

Art in America



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ZURICH CANDIDA HÖFER

Eva Presenhuber

Candida Höfer (b. 1944) had her first gallery exhibition in 1975. Since then, the erstwhile student of Bernd Becher has gained recognition as one of the most important photographers of her generation, best known for complex interior photographs of public spaces devoid of people. Her 70th year was celebrated with "Düsseldorf," a major traveling exhibition. The artist had avoided retrospective exhibitions, so that show offered an unusual opportunity to see works dating back to the 1970s alongside ones from the last few years. Two of the most recent, large-scale works included in "Düsseldorf" were also to be found in "Closer" at Eva Presenhuber. Of these, *Neuer Stahlhof Düsseldorf I* (2012) is the most intriguing; a spiral staircase in the 1920s building is shot from below so that the metal banister appears to snail away into a white void.

Were this the only artistic departure represented in the show, the shift toward abstraction would offer food for thought, but Zurich viewers were treated to two additional



Photo from
Candida Höfer's
slide show *Roads*,
2014, 3 minutes.

bodies of work that countered expectations. The first comprised 16 images from 2014, each around 2 feet on its longest edge and thus more modest in scale than her customary prints. In contrast with the sometimes disconcerting clarity and solidity of the large works, the smaller are visually ambiguous and signal flux. The surfaces and sites recorded in these interior and exterior shots display the marks of weathering, aging and abuse. While in her large-scale works Höfer makes the most of ambient light to inform and enhance the architecture, here light often obscures: sun streaming through the slats of *Blinds 2014* blurs the edges of the windowpanes; *Garage 2014* is a view from a street into darkness, where daylight as recorded on camera cannot touch the far reaches of the space. The cumulative effect of the fractured surfaces, imperfect lighting and signs of life (such as a garment laid out carefully on a countertop in *Blue Coat 2014*) infuse this series with a sense of a fragile society. The artist herself appears, a diminutive figure reflected in the glass panels of a Japanese garage door in *Semidetached 2014*.

The final unexpected aspect of the exhibition consisted of two 2014 slide shows that emphasize speed and the provisional. *Echoes* brings together images shot around East Asia, with dissolving transitions that further complicate the multiple surfaces in which Höfer's reflection appears. *Roads* portrays fleeting roadside impressions of rural and urban Mongolia. These scenes are often peopled; they seem like shots the artist urgently needed to take, even though their imperfections are only too evident. Maybe Höfer felt that, at 70, her pedestal was too comfortable, or she found herself placed in a position too distant from the social conditions that have informed her work from the outset. There are not many photographers who could make revelations of frustration and failure this exhilarating.

—Aoife Rosenmeyer