

PHANTOM SENSATIONS

by Kathryn Garcia



Andreas Hofer, "Phantom Gallery," Jan. 26-Mar. 8, 2008, at Hauser & Wirth Zürich, Limmastrasse 270, Zürich, 8005 Switzerland, and in Los Angeles at 7556 Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, Ca. 90046

In Los Angeles, Andreas Hofer's new project is installed in an abandoned storefront on a run-down part of the Sunset Strip. Nestled between smoke shops and tattoo parlors, the Phantom Gallery -- as reads the tacky sign on the façade -- sure doesn't look like much. A vacant space with cruddy gray carpeting, it has yellowing plaster walls marked with vague white shapes where the furniture and pictures used to be. Just another failed business on an ordinary commercial strip.

And it's complete theater. To make the "Phantom Gallery," Hofer had the

storefront emptied of its contents, and the barren walls repainted to his specifications. One thing does tip you off, though, and that's the gallery attendant sitting at a desk. On the wall is a flat-screen TV, which plays a live feed of a nearly identical show installed at Hauser & Wirth Zürich. The Swiss "Phantom Gallery" doesn't quite have the down-and-dirty kick of the L.A. version, as it is in a proper gallery space and not some rehabbed storefront. But because of the time difference, the image from Switzerland is a nighttime interior, devoid of visitors, neatly amplifying the sense of absence in the work as a whole.

The transcontinental aspect fits Hofer well. Born in Munich in 1963, he studied at both London's Chelsea College of Art & Design and the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, and presently lives and works in Berlin. But he's also lived in Los Angeles, and exhibited across Europe and in Japan. In New York he recently showed at Metro Pictures. He was included in "Euro-Centric" at the Rubell Family Collection in Miami in 2007 and in "Works from the Friedrich Christian Flick Collection" at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin in 2007-08.

Hofer's works -- installations as well as paintings, sculptures and drawings -- have a neo-Goth tone, mixing adolescent masculine fantasy with a vague early-20th-century air of heroic utopianism. For instance, his 2007 exhibition at the MARTa Herford Museum in Germany featured rudimentary "rockets" apparently made of hollow trees placed before a mural of a primeval mountain landscape. His graphic works feature a wide range of teen-boy imagery, including a skull-headed octopus, a crowned Christian king, a Prussian centaur and the Marvel Comics character The Thing.

He plays with fake identities and alter egos, signing his works "Andy Hope, 1930," a mordant reference to a tipping point in German history as well as to an era in American history that saw the pulpy birth of the comic superhero. And he has toyed as well with the "white cube," filling a gallery with the stock of a thrift store, transforming it into the "Batman Gallery," or crafting an exhibition in a private Paris apartment.

Hofer's affection for Potemkin gallery spaces brings us to the idea at the core of his latest work -- a literary reference. The title of the show, "Phantom Gallery," is a phrase from J.G. Ballard's 1966 novel *A Crystal World*, gracing the point when the characters in the novel encounter an empty room, and within it, find the auratic traces of the objects it once held.

Ostensibly, a work by Malevich was among the absent paintings in the Sunset Strip space. Hofer's "phantom gallery" takes Malevich's "black square," an icon of finality, past the Russian artist's point of absolute zero, making each stain on the barren wall into a work of art in its own right. And he perversely turns the notion of Malevich's "last painting" back towards

commerce -- each "phantom" is available for purchase individually, sold in do-it-yourself fashion just like some neo-Minimalist sculpture, complete with materials and instructions on how to install. The "hopeful" period of modernism, Hofer seems to say, is long ended.

Such turns on the gallery as context have become commonplace in our late-postmodernist era. How to read Hofer's version? A metaphor for some absence at the heart of art? Perhaps. But considering that Hofer has sited his "Phantom Gallery" but a stone's throw away from Hollywood, home of the all-American dream machine, it stands to reason that "Phantom Gallery" is a carnival-like fiction, a haunted house in a city where fiction often holds more weight than reality.

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