

An interview with Beat Suter FRPS

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An interview with Beat Suter FRPS

Beat Suter is a member of the RPS Swiss Chapter who lives just outside Bern in Switzerland. In May 2025, he was awarded his Fellowship with a successful submission of his photo book: *Im Dialog*. Beat shares with us his inspiration, idea and aims for his photo book, the connection with his grandfather's photography and the process and path he followed from idea to submission.

Claudine: What gave you the inspiration for your photo book? Could you tell us a little bit about the background to your idea?

Beat: My photo book project began with the discovery of the photographs of my late grandfather, Paul Suter. In the family home where my parents lived in Schwarzenburg near to Bern, there were many cupboards full of his slides and photographs. When they moved, my father gave everything to a local photographer. Eventually, this photographer cleared out his photostudio and found them. He called to tell me that he had my grandfather's entire collection. He had kept them for over thirty years and didn't throw anything away during this time which I think was very lucky!

Some of the photographs were sent directly to the Alpine Museum in Bern and some were sent to me. Now almost all the glass slides and film negatives are held either by the Alpine Museum or the State Archive in Bern.

Claudine: Did you set out with a clear theme or did it emerge through the process?

Beat: The theme emerged organically through the process of reviewing and curating images, rather than starting with a predefined concept. As I explored my grandfather's images, I saw an opportunity to combine his historical images with my own contemporary work but I didn't have a solid idea at the start. When I received the last set of images, there were a lot of glass slide stereo images from the 1920s to 1940s. I then had the idea to create diptychs, using a single left-hand image from my grandfather alongside one of mine. I was struck by their potential for creative reinterpretation, such as the one on the cover of the book. I saw a tea cup in my grandfather's image and so created an image to go alongside his. In some way, I was creating a "posthumous dialogue" with him, playing with shapes I saw and the humour in his images.



There were also serious photos such as the image I shot from the top of the World Trade Centre in New York before 9/11: most people are used to seeing images of the towers from below. Another diptych shows an image of the stage at Schloß Heidelberg in 1933 showing Nazi flags which was taken by my grandfather as the family travelled through Germany to the far north. I combined this image with modern-day advertising which had been defaced with racist text.

So I discovered the narrative as I explored my grandfather's photographs. I balanced humour, historical context, and personal connection, allowing the story to unfold naturally.

Claudine: How did you select your images?

Beat: When I received the images from the photographer, I reviewed them all, scanning approximately 10% which still amounted to hundreds of images. I was sent further scans by the Alpine museum to add to my review.

It was a very subjective process to select the ones I liked and so I used a collaborative and iterative process. I had approximately one hundred images selected at the start and I created a rating system to evaluate and select successful candidates: A for exhibition, B for a photo book or C rejected. I made small prints of my choices, laid them out on the floor, and repeatedly rearranged the sequence and order to achieve something I liked and felt was representative of my idea. Most importantly throughout the process, I sought feedback and advice from members of the Swiss Chapter group and other photographer friends to guide my final selection.

Claudine: Are there images that are particularly important to you and are representative of what you were trying achieve?

Beat: There are so many different images from which to choose: some humorous, some serious, some with very abstract execution. Here are a few I like.

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Lake Riffel, with Matterhorn Photograph by Paul Suter: 9th August 1932.

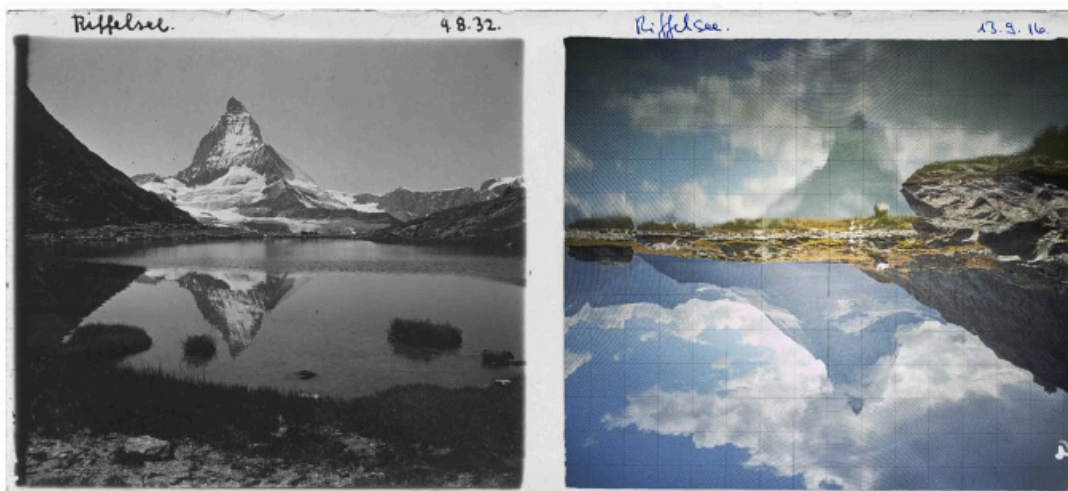
This is a most classic view of the Matterhorn showed on endless postcards.

Lake Riffel, with Matterhorn Photograph by Beat Suter, 13th September 2016

Inspired by such postcard-views I sought out such places mainly in Switzerland and captured them photographically. Just as in earlier times, a postcard photographer saw the image to be captured under the cloth behind his large-format camera, here it is also altered by the ground-glass screen, Fresnel lens and grid lines. Therefore, it is shown upside down, as it is on the ground-glass screen.

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Thus, the Diptych is more or less educational, explaining parts of the photo-optical process.



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Milan, Italy: Cathedral. Photograph by Paul Suter, October 1933

Rouen, France: Abbey of Saint-Ouen. Photograph by Beat Suter, May 2023

I took this photograph while staying in Rouen. The Abbey of Saint-Ouen was used for an arts exhibition and we just dropped by during the last few minutes. I found this interesting installation of dental casts and mirror fragments which reflected the interior view of this gothic abbey.

As a Diptych, it makes one reflect on Gothic architecture.



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Heidelberg, Germany: Castle courtyard with central house Photograph by Paul Suter, August 1934. My grandparents and father travelled to the Faroe Islands and Svalbard. This journey led them through Germany before the second world war. On the picture of the courtyard there is an empty tribune and some decoration with the swastika emblem.

Bern, Switzerland: Freight station Photograph by Beat Suter, October 2009
This shows an advertising billboard with text in German sprayed on: 'Out with the Turks - on the gallows' including two major orthographic mistakes.

This Diptych is a call against racism.



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Bogliasco, Italy: Net repairmen Photograph by Paul Suter, April 1931

In the town of Bogliasco, near Genoa, fishermen are repairing their nets.

Isle-sur-la-Sorgue: Mr. DIY Photograph by Beat Suter May 2024

I photographed this modern industrial building in May 2024 when staying in Isle-sur-la-Sorgue in the south of France. 'Monsieur Bricolage' is a chain of French stores, for DIY craftsmen.

The Diptych refers to the olden days, when people repaired their tools rather than throwing them away.



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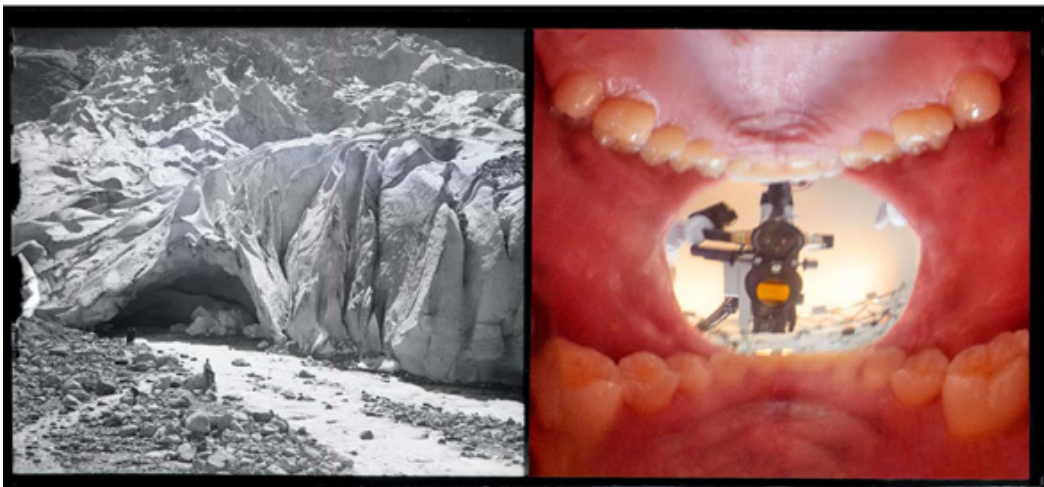
Glacier gate, Grindelwald Photograph by Paul Suter, 1930

In the 1930s, the so called 'mouth' of the upper Grindelwald glacier was reaching over one kilometre further down, easily accessible by a foot path.

Vista ex Oris Photograph by Beat Suter

This is one of the most difficult photographs I have ever taken. It was shot through an operation microscope as seen, with only minimal post production corrections to primarily reduce blur.

The resulting Diptych is a humorous play on the 'mouth'



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Piz Medel, Switzerland: Mountain Climbers resting on Piz Medel

Photograph by Paul Suter.

I love the funny picture of my grandfather with the heads of the resting mountaineers almost invisibly sticking out between the rocks.

The Men's Choir. Photograph by Beat Suter

Dental Mannequins at the Dental School in Bern.

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In this diptych, I wanted to reply to my grandfather's image with a humorous picture of 'The Men's Choir'.



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Group of men in living room Photograph by Paul Suter.

Note the camera and tripod reflecting itself in the mirror!

Double self-portrait: Confronting an 'Alien' Photograph by Beat Suter

In this diptych, I responded to my grandfather's fantastic, humorous group portrait with my own funny self-portrait.



Pages 86 / 87**Nervi: Park** Photograph by Paul Suter, April 1931

Oftentimes my grandfather dyed his photographs according to the main colours of the image - green for plants, blue for seascapes, red for brick buildings

Lavender Photograph by Beat Suter, September 2023

From March 2023 onwards, I started a series of photographs with an extremely high magnification using a similar technique as used by Levon Biss (<https://microsculpture.net>). The purpose was to use the technique in dental research, replacing scanning electron microscopic (SEM) images of relatively low magnification with the advantage, that in contrast to the SEM, a photograph can show colours and transparencies as well, not only B&W untransparent surface imaging. The shown image of lavender from September 2023 has a magnification of 380x (reduced from a 920-times magnification).

The Diptych plays with the shapes and colour of the palm trees and the highly magnified lavender.



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Son and father, photographed by father and son Photograph by Paul Suter and Photograph by Beat Suter.

My grandfather Paul Suter photographed his son (my father) on a children's chair, using a normal chair as a table, set on top of a chest of drawers. Yet another funny picture he took!

In the Diptych I replied to this image with a photograph I took when my father moved to a retirement home. He took about seven chairs with him to that small apartment, so I decided to have him appear three times in my image!



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Arolla, Switzerland: Raclette Photograph by Paul Suter. 4th August 1940 The traditional Raclette was also made in summer! Cheese was melted by fire in the forest and scraped onto the plate to be served to customers.

Winneconne, USA: BBQ Photograph by Beat Suter, 29th July 2013

My late Uncle Rocky on his BBQ grill stand at Lake Winneconne, Wisconsin.

The Diptych shows a history of outside cooking and of course, some humour!



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Portrait of Christian Klucker Photograph by Paul Suter.

A mountain guide, Christian Klucker was a very well-known early exponent of free-climbing with international reputation. See Wikipedia entry.

Bern, Switzerland: Entry staircase to Einstein exhibition, Historical Museum. Photograph by Beat Suter.

Albert Einstein wrote his most important work in Bern.

The Diptych respects the almost forgotten one of two famous personalities.



Claudine: How did you approach the design, layout and print and did you collaborate with anyone to produce your photo book?

Beat: It was primarily a solo effort but with a lot of collaborative input. For the design, I chose a compact 27x27 cm 'bookshelf' book which would support the format of my images. I created and laid out the entire book in InDesign. My aim was to keep image pages clean and simple, with context and reference in a detailed index at the back of the book.

I worked closely with a professional print shop in Stuttgart, Germany who supported me throughout the printing process. First, I carefully selected my chosen paper by requesting samples to look at and then I made a number of proof prints. I was very happy with the colour accuracy of the prints with my calibrated monitor, as photographs can often look very different in print form compared to on screen. The resulting print quality was very impressive and I was very satisfied with my final product!

To support and develop my skills, I attended a book-making workshop in Zurich organised by the Swiss Chapter which helped immensely throughout the process. Finally, I also organised an RPS 1-1 discussion to help me develop my Statement of Intent and a Supporting Evidence document of 1500 words to support my RPS Fellowship Distinctions submission.

Claudine: How important to you was the tactile experience of a photo book?

Beat: I believe that a photograph is only truly finished when printed so a physical book was very important to me. I value the experience of physically handling and exploring a book, and saw this as a perfect way to preserve and share family history in a more tangible format.

Claudine: What surprised you most during the process?

Beat: I was surprised by the humour in my grandfather's photographs and the unexpected connections I could create between his images and mine. I discovered historical details I hadn't known before, like the location or identity of a person in an old photograph and the context of a particular image. The project became a journey of discovery, not just about photography, but about family history.

Claudine: Was there a moment during the process when everything seemed to come together, or fall apart?

Beat: I didn't have a dramatic moment of everything coming together or falling apart. However, there were pivotal moments like receiving my grandfather's photographs, realizing I could create a 'posthumous dialogue' with him and discovering the humorous nature of his images. The most significant turning point was when I started creating diptychs by replacing one side of the dual images with my own photographs and at this point I realised my idea and approach.

Claudine: How did you handle the copyright and preservation of your grandfather's photographs?

Beat: All of my grandfather's works was given to the Alpine Museum, and with this I also transferred the copyright across to them. At the same time, I obtained an agreement that allowed me to access and use the images for this photo book and for my resulting exhibition which ran from October 2024 to January 2025 at the National History Museum in Bern. At this time, I also registered the book with an ISBN number which also ensured the photographs would be preserved for future generations.

Claudine: What advice would you give to someone creating their first photo book?

Beat: I would advise making your own prototype photo books first. I started by making cook books with my wife and then family books with interviews and pictures of my extended family. I also practiced using design and layout software, learning about paper selection and researching where I could print. I stress the importance of physical prints, a collaborative selection process, and maintaining a learning mindset.

Start small, be collaborative, and view the first photo book as a learning journey!

Claudine: How has the response been, and what's next?

Beat: The response has positive, with a successful exhibition and book sales. I distributed copies to family and institutions, receiving great feedback from both personal and professional circles.

Looking forward, I'm exploring new projects, including a potential book on an artist paper manufacturer in Ticino, Switzerland, a large format photography work inspired by Hiroshi Sugimoto, and continuing with landscape photography.

Claudine: Finally, where can people buy your photo book and see your work?

Beat: You can find more information about both my photography and photo book: Im Dialog on my website at:

www.beatsuter.ch/12205914/fotobuch-im-dialog

Thank you Beat for this wonderful view into the world of your and your grandfather's photography. A fascinating journey with real insight and knowledge of how you can approach this type of project. Wishing you all the best with your future photo books!

Written by Claudine Hart

If you have recently obtained a distinction, please let us know by emailing international@rps.org