

SEAN KELLY

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An Artist Who Prefers Empty Spaces

For her show at Manhattan's Sean Kelly Gallery, Candida Höfer of Germany will exhibit about 15 photographs to demonstrate how her style has split in two



Candida Höfer's 'Malkasten Düsseldorf II' (2011). PHOTO: CANDIDA HÖFER, KÖLN/VG BILD-KU

COLOGNE, Germany—One frigid winter night in 1979, German photographer Candida Höfer presented her breakout solo show in the West German city of Düsseldorf, projecting slides onto a gallery wall of Turkish immigrants smoking on sidewalks and standing in delis.

"People saw the lights from the projections spilling into the street and were coming in to see it," recalled Ms. Höfer, now 71, in a rare interview at her starkly modern home of stone and glass that directly overlooks the Rhine River in nearby Cologne, standing out markedly on a street of prewar houses.

The show was a success. But Ms. Höfer, who in person exudes a natural reserve, said she began eliminating humans from her photographs. She found herself uncomfortable interacting with them after realizing that “there was too little binding us together.”

Instead, she said she felt bonded to empty edifices in two disparate architectural styles—either a heavily embellished Baroque or a sleek modernism.

Ms. Höfer’s large-scale color photographs of the interiors of public buildings, shot from a straight-on perspective, have defined her artistic output since the 1980s. Scrapping analog for digital photography in the past decade has allowed her to triple the size of her images, enabling her to capture the sumptuous architectural details of libraries, theaters and museums around the European continent.

A curatorial favorite, she represented Germany in the prestigious Venice Biennale in 2003 and was one of a handful of contemporary artists to exhibit at the Louvre Museum as part of an initiative to link modern art with the museum’s old-master collection.

For her show at Manhattan’s Sean Kelly Gallery opening May 8, Ms. Höfer said she chose about 15 photographs shot recently in Düsseldorf to demonstrate how her photographic style has now split in two. While she still shoots ornate museums and palaces, she has begun experimenting with taking abstract-looking shots of Düsseldorf’s buildings.



Ms. Höfer’s ‘Benrather Schloss Dusseldorf IV’ (2011). *PHOTO: CANDIDA HÖFER, KÖLN/VG BILD-KU*

In “ Benrather Schloss Düsseldorf IV,” five baby-blue doors are set within the ornate white walls of an 18th-century palace, reflecting Ms. Höfer’s preference for drawing viewers into deep perspective and making them feel visually cocooned.

But in photographing the sleek monochrome rooms that normally display vibrantly colored video art managed by German collector Julia Stoschek, Ms. Höfer opted to photograph the gray-and-white walls devoid of art or shadows. Without the titles, viewers might assume they were just random geometric shapes, said Ms. Höfer.

The effect, she said, is an aloofness that can be either peaceful or disquieting. Art historians refer to Ms. Höfer as a member of the Düsseldorf School of Photography, a quintet of Germans including Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth who studied during the 1970s with the influential couple Bernd and Hilla Becher.

For their parts, both Ms. Höfer and Mr. Struth reject the notion that they belong to the same “school” of art, maintaining that while they inherited their professors’ rigorous working methods and share a penchant for formal, large-scale prints, their styles are utterly divergent.

“I simply have never understood why people are always lumping us into the same group. Can’t they see our styles are totally different?” said Mr. Struth, who said he prefers the “symbolic feeling” of outdoor lighting, particularly twilight.

By contrast, Ms. Höfer digitally alters photographs to make the daylight in her interiors appear “almost timeless,” she said.

Equally disparate are the group’s auction prices. While Mr. Gursky’s auction record was set at \$4.3 million in 2011 and Mr. Struth’s top price is \$1.3 million from 2013. Ms. Höfer realized her peak of \$139,000 in 2007, according to data from auction database artnet.com. Since 2009, Mr. Gursky’s prices dipped significantly, while Mr. Struth and Ms. Höfer’s have stagnated.

“I think it can be very difficult with a quiet personality to promote your work,” said Ms. Höfer’s dealer, Mr. Kelly, who is pricing her new photographs at about \$66,000. “Historically, women artists have been less aggressive.”

“Düsseldorf” is Ms. Höfer’s first show with Mr. Kelly, following the 2007 death of her longtime Manhattan dealer Ileana Sonnabend. Mr. Kelly said he plans to sell the images at more art fairs to attract new collectors.

One new work, the 72 in. by 92 in. “Neuer Stahlhof Düsseldorf II” shows travertine stones on a staircase winding around themselves to resemble a snail. It gives no context to how the historic Steelworkers’ Building endured the Düsseldorf bombings of 1943.

Ms. Höfer spurns covering the Third Reich in art, saying that viewers examining her 1970s images would find no indication that Düsseldorf and its residents were then still physically and emotionally scarred by war.

“In my work, this time period isn’t present,” said Ms. Höfer, who eschews discussing her childhood and her father Werner Höfer, a prominent journalist until he was forced to resign in 1987 when a magazine article exposed his past as a Nazi Party member and propagandist.

“I played in war rubble as a child,” said Ms. Höfer. “I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to justify [why]. I find it dreadful to talk about.”

Instead, she said, her enduring joy lies in photographing aesthetically pleasing spaces, showing how sparse modern buildings and opulent older ones can offer strength and peace—provided she gives viewers a quiet image on which to reflect.

The clearest example to date: her photographs of the Louvre that display the rooms of the world’s most visited museum bereft of their usual tourist hordes.

“The Louvre’s rooms are fantastic,” she said of the series made in the early 2000s and shown to Louvre visitors in a 2007 show. “But of course, the Louvre looks better without any people in it.”