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Vera Lutter At Dia Center For The Arts

by Anna Hammond

In a timely twist at this dawn of a so-called postphotographic era, Vera Lutter uses the camera obscura, the most basic photographic device, to render in massive form images that serve as faithful transcriptions of immense architectural spaces. The camera obscura was originally developed during the Renaissance as an aid in the recording of the visible world. In the mid-1800s, with the invention of the daguerreotype and the fixed printing processes of William Henry Fox Talbot, photography as a tool of art and science rapidly evolved. Now, 150 years later, we have computers that can render any image at any size, and make alterations at will. The supposed crisis for photography that these developments have initiated is undone by Lutter. Her images are neither manipulated nor enlarged. In fact, they are unique prints, direct exposures onto photographic paper hung inside rooms that Lutter transforms into camera obscuras.

There were five black-and-white images in this exhibition: two interiors of an abandoned Nabisco factory in Beacon, N.Y.; one Manhattan skyline; and two interiors of a zeppelin factory in Germany. Since Lutter's initial exposure is the final product, the pictures are negative images; what you would expect to be black in fact glows with an ethereal light made all the more strange and enveloping because of the large scale (the smallest of the prints is just under 7 feet high). In Pepsi Cola VII, a rooftop cityscape, it seems as if one has just stepped onto the set of Close Encounters of the Third Kind: the skylights glow underneath the iconic American sign with its tilted bottle; because of the planes of focus in the constructed camera, everything is slightly tilted and eerily just off balance. The two factory interiors are repetitive and geometric compositions. Each is a study in three-point perspective--pilasters recede to a vanishing point, and the only contemporary reference is a fire extinguisher in one, a chair in another.

Zeppelin, Friedrichschafen, I: August 10-13, 1999, and Zeppelin, Friedrichschafen, II: August 13-17, 1999 are more about tracking time. As evidenced by the titles, these images were exposed over a period of days. In one, you can see by the traces of movement that the zeppelin was shifted in and out of its hangar a number of times; in the other, where the zeppelin remained in place, the environment seems hermetically sealed into an unworldly stasis.

These are physically ambitious works that trace the way light moves through space and creates an impression in a direct way. They reference without nostalgia the most basic initial uses of photography and indicate that the unaltered image is still as surreal as any computer chip could realize, if not more so.