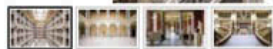


Johnen Galerie

Exhibit review: 'Candida Hofer: Interior Worlds'



By Philip Kennicott, Published: November 17

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

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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.