



ARTIST

Michael Tummings

TITLE

Steiermark04

DATE

2010

DIMENSIONS

30 in H x 30 in W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

IMAGE NOTES

paper size 34 x 34

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2012.453

CURRENT LOCATION

NA 08

MICHAEL TUMMINGS

BORN

1966

BIRTHPLACE

London, England

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United Kingdom

CULTURAL HERITAGE

British

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2011

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 167

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BIOGRAPHY

For a more recent CV or bio please visit the artist's website, www.michael-tummings.com

Michael Tummings photographs hunters in nature in the classic European tradition of painting. His series *Hidden* examines the ritualized killing of animals within a romanticized setting of open landscapes. This project has taken Tummings to countries such as Germany, England, Norway, Romania, and Turkey.

ESSAYS

A formal portrait of a youth follows the most distinguished conventions of old master portraiture. He stands in the foreground, facing forward, and is shown full-length. Myriad details define social standing and skills, notably the pair of pheasants dangling from each hand like attributes of old. In the light, cool tonality of its palette as well as the precise composition, this photograph evokes one of the most famous figure paintings of the eighteenth century, Watteau's *Gilles*. Regardless of whether that allusion was intentional, what is remarkable is the gravitas Michael Tummings provides to his subjects. Here in the cold morning light of eastern England a ritual as old as time helps usher this boy into manhood. For the past five years Tummings has followed the hunt; that is, he has sought out opportunities to join hunting expeditions across Europe, experiencing the differing cultures of the sport in many communities. Whatever one's initial response to the subject—and it is racked with controversy—hunting provides Tummings a wealth of possibilities. The series represents an extended meditation on landscape imagery, queried through historical, sociological, aesthetic, and emotive perspectives. Simultaneously it offers an intimate perspective on people and their circumstances. While connecting with these men—and a few women—and reveling in distinctive pastoral sites, he witnesses behavioral codes of an ancient activity. It is significant to many of these practitioners and above all to the artist that hunting is older than history itself, extending demonstrably through the entirety of human experience, evidenced in all known traces of prehistoric civilizations, and embedded in the origins of myth.¹ Born in London to parents from Jamaica, Tummings currently lives and works in Munich. Traveling widely in season, the hunts he experiences are social events, sometimes involving large groups of participants, as images from Halden, Norway; Hermannstadt, Romania; and Norfolk and Raveningham, England reveal. Invited into emotionally charged activities, he gains a privileged perspective on human behavior, moments of introspection, elation, concentration, and even boredom. These images must include some element of the posed, given the demands of Tummings's 4 x 5 view camera, but they also faithfully reflect the stories he finds. The *Highlands* series are all voluptuous clouds and charismatic wild animals; Hermannstadt in Transylvania retains traces of the bleak poverty and ecological mismanagement under Ceausescu. Tummings reveals an uncanny skill in capturing precise sensations of telling moments—often expressed by the synecdoche of color: the deep mossy greens capture the crisp morning stillness of Steiermark IV. Tummings's formal range is also revealed in his facility with space and scale, from majestic, vast distances to claustrophobic close-ups. Tropes of art history, portrait conventions, and landscape typologies inform these compositions. The ominously entitled *Ratcatcher* evokes Reynolds and Ingres. Hogarth too may contribute to the sardonic tone by which Tummings pictures a befuddled Irish gentleman. Beautifully composed through subtle color notes as well as complex space, the image overflows with meaningful details. The classic fireplace at left evokes his forebears; a table bursting with glassware and bottles at his elbow hints at a problem. Discarded boots and implements scattered at his feet (clad in sagging, holey socks) seal the critique. Although examples by such celebrated artists probably linger in his deepest visual memory—the artist recalls “being dragged through museums at a young age, viewing austere characters painted by old masters”—Tummings's own associations are more intellectual than aesthetic. His subject matter has encouraged far-ranging research; forestry, ecology, legal history, ritual and myth, and analyses of contemporary paradigms of masculinity pepper every discussion we've had about these accomplished photographs. Did I realize, he asked once, that Germany's hunting laws were drafted by Hermann Goering in 1934?² Other exchanges furnished me with provocative bibliography: Karen Armstrong on myth, Robert Pogue Harrison on forests, as well as an article by Mark Hopper exploring contradictory messages facing boys today. As these instances demonstrate, whether contemplated individually or through series, Tummings's hunting pictures sustain exploration in many fruitful directions, which is precisely what one asks of lasting works of art. Elizabeth A. Brown 1. Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd., 2005), 12–40. 2. Michael Tummings, email to the author, January 4, 2012. Michael Tummings was a Light Work Artist-in-Residence in March 2011. For more information on Tummings and his work, visit his website at www.michaeltummings.com. Elizabeth A. Brown, former chief curator of the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, is an art historian and freelance curator.