

German photos, reframing expectations

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Putting it all on the (clothes) line: Markus Georg's "Stonehenge" is part of the "Gute Aussichten: New German Photography" student exhibition now at the Goethe-Institut. (www.guteaussichten.org)

Now in its fifth year, "Gute Aussichten: New German Photography" culls work from top student shutterbugs at Germany's universities and art academies in a traveling show on view now at the Goethe-Institut. A European counterpoint to the American-heavy student shows in the galleries this August, the exhibition lives up to its title -- in English, "Good Prospects." The latest iteration collects works by nine students, each of whom mingles fantasy and reality, naturalism and theater, and reminds us that the photographer's vision is as singular -- and as constructed -- as any painter's. The show's best are below.

Laura Bielau's "Color Lab Club" finds the Leipzig-based artist toying with photography's earliest, most revered history. Hers is a distinctly raunchy sendup of early photographic experiments of the kind that Frenchman Joseph Nicéphore Niépce made in the 1820s. Whereas Monsieur Niepce set out to make an earnest reproduction of the view outside his studio (which ended up looking like a white trapezoid floating in a dark background), Bielau takes her camera inside the darkroom (now nearly an artifact itself) where red lights illuminate the proceedings. And I do mean red lights.

Bielau hired professional strippers to pose as lab girls, transforming the darkroom into a visual pun on a red-light district. Her camp tableaux feature bikini-clad women (in boots and heels) cavorting with the equipment. One girl teases the dust cover off an enlarger, another bends over suggestively to pick up a jug of chemicals. Bielau's pictures call to mind porn films set in rooms that awkwardly reproduce everyday life, yet her pictures never feel tawdry.

Alongside these pictures, Bielau exhibits still lifes of lab equipment -- pictures that gain a camp erotic charge once you're in on the joke. Let's say that her darkroom includes lenses of impressive girth and length.

Berlin-based Markus Georg cleverly transforms his art into souvenirs, and elevates, in turn, the souvenir into a work of art. He presents his photographs as postcards nestled in a wire dispenser; they go for \$2 a pop, \$15 for the set of eight. (Nearby, a slotted cardboard box awaits our cash.)

Georg offers us a selection of the world's architectural and natural monuments cast using everyday objects and people. For the "Brandenburg Gate," Georg photographed six tan-clad movers hoisting a long vertical "box" on their shoulders. Color-coordinated outfits and boxes

ensure that we see the whole first, then the parts; the triumphal form of the Berlin monument pops out at us.

Georg's "Stonehenge" is even more clever: He pegged laundry to a clothesline so that the sheets and trousers mimic the British site's post-and-lintel system. Georg has a sharp eye for mimicry and a crafty sense of improvisation. His pictures are almost better than being there.

Though also interested in architecture, Sarah Strassmann captures interiors at their most abstract and moody. Her series "The Void -- Nothing but Space" is dreamlike, somber and deathly still. Sample image: a dirty cream-colored curtain pulled closed in a white room of the kind you might find in some provincial insane asylum. A crepuscular counterpoint to the humor in the show, Strassmann's pictures remind us that the German people are some of the best ruminators around.

Of Iranian descent but now based in Berlin, Maziar Moradi specializes in cinematic pictures of his Iranian family and friends. Channeling director David Lynch and photographers Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall, Moradi's vision of everyday ennui is highly polished and ever so slightly disturbing.

One picture finds a woman in a living room letting loose a tray of oranges as if her muscle relaxants just kicked in. Another picture of a man watering his garden casts us as spies, viewing him from behind a veil of shrubbery. Moradi's strategies aren't groundbreaking, but his pictures are strong.

Düsseldorf-based Reza Nadji first visited Iran during his student days. For this series of Tehran streetscapes, he photographed the city in winter and found it crusted in ice and snow. Architectural images but also cityscapes, his pictures capture multi-story murals painted on the sides of buildings, signposts devoid of messages and a strong sense of the quotidian. Nadji's stance is largely apolitical (at least on the surface); he prefers to plumb the weirdness that arises when millions of people come together in urban places.

Familiar yet surprising, the pictures of Katrin Trautner portray the elderly -- the word feels wrong here, too clunky and sexless -- making love. It's soft core, for sure, but these pictures of hetero- and homosexual couples show plenty of skin. Though reminiscent of the late critic and artist John Coplans's large-format studies of his aging nude body, Trautner's pictures aren't as clinical. These bodies are not ones we see much of, yet they're much lovelier than we imagine.

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