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Review: 'Candida Hofer: Interior Worlds'



George Peabody Library in Baltimore. (Copyright Candida Höfer/Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York)

Candida Hofer has photographed the great libraries and museums of Europe, and the blessing of her lens can put a cultural institution on the map, ensuring its place (in her oeuvre, at least) alongside the Louvre and the 19th-century Paris Opera House, as well as dozens of lesser-known but no less ornate archives, theaters and reading rooms.

And so, at the instigation of Rheda Becker, a Baltimore-based philanthropist and art collector, the German photographer went to Charm City to photograph two of its beloved cultural icons.

Hofer's large-format photographs, with their deeply saturated color and extraordinary detail, have become a curious way to brand buildings, give them status, make them "celebrities." There is something boosterish in using Hofer, whose work resists magazine-style loveliness, for cultural cachet, as if she can do for buildings what Andy Warhol did for celebrities. And one wonders how many collectors who are passionate about her sumptuous prints are simply using her work the way college kids use posters of famous paintings, or people post "likes" on Facebook — as markers of cultural taste and affinity: "There's the Louvre; I've been there, and it looks just like that."

The artist, born in 1944, photographs buildings without people, often without any visible signs of human presence at all. The results are as haunting as they are stunning but also very chilly, like the airbrushed

photographs of Hollywood starlets who all seem to be alike under their masks of perfection. As a new exhibition of Hofer's work at the Baltimore Museum of Art makes clear, her photographs don't, in fact, look exactly like the buildings depicted, and in the small tweaks of the photographic staging process and the obsessive concern with lighting and detail, Hofer produces some of the most disquieting photographs around.

The BMA is displaying 13 of Hofer's images, including the pictures she made in Baltimore of the Walters Art Museum and the George Peabody Library. Two photographs of the Peabody Library are particularly striking. Finished in 1878, the library is an architectural gem, with a hall of books lined by five balconies, articulated with a dizzying rhythm of cast-iron columns and ornamental railings. Hofer presents the space in two distinct ways, one emphasizing depth and perspective, the other stressing two-dimensional surface of architectural detail. The former is inviting, the latter arresting, and the viewer feels pulled into one photograph, and stopped at the edge or surface of the other.

That can stand for the deeper ambiguity of most of the images on display, which invite us to both give in to and resist the impulse to appreciate them simply as exquisite travelogues from the world of culture. The exclusion of people from her images has an odd effect. Their emptiness is ghostly and thrilling: When will you ever have the Louvre all to yourself? But they are terrifying, too, reminiscent of the uncanny effect of certain dreams, when the dreamer realizes with a flush of fear that there's nobody here.

One image, taken at the Walters, emphasizes dreamlike space with what may be a wry comment on one of the gems in the Walters's collection. By photographing a sculpture court with studied symmetry, such that its architectural elements feel as tightly controlled as a drafting student's exercise in perspective, Hofer's photograph echoes the dreamlike emptiness and authoritarian bleakness of a famous Walters painting, "The Ideal City," by the 15th-century Italian painter Fra Carnevale.

That leads one to question whether Hofer is trying to idealize cultural institutions or reveal them as dead space or archaeological remains. In a 1999 photograph of the state art gallery in Karlsruhe, Germany, there are myriad references to Greek and Roman culture, but the emptiness of the room, and the oblique angle at which it is presented, make them feel like cultural remains rather than active, meaningful signs. But Hofer also uses light to animate empty rooms, creating a sense of life and luxury that contradicts the silence of the image. Her rooms twinkle and shine, and everything that's gold glistens.

Are these exquisite corpses? Is there a bitter commentary underneath the seemingly objective, straight-on framing of these views? Is she perhaps doing for Western culture what photographers such as Edward Sheriff Curtis did for Native Americans a century ago, romanticizing the final moments of a passing age?

When asked whether she intends anything specific in her choice of perspective — her contemporary interior spaces are often photographed without the seemingly rigid symmetry of older interiors — Hofer is studiously opaque: "There is no explicit, voluntary choice on the spot or in the lab according to the historical context of the space," she writes in an e-mail. "I assume it is the space as space that drives such decisions."

The photographer wants to focus on the pure objectivity of the images, the way in which the challenge of making the image dictates all the decisions of the photographer. But the images want to say more, even if their urge to speak leads to ambiguous statements.

The curators of the Baltimore show have used a 2005 image of the Louvre as a dramatic introduction to the exhibition. Displayed on the axis of one of the museum's galleries, the Louvre interior seems to extend the BMA space far into the distance. The color of the Louvre floor also echoes the marble coloring of John Russell Pope's 1937 addition to the BMA.

But there's something wrong. The Louvre corridor veers off slightly to the left, revealing the odd but subtle shift in perspective created by the photographer's vantage point. On closer inspection, many of the images that feel symmetrical are, in fact, not symmetrical at all.

The photograph also makes Pope's building feel derivative, and under the objectifying magnifying glass of Hofer's camera, the beauty of all of these interior spaces begins to seem generic. The Louvre is as empty, hollow and beautiful as the Peabody Library, which looks as though it should be someplace in Europe.

Paradoxically, for all their details and specificity, once you have entered a Hofer interior, you have left the real world of actual places and locations. Culture becomes a veneer — delicious to contemplate, but superficial, too. Which makes it doubly ironic that getting Hofer to photograph your cultural icon somehow elevates it. There's a sharper edge to these images, a hostility almost, that is bracing.

Candida Hofer: Interior Worlds

is at the Baltimore Museum of Art through Feb. 26. For information, visit www.artbma.org.