

Visual arts

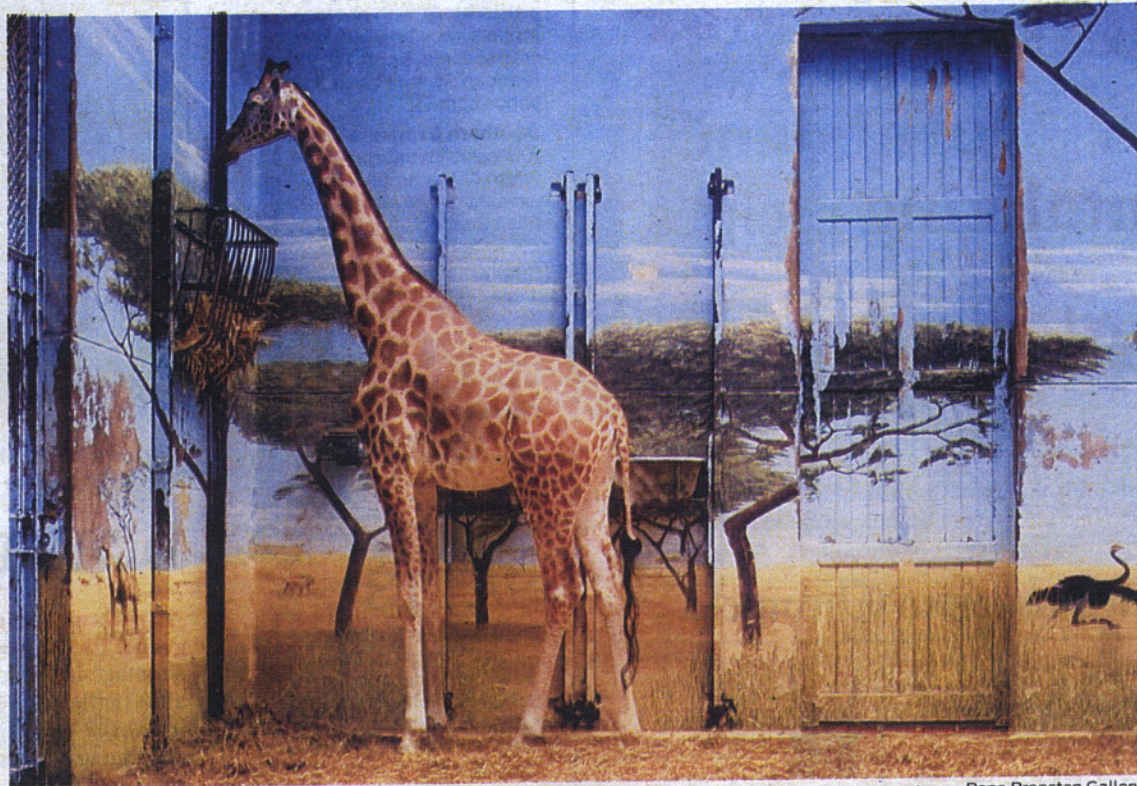
'Zoologischer Gärten': First U.S. showing of German photographer Candida Höfer's series on European zoos, a pet project since the 1990s

The strict, unsuspecting genius of German photographer Candida Höfer's work is that it verges on a thousand conceptual frameworks at once, then refuses to choose any in particular, using the rubrics to help frame the pictures but never leaning on them for support.

Known in the United States for her perfectly lit photographs of building interiors and archives, an expansive set of work that has been rightly called an "architecture of absence," Höfer has been working on the "Zoologischer Gärten" series, set in the zoos of Europe, since the 1990s. The stunning new exhibition at Rena Bransten Gallery marks the first showing of the series on our shores.

The modernist Alvin Langdon Coburn called the camera an instrument of "fast seeing." Working against this dictum, Höfer matches a quickness of mind with a consistently calm and questioning archival gaze. The penguins in "Zoologischer Gärten London III" (1992) seem to be alone in a CAD mockup of curved stairs and a pool. The elephants in "Zoologischer Gärten Hamburg I" (1990) tunnel amid endless rectangular concrete arches. The giraffe in "Zoologischer Gärten Paris II" (1997) seems both out of place and perfectly situated. The penguins, in black-and-white contrast, look like question marks; the elephants seem to be pushing concrete to build a structure somewhere; the giraffe seems too large for its diorama, like seeing a TV set from a distance where the lighting rigs and cameras are visible. All are about to move, but where will we allow them to go?

Höfer studied under Bernd



Rena Bransten Gallery

This giraffe in German photographer Candida Höfer's "Zoologischer Gärten Paris II" (1997), which is in her series on the zoos of Europe, seems both out of place and perfectly situated.

Through April 10. 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tues.-Fri., 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sat. Rena Bransten Gallery, 77 Geary St., S.F. (415) 982-3292. www.renabranstengallery.com.

and Hilla Becher, who for 50 years (Bernd died in 2007) photographed the disappearing European industrial landscape "because it existed." Bringing the Bechers' signature "photography of precision" to zoological gardens, Höfer illuminates settings where function is outdated and form sticks around despite itself — an industrial landscape

that will not die.

"I have done museums, among them museums of natural history, and zoos," Höfer says via e-mail. "This is all about what people build for other people and what this does for people and sometimes to people: in this case to look at 'spaced' live animals."

Seeing the animals as "spaced" rather than "caged" is essential to her vision, placing this work closer to projects at natural history museums by photographers such as Richard Barnes and Hiroshi Sugimoto than to the animal work by "Zoo" photographer Britta Jaschinski. The "Zoologischer Gärten"

pictures are most surprising for their immediacy. Concepts start to creep in — modernization, modernism, passivity, institutionalism — but are quickly shed for more immediate concerns. Whatever animation of natural life is left, it is clearly in the eye of the beholder. Look at just the animals or just the built environment, and the magic of life returns; look at both at once and the magic seems reduced to a geometry of light and form.

Höfer chooses not to shoot behind bars, so there isn't a cage without an open door. There isn't a zookeeper in sight.

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