

Evelyn Hofer – Encounters

Landscapes, architectural shots, interiors, still lifes and, time and again, portraits – there is hardly a genre that is not represented in Evelyn Hofer's oeuvre. And it is of an extraordinary consistency. Connecting the pictures is the German-American photographer's attitude towards the medium. Her photographs condense people and objects down to their essence, carefully composed and yet intuitive.

The exhibition shows the full range of her work spanning half a century – not in chronological order, but rather in three large thematic blocks. We accompany Evelyn Hofer on her forays through Washington and New York, embark on a journey back to Europe and visit famous artists in their studios. The photographs we encounter along the way almost seem to be removed from time.

Evelyn Hofer's straightforward style is not beholden to any faddish photographic trends and barely changed over the course of the decades. While contemporaries such as Robert Frank or Helen Levitt opted for a subjective approach using snapshot-like images, Evelyn Hofer's photographs are intricately constructed and painterly. Even before colour photography became established as a form of artistic expression, she self-assuredly availed herself of this technique, but without ever abandoning black-and-white photography. Hofer worked with a large-format camera and long exposure times; and thus her images are imbued with a sense of calm and concentration. The intensity of the engagement with her subjects gave life to portraits that are more than a mere likeness.

Evelyn Hofer

For all her life, Evelyn Hofer was an artist without a home. Born into a wealthy family in Marburg in 1922, she moved to the Val Fex in the Upper Engadine in 1927. In 1933, after Hitler came to power, she relinquished German citizenship. The family spent several years in Madrid, but when the Spanish Civil War broke out, Evelyn Hofer and her sister returned to the Engadine. During her time in Switzerland, shortly before her 20th birthday, she began an apprenticeship as a photographer at Studio Bettina in Zurich and took private lessons with the photographers Hans Finsler and Robert Spreng, influential representatives of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement. The father, who had emigrated to Mexico in the interim, had his family join him in 1942. Evelyn Hofer adopted Mexican citizenship and received her first commissions for fashion magazines. These photographs drew mixed reactions. She was criticised for taking portraits of models rather than fashion photography. She fought hard for the recognition of her work and against the prejudice that she was just passing the time with photography until marriage. This began to change when she moved to New York in 1946 and began working as a freelance photographer for magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*. New York was to remain her place of work and residence until old age, but the big city never became a real home. Throughout her life, she maintained a close relationship with Switzerland. In 2005, Evelyn Hofer moved to her sister in Mexico City, where she died in 2009.

City portraits

“I wanted to capture the quintessential nature of a city... I didn't want to do reports.”

The city portraits occupy a special place in Hofer's oeuvre. She published them in photography books with text, choosing a free and open approach and finding a different visual language for every city. While the photographs exhibit her signature objective character, the accompanying texts by well-known authors are associative and personal. Juxtaposed side by side, they coalesce into a loose narrative that captures a nuanced reality. The first photobook on Florence was followed by about a dozen others by the end of the 1960s, including books on New York, Washington and Dublin.

New York

In 1953, she took the four photographs *Glass, Dana Trucking Co., Joe's Restaurant* and *Ça c'est* in New York, which could be considered her first studies. Evelyn Hofer examines how layers, surfaces and structures come together to form a collage of New York that creates an image of the city beyond tourist snapshots and cemented clichés. Her use of colour is particularly noteworthy, as it would be more than a decade before colour photography started to become established as an artistic practice. William Eggleston, the most famous pioneer of artistic colour photography, did not start to photograph in colour until 1965.

In her photographs for the book “New York Proclaimed”, published in 1965 with texts by Victor Sawdon Pritchett, Evelyn Hofer probes the surface of the city: Her gaze falls on shiny skyscrapers, polished cars, garish advertising posters, but also on the ground and into windows, into rough corners, on building sites and waste containers. In this ambivalent setting she encounters the inhabitants of the city: three men watching the events unfolding on the street from a bar, people of different racial backgrounds standing together in the year of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and a shy-looking police officer. Thus Evelyn Hofer shifts between landscape photographs and portraits, at times masterfully combining the two genres, for example in *Queensboro Bridge, New York, 1964*.

Washington

Just one year later, “The Evidence of Washington” is a city portrait in a similar style, this time with texts by the journalist and painter William Walton. Once again, Hofer goes on a discovery tour with her camera and captures the unique nature of the city and its inhabitants. She captures the essence of the city as the centre of political representation in strictly arranged group portraits. Rooms, persons and vehicles are stand-ins for the authority of the state. In between, the everyday reality of lives of chauffeurs, secretaries and other residents of Washington shines through.

Europe

“I love Europe so much. The landscape – the civilisation (of which I know far too little), I am hungry for it. I also love the ‘old’ – the characters that reflect the past.”

Again and again Evelyn Hofer travelled to Europe, to the “old world”, with which she felt a stronger connection than with America in its constant pursuit of progress. Sometimes she spent weeks at a time on location, conducting interviews and filling entire notebooks with her research. Her in-depth approach is reflected in her pictures.

Wales

Following several short travel reportages, her first photographic essay “The Welshman” appeared in *Life International* in 1965. It is a social study of the residents of Wales. Using a wide frame, Evelyn Hofer also includes landscapes and objects in her portraits, thus placing people in a social, professional and cultural context. She does this in her signature style: the subjects are at rest in themselves and their surroundings. This sets Evelyn Hofer apart from the dynamic magazine photography and fleeting snapshots common among many of her contemporaries. These are encounters on equal footing, where the people being portrayed present a static and present counterpart and return the photographer’s gaze.

Dublin

Ireland, characterised by Catholicism and its outdated infrastructure, was in a state of transition at the time of Evelyn Hofer’s stay. The photographs in shades of grey offer deep, at times almost morbid insights into society. Where grey, black and white are the predominant colours, the details come to the fore: in the work clothes of waiters or maids, at the cemetery and in shoe repair shops. In between these images, Evelyn Hofer almost organically switches to colour photography to capture the city’s lighting moods, thus giving the pictures a narrative twist. The girl with the oversized bicycle and red stockings seems as though she can successfully brave the demands of life. And Evelyn Hofer does not portray the footballers coming fresh from the game as masculine heroes, but as rather likeable fellows from next door, who balance out the dismal reality with their small everyday pleasures and friendship.

Soglio

A centrepiece in Evelyn Hofer’s oeuvre is the extensive series of portraits of the inhabitants of Soglio. The small village in Bergell was the place that Evelyn Hofer most readily thought of as home. Every summer she returned to Soglio, which she had known and cherished since her childhood. Her deep connection is reflected in the extraordinary closeness to the portrayed people: the relaxed bodies and faces and the private setting are an expression of this trusting relationship.

Art

«What fascinates me concerning the works of Evelyn is that she portrays everything; it might be a tree, a human being, or even a chair. She always paints a portrait.»

Whatever Evelyn Hofer photographs, it is always a portrait – a painted portrait. This statement by artist and longtime friend Richard Lindner is true of the photographer's entire oeuvre, but it is particularly evident in her work when compared with her contemporaries. Evelyn Hofer paints with her camera. Whenever she uses colour, it becomes the dominant element of her composition. The effect of the photographs is also painterly. The objects detach themselves from their temporal context, giving her subjects an air of other-worldliness. When she positions an object in front of the camera, the result is never an objectively distanced shot that is typical of classical object photography. Instead, it becomes a leitmotif that refers to a person.

Artist portraits

For various magazines such as *House & Garden*, *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*, Evelyn Hofer visited some of the central figures of the international art scene in their studios. She profiled Andy Warhol for the first time in the 1960s and several more times in the 1980s. But her profile for *House & Garden* completely leaves out the face of the pop art pope. His home speaks volumes. It gives us a glimpse into the artist's self-image and his penchant for opulent furniture – far removed from a clichéd home story. The artists are also absent in other portraits; rooms and objects are their stand-ins. In Marlene Dietrich's estate, which was stored in a hangar after her death, the only hint of her person is a photograph; nevertheless, she has an almost-palpable physical presence in Hofer's photographs. We encounter Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner in the form of paint buckets and a pair of shoes in their studio on Long Island.

Still lifes

The extent to which Evelyn Hofer measures her photography against the standards of painting becomes apparent in her last free series of works. The still lifes with fruits are inspired by 17th century Spanish painting. For example, she references a painting by the Spanish baroque painter Francisco de Zurbarán: as in the original, the lemons and oranges, which stand out brightly against the deep black background, strike a balance between orchestrated artificiality and naturalistic representation. The technically perfect studio shoots, realised using the elaborate dye-transfer process*, retain the sensuality of painting – with great mastery she encapsulates the essence of her entire photographic oeuvre.

* dye transfer: photographic printing process characterised by nuanced colours, high colour intensity and a grainless image surface. Evelyn Hofer preferred this process to the otherwise common C-prints for her colour works, as it allowed her to express the painterly quality of her photography even better.