

Johnen Galerie

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Art in Review; Candida Höfer

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By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Sonnabend Gallery
536 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through Oct. 30
Goethe-Institut
1014 Fifth Avenue, at 82nd Street
Through today

Among the prominent disciples of the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, Candida Höfer may still be the most underrated, as these two gorgeous shows remind us. "Traces," at the Goethe-Institut, is a small group of photographs, from the past five years, of the interiors of libraries and museums: Beinecke at Yale, the Pierpont Morgan in New York, the Deutsche Bücherei in Leipzig and others. Sonnabend Gallery offers a larger number of new pictures: other buildings (museums, palaces, libraries) in Venice, Germany and the Netherlands.

For more than 30 years, Ms. Höfer has been compiling her deadpan inventory of public spaces, a social catalog of architectural history. Empty and vast, these places can sometimes seem like just occasions for photographic spectacle, the pictures are often so chillingly awesome. But Ms. Höfer is a straight photographer whose humanity and improvisatory spirit come across if we are patient enough to appreciate the serendipity of her light, the subtlety of her color and the quiet, melancholy pleasure she seems to take in finding, as if almost by chance, poetry in institutional form. Her real topic is ambience, a fleeting sensation. Her challenge is to avoid both the dry architectural document and clinical abstraction. When Ms. Höfer's work succeeds, it implies a secret world. You might say she captures the ghosts moving through these spaces, leaving their traces.

They appear in the willowy shapes of three pools of light, like the Three Graces, cast by the trio of tall windows onto the marble floor of the Ca' Rezzonico. Blinding light through the doorway of the archaeological museum in Venice is another trace, which dissolves the sculptures in the room, leaving only an arrow visible on the interior wall, pointing visitors as if into the ether. And in a library in Utrecht, Ms. Höfer catches the ghostly interplay of distilled white light through arched windows with the white of a sculptured bust, different from the white on the railings that frame shelves of books, some yet another white -- a kind of formal call and response.

Her self-portrait in a mirror at the Palazzo Zenobia, nodding toward Velázquez, is a reflection of a reflection of a room full of trompe l'oeil paintings of sculptures, themselves illusions, ghosts of ghosts. Ms. Höfer stands at the center, nearly hiding behind her camera in the empty space, capturing the essence of absence. MICHAEL KIMMELMAN