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National Gallery's East Building reopens with rich addition to its photo collection



The work of the Dusseldorf School is represented by the architectural interior photographs of Candida Höfer, as with her 2010 image "George Peabody Library Baltimore." (Copyright Candida Hofer/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn)

After the National Gallery of Art founded its photography department in 1990, curators focused on building its historic collection of images, dating to the origins of the medium in the 1830s. But at the same time, as it was assembling an overview of the history of photography as an art form, the art form was marching on, and so was the art market. Contemporary photographers became art-world stars, and much of the work they were producing became all but prohibitively expensive for the gallery's acquisitions budget.

As part of the opening festivities for its renovated East Building, the gallery is displaying a major gift of photographs, most of them made over the past quarter-century and squarely in the out-of-sight expensive category. The work has been promised to the museum by Robert E. Meyerhoff and Rheda Becker. Meyerhoff is a familiar name in this area: He and his wife, Jane, who died in 2004, already pledged a major collection of 20th-century art to the gallery, and he was a major donor to the symphony hall that bears his name in Baltimore. After Jane's death, he stopped collecting art, but turned his attention to contemporary photography in part because of the interest of Becker, who has built a career as narrator with symphony orchestras.

"Photography Reinvented" surveys the promised gift from the couple of 34 works by 18 artists. That may seem like a relatively small number — Georgia O'Keeffe jump-started the gallery's photography collection with a gift of more than 1,300 photos by her late husband, Alfred Stieglitz, in 1949 — but these are mostly large-scale works with outside visual impact. The new collection fills important gaps, including work by such artists as Cindy Sherman and Marina Abramovic, and several other artists — Catherine Opie, Candida Höfer, Thomas Ruff and Jeff Wall — who have never been represented in the gallery's collection. It is also particularly rich in images from the Dusseldorf School, photographers who studied with the revered artists Bernd and Hilla Becher, including Andreas Gursky, Hofer, Ruff and Thomas Struth. The Dusseldorf artists built on the methodical, documentary reticence of the Bechers, but expanded the visual language to include color and sumptuous detail to create large, saturated, highly refined prints that easily compete with the drama of painting.

The exhibition begins with a work by the Bechers, who gave photography a conceptual twist by photographing the architectural detritus of industrialism and arranging them into grids based on basic typologies. The work promised to the gallery is a grid of nine water tower photographs, shot straight on, with the mushroom-shaped concrete forms looking a bit like images of sculpture one might find in a museum index or catalogue raisonné. The sky is washed out to an almost uniform gray, and there are no people in sight. If alien anthropologists surveyed a post-apocalyptic Earth, they might go home with volumes of this kind of image, very useful for making minute visual observations but radically detached from any meaningful understanding of what species made these forms, and why, and, most important, why they lavished loving attention on making each one just a little not like the others.

Höfer and Ruff built on this legacy, at least in terms of its documentary style of apparent objectivity. Höfer is represented in the collection by her architectural interiors, often shot from a slightly elevated position, vividly detailed and empty. Ruff's contributions include portraits that are made with a similar, dry, direct and almost chilly sensibility. Both shoot their subject matter straight on, although Ruff's work includes a self-portrait in which the photographer doubles himself — two slightly different representations of the same pensive, long-haired man in an ill-fitting blue mock-turtle pullover. This doubling connects the work both to the surrealists and to the Bechers in its invitation to study a repeated image for small deviations of detail and meaning.

Long before the photographers represented here began their practice, people who worked with cameras developed an extensive repertoire of visual games and tricks, explored the lines between the real and the constructed, and pushed against the primal conviction that photography was a transparently truthful medium. But the photographers in this show take that gamesmanship to the same conceptual level as artists working in other media in the 1960s and '70s. One of the most striking works, and an image published in the show's catalogue, is Thomas Demand's 2003 "Clearing," seemingly a landscape of verdant forest captured in the long-angled light of early morning or late afternoon. But the image is a caprice: There is no forest at all, but a model of a forest, meticulously constructed from some 270,000 cut-paper leaves attached to cardboard trees and branches. It is more beautiful than the real thing, which seems a paradox: Isn't the beauty of nature all about asserting the permanence and grandeur of something larger than human, something that transcends our powers of making and destruction?

The exhibition gains resonance for the ways it complements other works in the National Gallery, including an engrossing survey of the art championed by Virginia Dwan's legendary art gallery in the 1960s (on view on the concourse level). Catherine Opie's 2012 portrait "Lawrence (Black Shirt)" depicts Lawrence Weiner, an artist whose work is included in the Dwan Gallery show.

And the large-scale museum interiors that are a trademark of Thomas Struth focus the viewer on the meta experience of museums in general. Even the most committed museumgoer may occasionally wonder about the transaction between the eyes and art, what is exchanged, what is gained or taken away. Struth's photos capture the moment of doubt we may feel — large, dramatic representations of what is essentially an agnostic anxiety about the power of art itself. The Meyerhoff gift includes seven of Struth's works, and they are a happy addition to the national collection.