

# A MOVING GALLERY

PRESENTS



## GERMAN VISA

## BERGEMANN PHOTO EXHIBIT OFFERS VIEWER UNIQUE ENTRY INTO BERLIN'S 'FROZEN TRANSITIONS'

BY MICHAEL J. KRAINAK/OMAHA CITY WEEKLY

“A new way of seeing.” That is how German photographer Frauke Bergemann, describes her work, hyper-realistic images of Berlin that reward viewers with proper credentials and willing to make the right connections. Her latest series of photos are currently on display at the Garden of the Zodiac Gallery in the Old Market Passageway until Oct. 29 after showing during Miami’s Art Basel last year.

This is the second opportunity presented by Omaha’s The Moving Gallery to view contemporary German photography in this region after its stunning show, “Portrait: Berlin,” in March of 2007. Organized by Matthias Harder, chief curator at the Helmut Newton Foundation, “Portrait: Berlin” was one of the year’s most significant exhibitions of contemporary art, and one of the show’s featured artists, Christian Rothmann, a familiar face in Omaha, introduced Bergemann and her work at her own opening last week.

Rothmann’s remarks about Bergemann’s vision and its complexity suggests that her own assessment of her point of view is neither naïve or pretentious. “What’s interesting to me,” he said of the eight bold and colorful, large urban landscapes, “is that, while so close to advertising and touristic views, only the second view tells you more, challenging your mind with (multiple) points of view. In addition are its references to painting and old masters such as David Hockney and others.”

Of all the art forms, perhaps photography is the most transparent, allowing its audience to be directly involved with its environment. Yet, as area artists have recently pointed out, that experience is more than one of merely looking. “Seeing” implies an understanding of what one engages in art or life, and photography offers several means of doing so within the medium. For example, in current or coming shows within the region: Jim Hendrickson’s (Bemis Bag Building) work requires a curiosity and spontaneity outside the box of one’s comfort

zone; Skyelar Hawkins’ (RNG Gallery) vision necessitates an imaginative suspension of disbelief; and Larry Ferguson (Modern Arts Midwest in October) asks the viewer to see Nature from a Romantic view, the spontaneous overflow of emotions.

Bergemann places an even greater demand on her audience, one that evolved from her childhood. “When I was a child, visiting a museum,” she says, “I wished to go into the scene of the paintings...like Mary Poppins and two children have done it in the children’s book, ‘Mary Poppins.’” The artist expects the same of her audience and provides a unique opportunity to take a closer look at her cityscapes and become part of the work’s creative process.

The history of German photography has long been represented by the documentary and anonymous style of Bernd and Hilla Becher and the more manipulative “artworks” of such artists as Thomas Ruff who point to the “pointlessness of insisting on objective representa-

tion.” Bergemann’s work dispenses with such conflict by its devotion to a “pure subjectivity,” the result of a complex process in search of a more comprehensive image expression. The result is an illusion of reality that allows us to “see” within one frame the full impact of its content in a way only a moving image could replicate with its moving camera, editing and multiple points of view. It’s a reality far greater than the sum of its parts.

Bergemann accomplishes her illusion in this manner as she transforms Berlin’s public spaces into stages. For example, in the exhibition’s signature piece “Spreebogen” (The Government), the large vertical image is dominated by a close-up of a motorcycle in the foreground with the camera position just over the seat. At first everything looks normal with the cycle pointed straight ahead toward one vanishing point. But a second and third look reveals additional points of view impossible for the eye to grasp in reality from a static viewpoint, and suddenly an interesting juxtaposition comes into view via the side-by-side placement of the Reichstag and modern government buildings in the background.

This montage of old and new is created by shooting several photos with a wide-angle lens as the artist tilts and pans the lens, scans the various images into a computer and then edits and prints them into a seamless digital print. Nothing is manipulated into the final result including the reflected image of the Swiss Embassy in the cycle’s mirror. These are moments of real magic, including the men and bicycles in middle ground that further comment on the combination of old and new including technology, that serves as a motif in virtually all of her work. There are other apparent themes but the formal construct always takes precedent, an aesthetic adopted from the painting technique of such old masters as Van Eyck in the early 1400s who used several spatial perspectives to expand upon the narrative point of view.

If reality is what the mind perceives it to be then it is also what the mind creates it to be. Bergemann’s method includes: deep field of focus which places fore,

middle and background in sharp detail; a consistent level of lighting whatever the source and wherever the direction; no distorted lines interfere with one’s spatial perception; and perhaps the most telling, clear distinctions are made front, middle and back with nothing overlapping in between. The result is the transformation of the audience from viewer to explorer to creator. All of which are impossible for the human eye to achieve in a natural setting without changing focus and position.

“The observer finds himself in the middle of the report-like scene,” Bergemann said, “and starts an exploration tour with his eyes, like going for a walk he wanders from an unfamiliar viewpoint deeper and deeper into the subject itself. Here the public area is experienced as a stage on which urban life takes place. People become co-creators of their environment by mere presence but also by direct activity.”

Rothmann refers to Bergemann’s juxtapositions of time and space as “frozen transitions” no doubt drawing upon a common theme of “Portrait: Berlin,” a city still existing in a parallel world, architecturally, politically and socially, despite its reunification in 1989. Though her photos here are dominated chiefly by her aesthetic and process, often her “stage” comments on such historical realities with irony and a sense of humor, if not overtly socio-political.

The most humorous piece in the exhibit is simply titled “Alexanderplatz,” a former cultural center of East Berlin, and constantly on the verge of redevelopment in the New Berlin. In this photo, a student lounging on the “Fountain of International Friendship” is abruptly awakened by Bergemann’s shutter. Yet its juxtaposition with Muhammad Ali’s larger than life image on the skyscraper in the background, as he jeters downward with fist clenched at the point of a knockout, suggests, at least visually, the Champ is responsible for the student’s prone position. Not until you translate the text on Ali’s chest do you decipher the photo’s real message that “Nothing is Impossible.”

Less subtle is the powerful image of “Reichstag,” with its foreground dominated top to bottom by a tall black flagpole. In a seamless distortion, this black obelisk divides the 200-year-old Reichstag on its right with the new government headquarters on the left all the while honoring Germany’s reunification at its base. As tourists and visitors gather in the combined plaza, the pole’s prominent division suggests that old and new are not completely united despite the Reichstag heralding “For All the German People.”

If Germany is not reunited yet politically, one image in this exhibit, “Checkpoint Charlie,” more than implies an economic unity, but not without its own irony. This image with its metal plate in the foreground at the viewer’s feet stating “Berliner Mauer” (Berlin Wall) commemorates that famous historic entrance point between East and West Berlin. Despite that history, complete with a soldier-like shadow that appears to be leaping the boundary, the image’s power is elsewhere. Looking into the former East sector one sees nothing but images of the West-Coke signage, commercial vans and billboards. It’s the latter that truly captures the imagination for all of Germany as the female figures shouts “[T]RÄUME!” That is, “DREAM!” or “SPACE!” without the “T.” Or better yet, “DREAMSPACE!”

These, as well as other photos in this show, project a dream space of their own with their illusion of reality, perfect distortion, saturated color palette and exquisite detail and precision. Yet, though they would look good at home in such global magazines as “Paris Match,” “Elle” and “Stern,” they aren’t selling anything. Instead they offer one the chance to jump in and fully connect to the world, without the aid and distraction of an iPod, cell phone or Blackberry.

#### **THE MOVING GALLERY**

1042 HOWARD STREET, THE PASSAGEWAY - STREET LEVEL, THE OLD MARKET, OMAHA, NE

GALLERY HOURS, MONDAY - SATURDAY, 11 AM - 7 PM, SUNDAY 11 AM - 3 PM / **SEPTEMBER 18TH - OCTOBER 29TH, 2008**

(Preprint)

“Nothing is impossible.” That’s what a monolithic billboard image of Muhammad Ali seems to growl at a young man lounging next to a fountain in Berlin’s Alexanderplatz. And impossible is what German artist Frauke Bergemann achieves in her large-scale city and streetscapes, a photographic suite that challenges viewers to take in every detail, both near and far. More cinematographer than photographer, Bergemann captures daily life with the dispassionate eye of a documentarian, and she does this by making all vanishing points disappear. For this reason, it’s possible to see everything in her photographs simultaneously, even though it’s actually impossible for the human eye to absorb so much at one time.

Bergemann’s goal is simple: to stretch her viewer’s gaze, as she says, “as far as the eye can see.” To accomplish this, she engages in a complex process that imparts her photographs with a surreal *cinéma vérité* feel. Bergemann uses a wide-angle lens to capture numerous views, both horizontally and vertically. She then scans and binds these images – sometimes as many as seven at a time – seamlessly together to create a scene where every color-drenched detail is in sharp focus. The result is in pointed contrast to how we really view the world. If our focus is on the foreground, we lose site of the background; if we switch our gaze, the opposite is true. With these photographs, we lose site of nothing. The effect is somewhat disorienting and even dizzying, but visually liberating. As viewers, we become omniscient by seeing details we almost always miss.

“Spreebogen” serves as a prime example. At the top of the photo, the German Reichstag, the building that houses the country’s parliament, appears next to new government buildings. A gleaming black Yamaha motorcycle dominates the lower two-thirds of the photo, its hood and side mirror reflecting the Swiss embassy as well as two policemen passing just behind us. By enabling us to see all of this, Bergemann allows us to consider the unseen context— both the past and the present. The Nazis commandeered the Reichstag to take over Germany, and during its subsequent post World War II division, Berlin exemplified the Cold War and communist dictatorship. Today, a glass dome sits atop the Reichstag, an emblem of political transparency. The viewer notices the Polizei; they do not see us. In a unified, democratic Germany, the people keep an eye on government, not the other way around.

“Am Checkpoint Charlie” also provides a point of departure for contemplating the past and how it has been resituated into the present by focusing on a streetscape laden with unintentional irony. The former crossing point turned tourist attraction was a flashpoint Cold War tensions; people lost their lives trying to escape East Germany. Today a woman in a billboard for office space for rent calls in a direction pointing east: “(T)räumen.” It’s a great pun in German and one with multiple meanings: “träumen” is dream; “räumen” can mean both “to vacate/clear away” or “room.” The building might provide room to dream, but the larger message exhorts people to run

to their dreams. Dream about more room, more space, greater freedom. Of course, tied up with all of this is a kiosk selling Coca Cola. Freedom from communism comes with capitalism. There is also, though, a hint of pathos in this scene and a reminder of what the past really was. In the lower frame, Bergemann captures the elongated shadow of a cyclist. But the shadow morphs into the infamous photo of an East German guard leaping over barbed wire into West Berlin. The handlebars become the guard’s rifle, which he dropped just at the moment he makes his fateful jump. Here is the shadow of the past, still hovering over the defunct border crossing, a moment frozen in time, Coca Cola notwithstanding.

Not all Bergemann’s photographs feature political content. She also hones in on quotidian details, bringing a fresh perspective to things we don’t have time to notice. In the Muhammad Ali photo, the twenty-something man wakes from a hazy summer nap with start, his arm swinging above him in a quick, almost violent arc. He looks knocked down but not out, his body turning away from the larger-than-life billboard as if shielding himself from Ali’s pummeling blows. But Ali is telling the man that nothing is impossible; he can pick himself up and keep going. And this is the thread that runs throughout Frauke’s Bergemann’s work. She tells us to achieve the impossible by looking “as far as the eye reaches” – that is as far as we ourselves can reach.

**Kim Carpenter**