

Water colours

Photographic focus on ships

Dan Kaufman must be the only person who tracks vessels on AIS to find out the hull colour of container ships.

Kaufman's colour searches date back to the day he was photographing a panorama on the Savannah River, Georgia, in the southeast US, downstream from its port, "when suddenly my field of view went black. I looked up instantly to see a 900ft containership just 30ft away, and started shooting instinctively."

When he printed the day's shots, he realised that the blocks of colours he had captured carried unmistakable echoes of the art of Mark Rothko, the Russian-American abstract expressionist. Thus Kaufman's *Rothko Series 1* was born, and he started planning ship shoots.

Although Kaufman initially studied architecture and had no formal art training, he began his career as a painter, inspired by Rothko, Salvador Dali, Jackson Pollock and Wassily Kandinsky, among others. He also cites his mother, Tricia, who took him to a Pollock exhibition at Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1965. "I came home that day and started painting."

His love affair with photography began early, "working a paper route so I could buy a German 35mm rangefinder... my first exposure to a darkroom in a converted guest bathroom". By the late 1990s his photography had become minimalist. "I was known for a time as Daniel Scissorhands due to my propensity to cut out what I did not want."

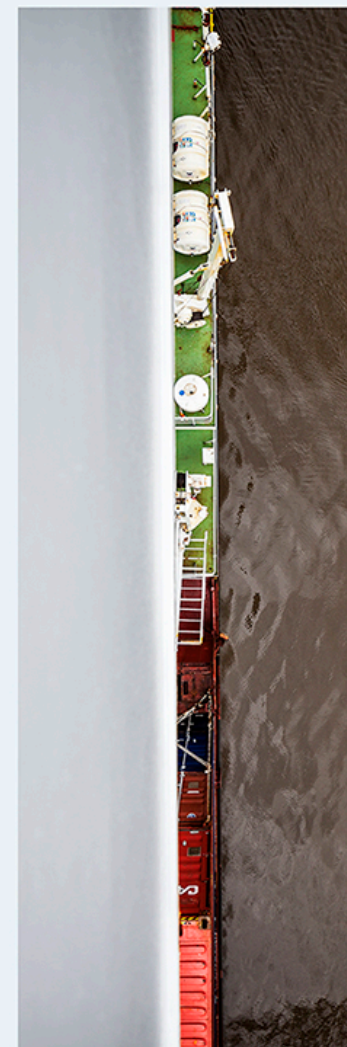
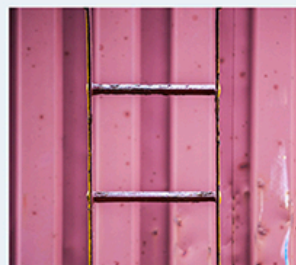
But then came the ships. At first he was not interested in their names, let alone who owned them. That changed when Captain William Van Puffelen at towage company Biblia said something along the lines of: "I don't know anything about art, but you sure do make these ships look beautiful. You ought to show them to the shipping lines."

And so Kaufman started contacting shipping companies. Within days, he received an email from Hapag-Lloyd's senior director of corporate communications, Nils Haupt, saying: "Dear Dan, I immediately loved your photos — and yes: these look like Rothkos." An invitation followed to spend time on Hapag-Lloyd's 7,200-teu *Berlin Express* when it was in port at Savannah.

Kaufman quotes Rothko ("Silence is so accurate") when discussing his latest series, *The Fine Art of Shipping; the Hapag-Lloyd Berlin Express*. "When you're on the river at bunker level with the ship," the photographer says, "the 'silence' is like the roar of thunder, its strength is overpowering. One feels a respect for the magnificence of the vessel." That feeling continued on board the *Berlin Express*. "In the depths of the engine rooms the 'silence' is numbing; to the taut vibrations in the mooring lines the silence is a shiver." ©

Paul Berrill

01-02 Dan Kaufman's *Rothko Series 1* and *Rothko Series 2* — images of ships at the Port of Savannah — bear an uncanny resemblance to the work of Mark Rothko (1903-70)



+ Dan Kaufman's photos are available in limited-edition sets, generally of seven or 10 prints. When one is sold, the price for the next print is increased, to "respect the scarcer quantity value and the faith that early adopters have in my work". Prices generally range between \$1,600 and \$2,400. That's good, but not quite in the Rothko bracket. His 1951 work *No 6 (Violet, Green and Red)* is the fifth-most-expensive painting in history, fetching \$186m in 2014.

03 Notice the resemblance? Rothko's 1950 *White Center (Yellow, Pink and Lavender on Rose)*, sold to the Qatari royal family in 2007 for \$72.8m (Photograph: Matt Cardy/Getty)

04-06 In the *Hapag-Lloyd Berlin Express* series, the horizontal bands of colour in Kaufman's 'Rothko' images are often replaced by vertical divisions, although he says that's 'not intentional, just... how the image, the view, struck me'