

Charles Jones

10 November, 2006 – 6 January 2007



New York Howard Greenberg Gallery is pleased to announce an exhibition of still life photographs by British born Charles Jones. Viewed as a proto-Modernist and outsider artist, Jones, a humble English gardener and photographer working at the turn of the 20th century, is one of art's most mysterious and recent discoveries. Jones' work came to light in 1981, when discovered in a trunk at an antiques market in London.

The only clue to the identity of the photographer were the initials "C.J." or sometimes the signature "Charles Jones" that was scrawled on the backs of the prints along with fastidious notations giving the precise name of each of the subjects. But the story of the photographer remained unknown until a woman, seeing the photographs on BBC television, identified them as the work of her grandfather, a gardener who worked at several private estates between the years 1894 and 1910.

The sharply detailed, starkly composed images of vegetables and flowers contain many modernist elements yet, remarkably, Jones' photographs predate the Modernist movement by more than a decade. Photographers such as Karl Blossfeldt, Paul Outerbridge, Edward Steichen, Josef Sudek and Edward Weston created similarly avant-garde still-life compositions in the 1920s and '30s but, as far as we know, possessed no knowledge of the innovations achieved by Jones.

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Jones, the son of a master butcher, was born in 1866 and trained as a gardener from an early age. At the age of 27, he began working at Ote Hall in West Sussex tending the estate's fruit trees and large walled-in vegetable garden. For the next ten years he mastered gardening while also experimenting with photography. Within a very short period of time he was producing exceptionally beautiful gold-toned gelatin silver prints with large format glass negatives. His photographic achievements seemed to have remained in obscurity but his gardening achievements were acclaimed in the September 1905 issue of *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, which noted that Jones was "quite an enthusiastic fruit grower and his delight in his well-trained fruit trees was readily apparent."

It is likely that Jones' intentions in photography were purely documentary and that he photographed simply for his own private investigation. However, the results of his photographic endeavors are undeniably artistic and run strikingly contrary to the Victorian taste of the time. Working with his large camera, Jones photographed his specimens isolated from nature by draping neutral dark or light cloths behind them as if they were characters posing for portraits in a studio setting. The plants are often captured while still in the ground or just dug up and composed into groups and piles. Jones clearly paid close attention to composition and use of light. In several photographs of bean runners, or string beans, he has purposefully stripped away the outer skins to partially expose the inner seeds. The repetitive forms of the beans and exposed seeds are delicately wrapped by a thin silvery light.

In the mid-1990s, the discovery of Jones' unusual photographs grabbed the attention of curator Robert Flynn Johnson, who co-edited the book *The Plant Kingdoms of Charles Jones* and curated the exhibition of the same name for the de Young Museum in San Francisco in 1998. The photographs were later exhibited that year at the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne. In 2005, the Folio Society, London, listed Jones' image *Bean Runners* as one of the 100 greatest photographs ever taken. The exhibition of Jones' work at Howard Greenberg Gallery will be the largest and most extensive in the U.S. to date and will include a selection of the original prints reproduced in *Plant Kingdoms*.

In the South Gallery, accompanying the Charles Jones exhibition, will be selections of still life work from Modernists Karl Blossfeldt, Edward Steichen, Dr. Dain Tasker and Edward Weston.

For further information, or to request visuals for press,
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Starting November 10th, the exhibition can be viewed at www.howardgreenberg.com