

Lorch, Catrin. "Candida Höfer," *frieze*, October 2009.

frieze

Candida Höfer



It is as though the Baroque era was holding its breath for the brief duration of the shutter's exposure: tall, ornate white walls are divided into two tiers, further subdivided by flat pilasters; placed almost symmetrically at the centre of the far wall hangs a large mirror, reflecting neither the camera nor any other hint of activity; above the mirror, a huge crystal chandelier is suspended from the ceiling. Museum Morsbroich Leverkusen II (2008) was part of an extensive exhibition of works by Candida Höfer, displayed in the same Baroque palace where the photograph was taken. In a subtle twist, the signifier here mingles with the signified – a ploy that seems fully in keeping with the clever, calm and sometimes slightly precious character of her work.

Höfer is famous for her carefully planned and executed images devoid of human presence. Rarely smaller than two or three metres in height and width, her works focus on a world in which the visual language of architecture is a significant icon. Her pictures reveal a preference for cultivated places such as libraries, museums or old zoos, whose spatial design marks them out as storehouses of knowledge, as treasure troves of cultural artefacts, or as sites of scientific inquiry. Höfer imbues her images of these places with a definitive look – not so as to render further change impossible, but in order to create a kind of benchmark against which any future development will be measured. There is nothing transitory about these spaces: the windows are mostly closed or draped, and no one ever walks through the door.

Although Höfer organized her photographs into an extensive show, the resulting exhibition did not follow the logic of a retrospective – a concept she rejects. Both older and more recent works were, on occasion, rearranged: the series 'Flipper' (1973) was presented, with the help of architects Kuehn Malvezzi, in the same kind of vitrine tables as Höfer's more recent project 'On Kawara: Date Paintings' (2009), which attempts to document Kawara's oeuvre at the point where each work is hung in its respective collector's home. While the vintage black and white prints of 'Flipper' reveal the contrast-rich, detailed world of pinball machines, Kawara's paintings occupy the centre of each photograph, like gravitational poles around which everything revolves – regardless of whether they are hung above a staircase, over a door or in the middle of a proud row.

The inclusion of two of Höfer's relatively unknown slide series revealed a surprising side to her practice, which had until now appeared diverse, although never unwieldy. The calmly paced colour slide projection *Türken in Deutschland* (Turks in Germany, 1979) contrasts with the often opaque presence of many of Höfer's other works: this is a dense, inquisitive, at times almost spontaneous documentation that puts people at centre stage (although the aptitude with which the artist depicts shop counters, living-room wallpaper and furniture visible in the background reveal her affinity with interiors even then). This work, plus a series of black and white photographs, made up the portfolio Höfer submitted to Bernd and Hilla Becher in the mid-1970s with her application to the Dusseldorf Art Academy; the rest is art history.

Like other Becher students – Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth – Höfer draws above all on her teachers' technical perfection and strictly Conceptual approach. With its orientation towards architecture, especially interiors, Höfer's work resembles a fugue unfolding over decades, its elegant range of motifs played out at a pensive tempo. Yet, as Höfer has stated: 'There are preferences and reasons for the preferences. But there are no dogmas for me.' Correspondingly, the second projection, *80 Pictures* (1996–2004), also goes against the compelling tastefulness of other works. Here, photographs from the years 1971 to 1984 are sorted into pairs. Each pair is introduced on the black projection screen by a concept word, accompanied by details of the time the image was taken and its location: the word 'row' appears before a photograph showing a table spread for a banquet in the spa town of Baden-Baden beside a picture of a Turkish street market in Berlin; 'turquoise' links a tray in a snack bar (with pale blue drinking straws) to the counter of a laundrette. Some combinations are based on obvious similarities, others on hidden details – and also on a certain degree of eccentricity and humour.

Höfer could hardly have come up with a more radical foil to the austere singularity of her architecture pictures: where previously everything seemed cut and dried, commentary is now called for. She not only reveals a new side to her practice, but also takes herself to task. Places that once appeared as timeless motifs have since become mobile, contrary, related, temporal and accessible – rather like Höfer's oeuvre as a whole.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell