

photograph

January/February 2020

Jean-Pierre Sudre

[Gitterman Gallery, New York](#)

By Michael Wilson

There's an enticing aura of mystery to the work of French photographer Jean-Pierre Sudre (1921–97), the obscurity of his technique and the abstract cast of his imagery mirroring each other to produce a singular and highly evocative set of results. In the unique vintage gelatin-silver prints gathered here – all 20 were made between 1960 and '75, predating the possibility of digital manipulation – Sudre used a variety of unusual chemical processes to pull away from straightforward representation toward something stranger. So while the photographer's overarching theme – the fundamental components of naturally occurring structures like cells and crystals – was clearly apparent throughout, the specific subject matter of each picture was much harder to pin down. Sudre's experimental approach to darkroom manipulation, which began in the early 1950s, lent his subsequent work an alien quality, even when his focus was on subjects as wholly earthbound as the interlocking patterns of forest-floor leaf litter. There was an organic, genuinely timeless quality to it that situated it largely beyond contemporaneous art-world trends.

Diamantine (1964) is one of a number of prints that Sudre made by shooting solutions in which crystals have been dissolved on sheets of glass placed on the enlarger before magnifying and cropping the results to engineer a deliberate confusion of scale. The white lines that cut and swirl across the shot's variegated surface suggest an aerial view of a vast landscape as much as they do cracks in a slab of ice. Sudre also devised the mordancage technique, using a solution of hydrogen peroxide, acetic acid, and copper chloride to soften the darkest areas of an existing print before wiping them away to leave an altered texture. In works such as [Soleil](#) (1965-75), Sudre employed the method to impart an extraordinary delicacy of texture, hinting at cellular microstructures or fractal worlds-within-worlds. Sudre's use of color is notable, too; in [Apocalypse, Révélation](#) (1967), for example, he added toner to give most of the image a moss-green cast, leaving only a small cluster of crystalline forms in the center untouched. The result hints at mutation or even metastasization; like Sudre's oeuvre as a whole it's lovely, and faintly unsettling.