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Up high in the sky

Stephan Zirwes has spent a lifetime shooting the earth from a bird's-eye view. Oliver Good reviews his new exhibition

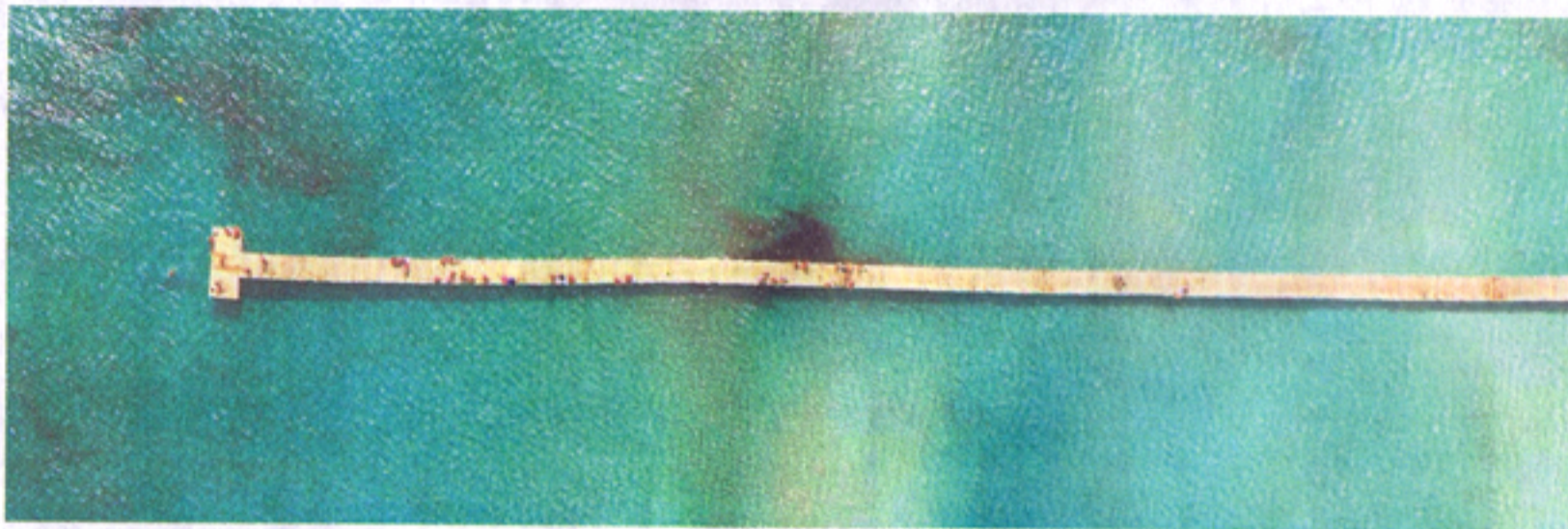
It is a special kind of mind that looks at a factory, a ski slope, or a funfair and wonders how it would appear to somebody sitting on a cloud.

The German photo-artist Stephan Zirwes has one such mind. He has spent much of the last seven years hanging out of helicopters all over the world, taking ultra-high-definition images from directly above, as only a bird might see it.

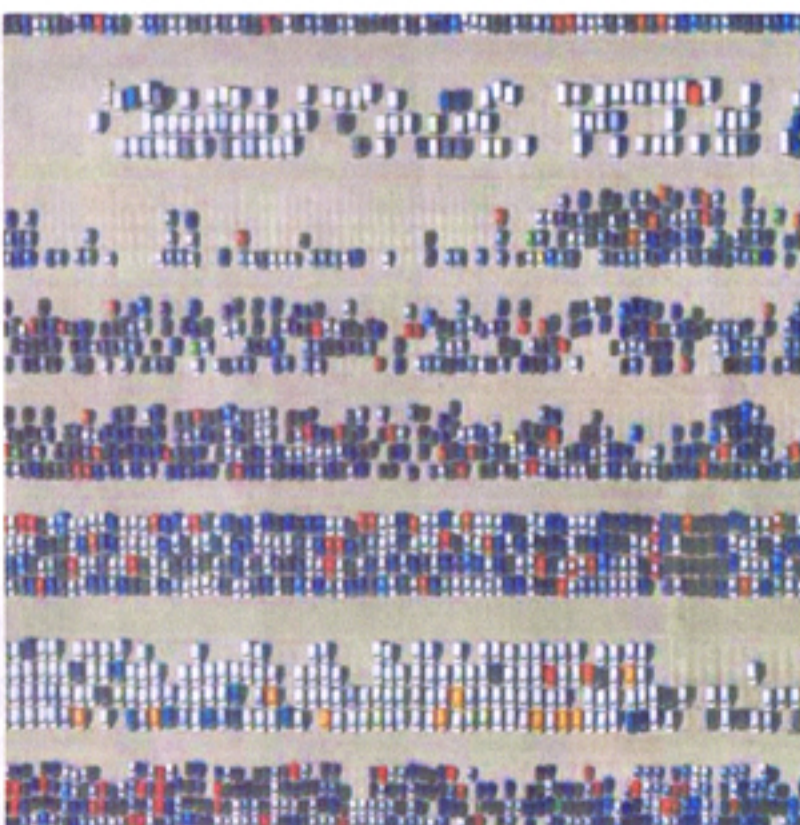
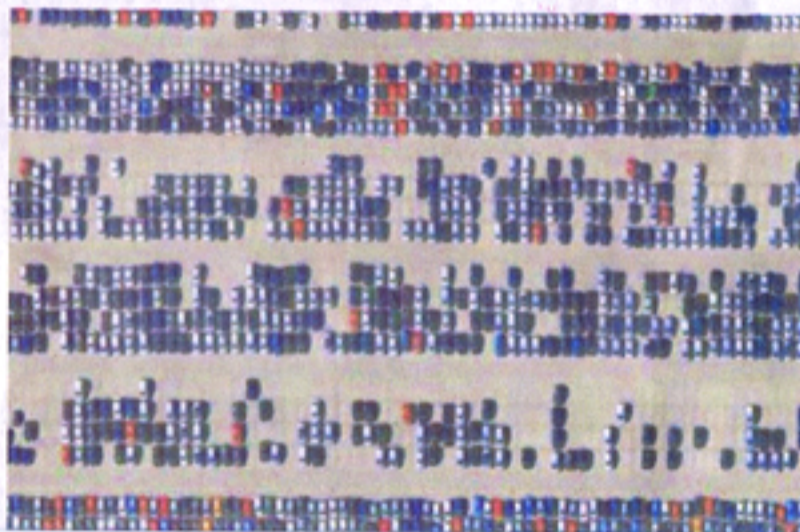
A handful of his works are currently on display at The Empty Quarter fine art photography gallery in the Dubai International Financial Centre. Real Reality may not be this year's best title for an exhibition, but the abstract images on show are nothing less than astonishing. Most are blown up to well over a metre high and wide and show their subjects with an overwhelming and almost hypnotic amount of detail.

Zirwes's work is like no other aerial photography in the world. The pieces are composed in a way that can make a giant car park look like a DNA portrait or a row of shacks resemble a bar code. It is only after staring at them for a few seconds that the lines, dots and other shapes unscramble to become something recognisable.

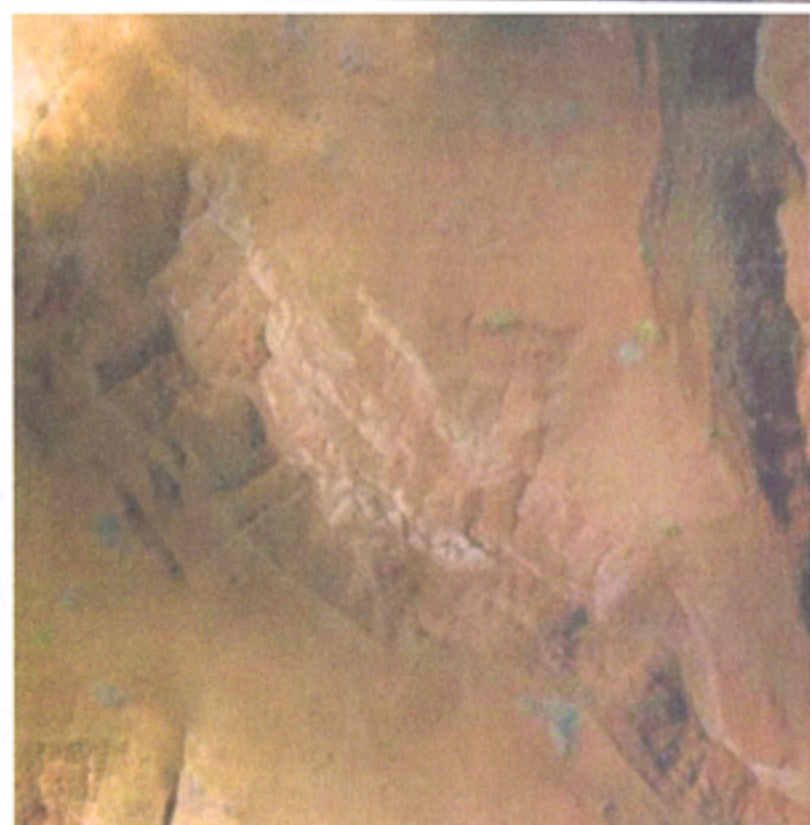
The 41-year-old photographer says his goal is to create an artificial "over-reality" with his pictures. By representing something mundane in a new and unique way, he hopes that the viewer will be inspired to think differently about the object and also about reality. "I discovered this technique by accident," he says. "About seven years ago I began to rent heli-



Zone 2, Leisure 3 by Stephan Zirwes captures bathers on a dock in turquoise waters. Photos Courtesy Empty Quarter



Zone 1, Industry 4 reveals the grid-like pattern of a car park.



Lufthansa 2008 juxtaposes untouched land with modern technology.

as to detract from it. "Sometimes long shadows are very good at giving something another perspective," says Zirwes. "But it can also destroy the symmetry."

Some of his most striking works were taken in Rwanda after the artist was invited by the country's government and given free use of a helicopter for a day. One shot shows dozens of schoolchildren running in different directions on top of deep red earth. The lack of child-shaped shadows seems to dehumanize the tiny figures, but then adds to the sense of surprise when the reality becomes apparent. "When the helicopter flew over the school, everybody ran out," he says. "The colours are beautiful, because there are two different school uniforms; blue and yellow with white. You can't plan that kind of thing. It just happens sometimes."

Zirwes's pictures could not have been taken at any other time. Seven years ago, he was using a three megapixel digital camera and could only dream of capturing the detail he reaches today. He relies on digital technology rather than film, because some of the shots require editing using computer software.

Some of Zirwes most subtle pictures simply deal with contours and shadow, like his image of thousands of overlapping trails created in snow by skiers. There are no humans in sight, but there is evidence of their existence thanks to the detailed patterns created in the snow. They are only visible because of the shad-

been subtly enhanced with image-manipulating software.

Zirwes is desperate to explain the meanings behind his works. They range from comments on reality and fiction to socio-political themes and concepts of timelessness. For example, he explains a piece which shows hundreds of skis, ski-poles and snowboards lying in the snow. "I think that in five or 10 years you will not see people leaving their skis and equipment outside anymore, because they are being stolen," he says. "It's happening everywhere and people are having to get special insurance." Zirwes believes this is relevant because it makes his picture both a frozen moment in time and a document of something under threat.

However, like the rest of his works, the picture requires no explanation. It is enough to say that his images are beautiful, complex and skillfully composed. His images create a feeling of awe, but not for simply artistic reasons. It is the sense of awe that one feels when first told that there are more stars in the universe than grains of sand on earth. In other words, the power of the pictures lies within their ability to invoke the infinite.

Real Reality by Stephan Zirwes runs from until June 16 at The Empty Quarter Gallery in DIFC.

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around the world," he says. "There are huge ports here in Dubai. You can also find them in Europe or America, but nobody ever sees them

like this. Nobody sees how beautiful they can be." Something that sets Zirwes apart from other photographers is that he

has almost no control over the lighting of his subjects. All of his shots are naturally lit and the artist is rarely able to choose the time of day that he

can rent a helicopter. This inevitably leads to shadows becoming a variable factor within his works, just as likely to add something to a picture,