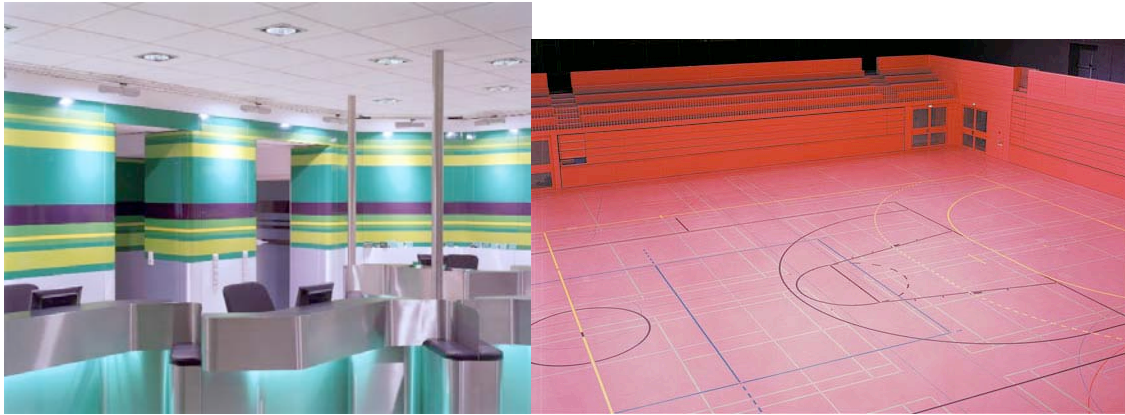


Cold comfort from banal beauty

By Yenni Kwok in Hong Kong



Rezeption, left, and Sporthalle. Photos: Julian Faulhaber

German photographer Julian Faulhaber sees beauty in the most unlikely places. His series LDPE - Lowdensitypolyethylene (the title comes from the chemical name of a type of thermoplastic) is an “aesthetic meditation” of functional modern objects, from street signs to locker rooms, vending machines, sports halls and reception counters.

Through Faulhaber's lens, the most banal entities become objects of beauty. He produces striking images that document a particular spirit of Germany's technological and economic advances, while evoking a universal yearning for the untouched. “I'm interested in objects with clean, smooth surfaces,” he says. “Especially in their artificial quality and form.”

Faulhaber's photos have an ambiguous appeal. *Rezeption*, a shot of a glossy car rental reception desk, is both inhospitable and alluring. By opting for oblique, unusual angles, Faulhaber – who says he doesn't digitally alter his photos - decontextualises these mundane objects and spaces, turning them into something unfamiliar. Thus, a green wall with small windows - the facade of a vending machine – becomes an enigmatic artefact.

Void of any human presence, his photography lacks natural warmth and is detached from common reality. The captivating aesthetics of the images doubles as a criticism of the alienating effects of the post-industrial world. “These smooth, glossy surfaces reflect something that we want,” says

Faulhaber, who turns 32 next month. “We desire a modern, futuristic lifestyle, but if we get used to that, we'll get further and further away from nature.”

In a small, upper-storey café in Causeway Bay, facing the giant screen of Times Square, he talks about a local area network convention in Germany, where people interacted with computers rather than each other. “In the end, humans are perhaps too stupid to realise what's going on,” he says.

Although his exhibited works were shot in Germany, they would strike a chord in tech-crazy Southeast Asia. The show at the Goethe-Institut is his second in this city. Faulhaber participated in a group exhibition at the IFC Mall last year.

“Faulhaber's images oscillate between reality and artificial,” says Michael Mueller-Verweyen, director of the Goethe-Institut in Hong Kong. “Asia's concept of reality is much more comprehensive than the German one. Blurring the lines between fiction and realism is much more accepted here. Haruki Murakami's novels are proof of this.”

The world of fashion sparked Faulhaber's interest in photography. “We had lots of fashion magazines in my parents’ house,” he says. While a student, he worked as an assistant on fashion shoots in Cape Town and Miami. It proved to be an important influence on his later works.

His adopted home has influenced his creative outlook as well. In 1999, after spending a couple of years in Frankfurt, the native of Heidelberg - an idyllic town surrounded by green hills and old castles - went to study photography in industrial Dortmund, where he is based now. Just a stone's throw away is Dusseldorf, which lends its name to an influential school of German photography, spearheaded by husband-and-wife team Bernd and Hilla Becher.

Their take on the unintended beauty of industrial structures - from water towers to silos and industrial plants - became a watershed of German contemporary photography. Students of the school (most prominently Andreas Gursky and Thomas Ruff) are now internationally well known.

Faulhaber says he takes inspiration from Gursky and Ruff - as well as Japan's Hiroshi Sugimoto - but also has his own distinctive style. “When I

started developing my own style, nobody in the arts school understood what I was doing,” he says.

He says he's keen to pursue his own direction. “I’m not taking photos of good designs or even super designs,” he says. “I’m more interested in normal stuff.”

Yet, because of Faulhaber's ability to imbue mundane objects with a hyper-real quality, many viewers find it difficult to believe that they're genuine, old-style photographs. “Sometimes, they say, ‘Oh, that's [a] digital [manipulation]’,” Faulhaber says. “But the strange thing is, it's really real.”

New Photographic Works, Julian Faulhaber, Goethe-Gallery, Goethe-Institut Hong Kong, 14/F Hong Kong Arts Centre, Wan Chai. Ends June 27

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