Gallery, London

Geraldo de Barros took his first photographs aged 16 using a camera he'd made himself. Pretty soon, he began playing with the form by scratching, piercing and drawing all over his negatives. He was a relentless experimenter throughout his whole life, moving from painting to photography before becoming a pioneer of concrete art – and one of the most influential Brazilian artists of the 20th century. Then, in the 1990s – following a

40-year layoff, and after a series of strokes had left him semi-paralysed – De Barros picked up his camera again. Now, the two photography series that bookmarked his career – Fotoformas (1948-1950) and Sobras (1996-1998) – are on show in Britain for the first time at the Photographers' Gallery.

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**Geraldo De Barros**  
**What Remains**

The Photographers'  
Gallery, London  
W1F

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Until 7 April

[Full details](#)

De Barros made his Fotoformas works, influenced by the Bauhaus and Paul Klee, with a Rolleiflex 6x6 twin-lens camera.

In them, he often superimposed one image over another to make geometric shapes that seem to float on the page. Other images from the series include: an egg hovering over a wooden door where the handle should be; spheres sitting on telegraph wires against a grey sky, like a still from an early sci-fi film; a leafless tree in an expanse of white broken only by a thin black line. This early body of work is an intriguing testament to a restless imagination that reacted instinctively against accepted photographic practice. He once said: "For me, photography is a process of printing." But, for him, it was also a process of disrupting, interfering and experimenting.



Restless imagination

... Untitled by Geraldo de Barros (Tyrol, Austria, 1951). Photograph: Courtesy of artist and The Photographers' Gallery, London

The whole Fotoformas series was first shown in his breakthrough exhibition at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo in 1950. It earned him a scholarship to Europe, where he fell under the spell of concrete art and abandoned photography altogether. Then, in 1993, his daughter found his early photographs as she was sifting through his archive, and they were shown at the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne in Switzerland. De Barros was belatedly hailed as a master of abstract photography, and this renewed interest seems to have spurred him on to return to the medium. In the last two years of his life, though incapacitated, he made the 250 works that comprise the series Sobras (Remains).

Here the raw material is family snapshots and portraits, which have been cut up and

rearranged into beautiful, painterly collages tending toward the surreal – glowering pink clouds sit atop a grand building by an eerie lake and each element is bordered by black tape, drawing attention to the process as well as the resulting image. They are strange and bewitching works that echo the creations of John Stezaker and, as their name suggests, have a haunting, elegiac quality.



Ethereal ... Laura

Letinsky's *Ill Form* and *Void Full I Untitled 29*, 2011. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and The Photographers' Gallery, London

On another floor of the Photographers' Gallery, Laura Letinsky's ethereal collages of food and objects play with the notion of what is real and what is illusory. Titled *Ill Form* and *Void Full*, after a phrase by the modernist writer Gertrude Stein, the work manages to be beautiful and intriguing, though bloodless – all those anaemic tones. Using images of food, drink and utensils from lifestyle magazines as well as her own photographs, Letinsky creates formal arrangements of paper cutouts and the odd real object – a silver spoon, a glass. They are precisely arranged against a white background in a studio and photographed using a large format camera to capture every detail – a smudge, a trace of lipstick, a crumb. Printed lifesize and often containing strange shadows and perspectives that may be real or part of the construction, they refer to the impossible, idealised notion of home that magazines perpetuate. Ultimately, though, it is photography that Letinsky is questioning, and its role in what she calls "the circuitry of production and consumption" that underpins lifestyle culture. I am not sure the work quite manages to carry the claims she makes on its behalf, but it is certainly singular in its elaboration.



Delicate and powerful

... Untitled, 1992-1995, by CK Rajan. Photograph: Courtesy M HKA, Antwerp /© CK Rajan

A word of recommendation, too, for the intricate, politically resonant collages in Indian artist [CK Rajan's series Mild Terrors \(1992-96\)](#), part of the group show [Perspectives on Collage](#) that's also at the Photographers' Gallery. The whole show is worth seeing for the variety of approaches, but Rajan's work is delicate and powerful.

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## Now see this

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Juergen Teller's recent work is the subject of a show called [Woo at the ICA in London](#), opening on 23 January. Expect the raw and the oddly tender in equal measure from the man who revitalised fashion photography in the 1980s and whose most vital work of late has tended to be his most personal.

For devotees of Russian photography, Foam gallery in Amsterdam is hosting [Primrose: Russian Colour Photography](#). It includes work by [Boris Mikhailov](#), Alexander Rodchenko and Ivan Shagin.

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