

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Luigi Ghirri

Felicità

Curated by Alessio Bolzoni and Luca Guadagnino

Private view: Thursday 22 January, 6–8pm

Exhibition dates: 23 January–9 May 2026

Thomas Dane Gallery

3 & 11 Duke Street, St James's, London SW1

Thomas Dane Gallery in London presents *Felicità*, an exhibition of Italian artist Luigi Ghirri (b. 1943, Scandiano, Italy, d. 1992, Roncocesi, Italy), across the gallery's two spaces on Duke Street, St James's. Curated by Alessio Bolzoni and Luca Guadagnino, *Felicità* will be the second exhibition at Thomas Dane Gallery dedicated to Ghirri's work, following *Luigi Ghirri: Colazione sull'Erba* in 2019.

There have been over a hundred exhibitions of Luigi Ghirri's photography; countless texts published about him; dozens written even by himself, on his own work, on what image-making can become. Many essays on his practice – including at least two of his own – start with the image of the whole world: *The Blue Marble*, taken for the first time from aboard the Apollo flight in 1972. The artist described being confronted by the thought that this image contained not only the entire world as we knew it, but also all images ever created of the world: the graffiti, frescoes, paintings, writings, photographs, books, films – an image to contain all images. Reading back his recollection now, it feels like witnessing someone confront the heart of modernity, someone writing from the brink of postmodernity. We can find ourselves today, standing at the brink of something yet unseen, asking the same question as did he: What of new can we possibly find here? Ghirri responds with images, with curiosity and the kind of self-awareness we recognise in the image-makers of today. And with this exhibition, curated by Alessio Bolzoni and Luca Guadagnino, we discover him not strictly as a photographer, but as an artist working with photography in the most conceptual and contemporary terms: of his time, yet precociously of the now.

A great portion of the exhibition presents photographs never before exhibited or published – a surprising fact, given the five decades of Ghirri's extensive exhibition history. That his archive should still reveal ideas in his work overlooked by previous narratives attests to just how rich his artistic aims were: this exhibition seeks to foreground the works lesser-seen and yet most prescient in feeling. Selected by the curators from Ghirri's archive, which is still held at his home by his family, the photographs that introduce the exhibition in the first gallery (at 3 Duke Street, St James's) focus on his work with surface and representation, the core of his subversion of the banality with which images circulate in our world. Ghirri was an excited consumer of culture: his essays are rich in reference to the films, literature, philosophy and music of his time. But the reference most pervasive of all seems to be Jorge Luis Borges, and his stories of the world as an infinite library, or the world as a map ever-expanding in detail: of media production itself as the medium in which the modern man sees himself represented. Ghirri saw that image culture made the world into a catalogue, an index, of itself. His photographs on view in the first section of the exhibition are near-abstract compositions that include fragments of postcards and newspapers stripped of context and reappropriated in his frame; mirrors acting as frames to the reflections of

3 & 11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL: +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX: +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdanegallery.com

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other mirrors; posters stripped off the walls to reveal intricately random image layers; street signs indexing something beyond the frame; and finally, cropped details of the pages of an atlas, Ghirri's way of travelling the world by tracing his finger on a map of the world, as if a character in a Borges story. Ghirri died in 1992, just two years before the first full-length English publication of *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard's landmark philosophical reading of Borges that defined our understanding of image-making for decades to come. That same year, the first digital camera was released for the mainstream consumer market.

In one sense, Ghirri shot pictures the way we shoot with our phones. In another sense, this is deceptive: he was a master of composition, and the randomness or banality suggested by his framing is a precise illusion. This is most widely celebrated in his images of landscapes of Emilia-Romagna, the region in which he was based his entire life, one he saw eaten away at by industrialisation and one in which he subverted the codes of tourist photography. But this exhibition skirts the most totemic images of Ghirri's for the more subdued and nuanced: the second portion of the exhibition (at 11 Duke Street, St James's) explores his interiors and exteriors, and how he used them to further his conceptual aims. Pictures of wallpapers and wall panelling flatten the room as if it were another page in a book, the printed atlas he travelled on with his finger in other compositions. Writing on the wall and writing on a page echo the same flatness, as if he were taking a picture of an image on a screen: every surface is like a mirror of the medium. Four photographs from the studio of Giorgio Morandi remind us of Ghirri's relationships with the other Italian artists of his time, those who also grappled with modernity with various strategies: of minimalism, of reduction, of indexicality in representation, and a suspicious eye towards symbolism. While still working as a land surveyor in the 1960s, Ghirri was introduced into the social circles of Conceptual artists working in Modena among the zeitgeist of Arte Povera: the discussions of their radical approaches to art coincided with a formative time in Ghirri's exploration of photography as a tool. Ghirri's exhibitions began to gain momentum in the 1970s, enabling him to quit his job to pursue his art practice wholly. By the 1980s, he developed his most recognisable series of landscape photography, the *Paesaggio Italiano*, to which the final chapter of the exhibition is devoted.

Before this, though, another conceptualist slips in between Ghirri's landscapes, foreshadowing the subversion of the trope of a paysage: the exhibition features two puzzle works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres (b. 1957, Guáimaro, Cuba; d. 1996, Miami, USA), "*Untitled*" 1988, and "*Untitled*" (*Key West*), 1992. The two works consist of photographs taken seemingly from a boat – one of sunshine reflecting off the surface of water in Florida's Key West and one of a forested lakeshore house – and like Ghirri's, fit in with the vocabulary of touristic photography, of something accidentally intimate found in a family album, or now on our phone's camera reel. This felt intimacy is that of someone capturing a moment likely without the presumption of a viewer, or at least the artist replicating this unpretentiousness. Gonzalez-Torres used a commercial puzzle-cutting service to create these works, which transformed photographs into jigsaw puzzles and returned them sealed in plastic bags. He did so with a variety of source imagery, including numerous personal photographs through the 1980s and 90s: photos of his lover, their last letters to each other, newspaper clippings of crowds, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, references to the Gulf War, childhood portraits, and quotidian moments of places travelled to. The landscape, here, is a flicker of somebody's presence, captured by the camera and unravelled by the fragmentation of a jigsaw puzzle – and then brought back together again, solved and sealed to never come apart again.

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And for Ghirri, too, it isn't the land which is in focus. Rather, it is the tool of the frame, used with contemporary self-awareness. Each vista is recursive: an image of an image of a landscape, an image of banality, an image of us looking at a landscape. His home region was made most famous as a theatrical backdrop to films like Fellini's *La Strada* or Antonioni's *Red Desert*, yet in this selection, his compositions hark back more to the great image-makers of the filmic, glowing American landscape, like Ed Ruscha or William Eggleston. Like them, and their fascination with gas stations, he takes a region deeply subdued by petrochemical industrialisation and intense human activity, and turns them into images like Hollywood postcard candy: charming in colour and seductive in composition. This turn, along with his pointed use of screens and rectangles that replicate the frame of the printed image we look at on the wall, reminds us of our place in the process of looking. All the vanishing lines of perspective, in the end, converge right where our eyes meet them: they are products of our perception as much as subjects to it. Our participation in image-making and its circulation is the great subject of Ghirri's century, and the one we live in. His practice is a rare example of work so precocious as to only gain nuance with each year's passing, with each new image from the archive revealing his foresight for our understanding of the now. (Tosia Leniarska, 2025)

A book to accompany the exhibition will be published by MACK, featuring works from *Felicità*, as well as three essays by Luigi Ghirri. This is a bilingual edition, with texts in English and Italian.

Luigi Ghirri (b. 1943, Scandiano, Italy, d. 1992, Ronceschi, Italy) began his work as an artist in the early 1970s in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy, where he would spend the rest of his working life. In 1978, he published *Kodachrome*, a pivotal book that encapsulates the diverse themes that would go on to define his career.

Recent solo exhibitions include: *Luigi Ghirri. Polaroid '79-'83*, Museo Pecci, Prato, Italy (2025–26, forthcoming); *Luigi Ghirri: Il viaggio. Photographs 1970-1991*, MASI Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland (2024); *Luigi Ghirri: The Map and the Territory*, Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany, travelled to: Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain; Jeu de Paume, Paris, France (2018–2019); *The Landscape of Architecture*, La Triennale di Milano, Milan, Italy (2018); *Pensare per immagini*, MAXXI Museum, Rome, Italy (2013); and *Project Prints*, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy (2012). In 2011 and 2013, Ghirri's work was featured in the Venice Biennale.

Ghirri's work will also be included in *Atlante*, a group exhibition curated by James Lingwood at Thomas Dane Gallery, Naples, 3 February–5 May 2026.

For sales and exhibitions enquiries please contact Simone Battisti:
simone@thomasdanegallery.com

For press enquiries please contact:
Thomas Dane Gallery, Patrick Shier: patrick@thomasdanegallery.com
Rees & Co, Megan Miller: megan.miller@reesandco.com | +44 (0)7743 036449

Gallery hours: Tuesday to Friday 11am–6pm, Saturday 12pm–6pm or by appointment.
Admission: Free

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TEL: +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX: +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdanegallery.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Tel: +44 (0) 20 79252505

Nearest Tube: Green Park or Piccadilly Circus

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