

Humanism on a Grand Scale

'Thomas Struth: Photographs' at the Metropolitan Museum

By KAREN ROSENBERG JAN. 22, 2015



Thomas Struth

Email

Share

Tweet

Pin

Save

More

Although it has come late to contemporary photography, the Met has a few favorites in the field. One of them is the German photographer Thomas Struth, whose [midcareer survey](#) in 2003 had the rare distinction of spilling out into the museum's Great Hall.

His current show at the Met, "Thomas Struth: Photographs," is a much smaller affair, with just 25 images from the late 1970s to 2013, all but two of them from the museum's collection. But if it is a modest display, it is one with a compelling humanist undercurrent that defines both Mr. Struth and the Met.

That through-line also helps to distinguish Mr. Struth from his large-format peer [Andreas Gursky](#) and from an earlier, more skeptical generation of German artists working with photography (Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke come to mind, as do Mr. Struth's mentors [Bernd and Hilla Becher](#)). The Bechers' influence is still apparent here in Mr. Struth's early series "The Streets of New York," from 1978. These rigorous black-and-white

The New York Times

Rosenberg, Karen: Humanism on a Grand Scale - Thomas Struth: Photographs' at the Metropolitan Museum
22 January 2015

cityscapes were shot precisely from the middle of the street, with what is neither a car-centric perspective nor a pedestrian one. They have an eerie kind of blandness, emphasizing conformity to the grid over neighborhood character.



Thomas Struth's "115 Street at 2nd Avenue, Harlem, New York" (1978). Thomas Struth

Also here, however, are more idiosyncratic cityscapes from 1989-90 that contrast Old World and New World urban planning. One shows an oppressively modern housing project in Chicago, another the charmingly crooked Calle Tintoretto in Venice. You can see, in these images, Mr. Struth's developing sensitivity to place if not yet to the subtle interactions of places and people, the main subject of his mature works. Surprisingly, the show includes just one of his "Museum Photographs," his celebrated series in which tourists confront masterpieces in museums like the Louvre and the National Gallery, at churches and at other cultural institutions. In the example on view, "Pantheon, Rome" (1990) the grid patterns on the dome and marble floor seem to herd older visitors into a tidy cluster.

I had always found these images too pat in their formal parallels between art subjects and spectators and a bit snobbish in their ribbing of tour groups and the like. But seeing the show's sole example in context, surrounded by earlier photographs that inspired the series, made a difference. (The show was organized by Doug Eklund, curator, and Jeff L. Rosenheim, curator in charge, both from the Met's photography department.)

One of those earlier photographs is “The Restorers at San Lorenzo Maggiore, Naples” (1988), a casual but dignified group portrait of four art restorers repairing paintings damaged in an earthquake. The paintings are propped up in a staging area, looming large over the workers, who stand, deferentially, in the middle distance.

That the restorers are friends of the photographer, as the wall label tells us, is not immediately apparent from the image. But the two art historians in another portrait, from 1987, “Eleonor and Giles Robertson, Edinburgh,” appear very much at ease with Mr. Struth, who seems to have pulled up a chair at their dining table, to judge from the angle of the shot. His affinity for people who are on intimate terms with art, who devote their lives to its study and conservation, elevates the “Museum Photographs”; it makes them seem far less superficial and tourist-centric.

It’s hard to say the same of Mr. Struth’s “Times Square” (2000), in which a photograph showing the typical glut of electronic billboards conveys vague stirrings of millennial anxiety but ultimately looks as if it could have been taken by anyone at any point in the past 30 years. Images like this one do not compare favorably with Mr. Gursky’s prints of hyperactive global centers, which achieve a kind of transcendence of overstimulation.

More inventive is “Milan Cathedral (façade)” (1998), in which Mr. Struth winkingly sabotages a beautiful architectural photograph with a glimpse of the goings-on at street level. The people milling around on the cathedral steps turn their backs to the Gothic grandeur; at the same time there’s a sense that they are absorbing culture and history just by being there.

Implicit in all of Mr. Struth’s photographs, or at least the ones collected here, is a custodial impulse — a desire to preserve something, usually culture but sometimes nature. (I recommend seeing this show in tandem with the Met’s excellent little exhibition of [Carleton Watkins’s photographs of Yosemite](#), just down the hall in the Howard Gilman gallery.) It’s there in the show’s lone landscape, the mossy “Paradise 13, Yakushima, Japan” (1999).

And it’s also there in the more recent image “Hot Rolling Mill, ThyssenKrupp Steel, Duisburg” (2010), in which the hulking machinery of a steel processing plant in Germany shows some wear and tear but remains forbiddingly intricate. As Janet Malcolm wrote in her profile of Mr. Struth in [The New Yorker](#), his industrial scenes “reassure even as they baffle.” Less reassuring is the newer photograph “Figure 2, Charité, Berlin” (2013), which is being exhibited for the first time. In it, we see a mess of wires, tubes and robotics with a helpless human in the middle: a patient on an operating table, anesthetized and about to undergo surgery for brain cancer. It’s a deeply unsettling image, even if the wall label tells us that the patient consented to be photographed and that she is now “doing well.”

The New York Times

Rosenberg, Karen: Humanism on a Grand Scale - Thomas Struth: Photographs' at the Metropolitan Museum
22 January 2015

It asks us to have faith in modern medicine and technology, just as Mr. Struth's earlier photographs ask us to have faith in art and its conservation. At the same time, it reminds us that hospitals are not museums and that even the most passionate, dedicated and humane doctor may be faced with a body that can't be restored.

"Thomas Struth: Photographs" runs through Feb. 16 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; 212-535-7710, metmuseum.org.

A version of this review appears in print on January 23, 2015, on page C29 of the New York edition with the headline: Humanism on a Grand Scale. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)