



KUNST
MUSEUM
BRANDTS

Keld Helmer-Petersen, *no title, Skovshoved*, 1942-1943

Press release

A Frontrunner of Photography

Danish photographer Keld Helmer-Petersen made his mark internationally and revolutionised photography long before it was widely recognised as an art form. Now his striking, pared-back modernist compositions focusing on shapes, planes and textures can be seen in a fresh light at Kunstmuseum Brandts, home to one of Denmark's largest collections of the artist's work.

Keld Helmer-Petersen: A Frontrunner of Photography. From 14 November 2026

The story of Keld Helmer-Petersen is a fascinating tale of a self-taught artist whose bold, inquisitive experiments helped establish colour photography as an art form and introduced modernism in Danish photography. Over seven decades, he demonstrated photography's power to reveal the wonder in the smallest details of everyday life, transforming the world around us into arresting, innovative images.

Bringing together more than 80 works, the exhibition at Kunstmuseum Brandts takes visitors on a journey through Helmer-Petersen's oeuvre, introducing one of Denmark's most intriguing and influential photographic artists.

Until the 1940s, art photographers confined themselves to black and white, while colour photography was generally seen as the preserve of advertising. Helmer-Petersen, however, began

making art photographs in colour. He was also one of the first Danish photographers to move in so close on his subjects that his images became almost abstract, tightly framed compositions of everyday details that most of us fail to notice or would scarcely consider worth photographing: a drainpipe, a road sign, a brick wall or the play of colour across a building's façade. He used colour itself as a compositional element – and this was an entirely new departure at the time.

What looks deceptively simple was, in fact, a highly sophisticated and, at the time, radically new photographic approach. Armed with his poetic eye and colour film in his camera, Helmer-Petersen turned everyday details into art more than two decades before his American counterparts Stephen Shore (born 1947) and William Eggleston (born 1939) made this particular genre famous.

In 1948, Helmer-Petersen published *122 Colour Photographs*, the book that brought him his great breakthrough. He attracted international attention on a major scale, including a substantial feature in the American magazine *LIFE*. In 1950, he travelled to Chicago, where he both studied and taught as a visiting instructor at the Bauhaus-inspired Institute of Design.

The aesthetics of decay and contrast

Nature, industrial sites and harbours all offered a wealth of teeming activity, subjects and materials whose forms, textures and surfaces he could explore at close range. His main interest did not focus on the story behind the subject, but on its graphic lines and planes, its light and shadow. In Chicago, he trained his camera upwards, photographing steel structures, fire escapes and architectural surfaces silhouetted against the city's grey skies. In the 1960s and 1970s, he turned his camera downwards instead, capturing litter, a discarded tin can, a lost glove or cracks in the tarmac.

Throughout his career, Helmer-Petersen also worked in black and white. In the post-war years, his photographs were characterised by stark contrasts and a pronounced graphic quality, with steel structures, cranes and architecture transformed into dynamic black-and-white compositions. Later, the contrasts softened. Although he remained fascinated by the aesthetic qualities of our everyday surroundings, he became increasingly interested in exploring what happens when things decay, weather and fall apart.

'Throughout his life, Keld Helmer-Petersen experimented with the expressive possibilities of photography. His insatiable curiosity and ceaseless zest for innovation have earned him enormous recognition, both in Denmark and internationally, for his tremendous contribution to the history of the medium. He reminds us to look up from our screens and open our eyes to the wonders of the world around us,' says the exhibition's curator, Inger Ellekilde-Bonde, a historian of photography.

A photographer of architecture

Alongside his artistic practice, Keld Helmer-Petersen worked as an architectural photographer and was a senior lecturer at the School of Architecture at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. He photographed buildings by the leading architects of his day, including Arne Jacobsen (1902–1976), and worked closely with eminent figures such as Poul Kjørholm (1929–1980), Finn Juhl (1912–1989) and Jørn Utzon (1918–2008).

In Helmer-Petersen's 1993 book *Frameworks*, Jørn Utzon wrote: 'I am sure that other people who see your pictures will react in the same way as I myself have done on every occasion: as soon as I have looked at them, I find myself looking at my surroundings through different eyes.'

Helmer-Petersen enjoyed a flourishing career, particularly outside his native Denmark, yet for many years he came close to being forgotten in histories of photography. In recent years, his work has once again received considerable international acclaim, not least thanks to the legendary British photographer Martin Parr (1952–2025), who highlighted Helmer-Petersen as one of the most important pioneers of colour photography in the history of the medium in *The Photobook: A History*, his landmark three-volume survey co-authored with Gerry Badger.

'We are delighted that our museum's extensive international collection of photographic art now provides the basis for a comprehensive presentation of one of the Danish photographers who has had the greatest influence on the history of photography as an art form. Photography is a particular focus at Kunstmuseum Brandts, and Keld Helmer-Petersen is a towering figure on the international art scene – one of whom Denmark can be immensely proud.,' says Stine Høholt, Director of Kunstmuseum Brandts.

Facts:

Keld Helmer-Petersen (1920–2013).

Featuring more than 80 works, the exhibition traces the artist's oeuvre and introduces one of Denmark's most fascinating and influential photographic artists.

The exhibition draws on Kunstmuseum Brandt's extensive photography collection, reflecting the institution's special focus on the medium. Early and late works engage each other in an ongoing dialogue across three themed sections spanning the 1940s to the 2010s. These sections explore Helmer-Petersen's fascination with form, the aesthetics of decay and the rhythms of image-making. Series such as *122 Colour Photographs*, *Fragments of a City* and *Deformationer* are pivotal pieces in the exhibition, presented alongside prominent series shot in former industrial districts.

Keld Helmer-Petersen drew inspiration from music, particularly jazz. The exhibition includes one of his experimental films, *Copenhagen Boogie*, in which the waters of Copenhagen Harbour move in patterns to the sounds of jazz. He was also an active writer and commentator on the arts. He published a total of seven books of fine-art photography.

Helmer-Petersen's formal experiments were influenced by figures such as Albert Renger-Patzsch and by the poetic realism of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). Through his photographs, he introduced modernism in Danish photography.

Awards and distinctions

1981 Thorvald Binesbøll Medal

1996 Danmarks Nationalbank's Anniversary Foundation Honorary Award

2005 Fogtdal Photography Award

2011 Forening for Boghaandværk Honorary Award

Selected solo and group exhibitions

1953–54 Post-War European Photography, Museum of Modern Art, New York

1954–55 Subjektive Fotografie II, Schule für Kunst und Handwerk, Saarbrücken

1954 Eksperiment og Dokumentation, Charlottenborg, Copenhagen

1978 Vor 30 Jahren, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne

1980 Color Photographs by Keld Helmer-Petersen, The American-Scandinavian Foundation, New York

1990 D'un Art L'autre, Biennale International, Centre de la Vieille Charité, Marseille

1990 Fotografier af Keld Helmer-Petersen, Museum of Photographic Art, Odense

1992 13 crítics 26 fotògrafs, Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, Barcelona

2004 Retrospektivt, Fotografisk Center, Copenhagen

2005 Les Rencontres d'Arles, Espace Van Gogh, Arles, France

2008 Winter Graphics, Rocket Gallery, London

2014 Un autre monde, La Maison du Danemark, Paris

2019 Finding Beauty, The Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen

Selected public collections

Helmer-Petersen's work is represented in public collections including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; Designmuseum Danmark, Copenhagen, Denmark; Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany; Saarlandmuseum, Saarbrücken, Germany; Stiftung für die Fotografie, Zurich, Switzerland; Kunstsilo, Kristiansand, Norway; the Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen; and Kunstmuseum Brandts, Odense, both Denmark.

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