





A QUIET GRANDEUR

CANDIDA HÖFER'S
photographs—masterpieces of serenity
and symmetry—may be devoid of
people, but they're far from empty.
As PHILIP GEFTER finds, her majestic
interiors are suffused with the poetry
of the lives they once contained.

German photographer Candida Höfer's subjects might be viewed as the cultural building blocks of a civilized world: the public library, the encyclopedic museum, the grand cathedral. The heightened formality of public architecture at one time channeled the reverent atmosphere, and often the grandeur, of just such institutions of worship, whether designed to nurture the spirit or the mind. Höfer's interior of the Church of St. Andrew in Düsseldorf, Germany—part of her upcoming show at Sean Kelly Gallery, in New York (from May 8 to June 20; 475 10th Ave.; skny.com)—registers

Dominikanerkirche Sankt Andreas
Düsseldorf II, 2011.

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what these spaces do for people—and what people do to these spaces—more visible,” she explains. “Absence is often the strongest presence.”

This koan-like philosophy didn’t always guide Höfer’s work. Born in Eberswalde in 1944, she began her career as a portrait photographer for newspapers. It wasn’t until she met her mentors, Bernd and Hilla Becher, at the Düsseldorf Art Academy in the 1970s that humans began vanishing from her compositions. The Bechers brought a methodical rigor and exacting optical precision to their own copious documentation of the last vestiges of industrialization in the European landscape. Their focus was on the industrial object—the water tower, the gas tank, the coal bunker—and not the individuals who used them.

Among the Bechers’ students, Höfer might be called the fourth “Struthsky,” a contraction of the names of her arguably better known classmates: Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, and Andreas Gursky. All of them work in the same systematic manner of photographic documentation as their mentors and represent what is referred to as the Düsseldorf school of photography. All of them approach their subject matter with forensic regard and objective neutrality.

Höfer sets up her camera in each of these vast rooms at an elevated height and aims her lens at the center of the

the humbling proportion of so monumental a structure on the individual; its daunting ornamentation is exquisitely crafted, as if by the hand of God. While her public interiors display the architecture of the past, she presents these relics of high-minded purpose without nostalgia or irony. Her photographs are not intended, she claims, as “documents of things soon or already gone.”

Yet an elegiac quietude seems to suffuse her empty reading rooms, opera houses, and exhibition halls. Now that an infinite archive of science, literature, music, and art can be stored in the cloud, there is less need for the citadels that Höfer meticulously photographs. “When I started making images of libraries, for example, or even banks, those building types were already on the list for fundamental change because of digitalization,” she says. “But this was not driving me. I find these spaces still very resilient, so they do not need nostalgic regret.”

The lack of human beings in Höfer’s public interiors might be an apt metaphor for the computer age, but she has her own aesthetic reasons for photographing these grand spaces without people. “The absence of people makes



far wall. The opposite wall, then, is always parallel to the picture plane, providing an undistorted, almost clinical view of the room's geometry, its materials, its craftwork, and its open space. Her photographs provide formal evidence of the structure of the room, the period in which it was designed, the culture it served, and the unique elements that construct the specific environment. She is aiming for as objective a record of these interior spaces as the camera can provide.

While geometry dominates her neutral compositions, the subtlety of light in each of her pictures adds a poetic calm to the determined structure of the rooms. In one 2009 picture of the sumptuous Girolamini library in Naples, Italy, Höfer captures a band of light emanating from the top row of windows; this natural, exalted light has a distinct contour of its own that illuminates the oval paintings and the decorative filigree along the wall on which it hovers.

In recent years, Höfer has been making mural-size prints that extend beyond six feet in length. Her photographs contain such precision of detail that it is possible to see the titles of books, say, lined against a library wall, which might be 50 feet away from the camera. By presenting the facts with such optical fidelity to every detail, Höfer retains the essential lesson of the Düsseldorf school and underscores the fine tradition of photographic documentation. She has carried that tradition forward with forensic exactitude and solid artistic resolution and confirmed an intrinsic capability of photography: to show us what is actually there. ♦

Benrather Schloss Düsseldorf IV, 2011.



