

NO SHOW

Althea Thauberger in response to Melvin Moti's exhibition
No Show at Artspeak September 8-October 13, 2007.

The photograph shows an interior: a grand hall, a gallery. On the walls hang picture frames, all empty and without paintings. The impression is of a well-ordered ruin.

On the computer screen, the photograph is a jpeg of a scan of a re-photographed copy of the original print. Because of its particular shades of grey, it seems the original must have been a silver gelatin print. It was taken during one of the World Wars.

The photograph's tonality is soft, making you look at it in a gentle way. The building in the photograph seems to date from the late eighteenth century. Its architectural style might be called "restrained neo-classical."

The photographer has expertly applied the camera's capacity for squareness and symmetry, contributing to an effect matching the domineering exactness of the architecture itself. The photograph is a conventional and exemplary demonstration of single point perspective. The photograph is exquisite.

The vanishing point, in the very centre, is through a door at the far end of the hall, and all lines in the scene converge towards the doorway. Through it, you can make out a dark passage that opens onto another grand hall. You can't see enough to confirm it is another grand hall, but you know that it is, and that it leads, in turn, to others. The crown moulding, jambs and casing around the door are light (or white) in comparison to the walls, which are dark. The moulding seems to be mitred decoratively, but the details are unclear.

Far above the doorway, the triangular gable between the walls and the ceiling spreads out and down at a gentle angle. Rendered in partial shadow, it is divided into six parts by decorative panels. Upon them are painted great thistles stylized as geometrically unfurling paisleys.

On either side and slightly in front of the faraway door, stand four pairs of decorated partition walls, receding symmetrically like dominos. Extending from the side walls of the great hall towards the centre, they are spaced evenly between a series of large windows. The windows are visible over the tops of the walls only by suggestions of sunlight, and the carved trim and decoration on their crowns. The tops of the front partitions exactly align with the outside edges of the painted gable. The floral painted friezes emerge perfectly from the other corners of the partitions, extending diagonally to the upper corners of the photograph. You are compelled to linger over these symmetries.

Your attention is turned towards the innumerable coffer beams in the ceiling. Each is met with a corbel—a kind of decorative joint on the wall above the frieze. Every fifth corbel is larger and ornamented and is aligned above the crown decoration atop each window. You notice that the space between the panels on the gable exactly aligns with the ceiling beams where they meet on the far side of the hall. The central beam of the ceiling exactly divides the image in half, and your eye follows this line down through the doorway and floor to the bottom of the photograph. Each side of the image is an exact mirror of the other. Now, you consciously seek asymmetry.

In the foreground, on the right, a patch of diffused sunlight seems to sit on the floor like illuminated fog. You follow the highlights towards the centre of the room where they give way to bits of shadow cast by the objects and the walls. You notice the play of shadow throughout the image and are reminded of the physicality of darkness, and the pleasure of seeing shadows almost (but not quite) give way to black as they can in a silver print.

A pair of gaudy marble half-columns sit facing each other between the first and second partitions. They appear to have been sawed off at plinth height.

The front partition walls are almost entirely visible in the photograph. On each hang five picture frames of varying sizes and shapes, completely without pictures and paintings. Instead, the frames display the walls behind them, and their own shadows. You can make out that all the other walls are similarly covered and ordered, even the back wall of the grand hall by the doorway. The frames are the kind you see overwhelming old paintings in museums. They are suspended by wide rods attached to a picture rail near the top of the partitions. They are hung salon style, all over the walls. None of the frames are exactly the same, but they all seem to have equal status. Some are ornamented. One has an oval opening and is hung so that the oval is horizontal, as if the wrong way. After counting the visible ones, you estimate that one hundred and twenty frames frame nothing in this grand hall. Perhaps paintings are banned and burned—like books.

You notice that almost everything within the photograph is a frame. Frames within frames—decorated ones. The tall windows; the baseboards and panel mouldings on the partitions; the partitions themselves; the soaring ceiling with beams like lattice; the door and the grand hall beyond; the room.

There is another mystery in the immediate foreground: a lumpen pile—probably sand—about three wheelbarrows full. Surrounded by such absence, or absence of witness, the pile does not seem out of place, except that a shovel is artfully stuck in, face down. The shovel is the digging kind with a long straight handle and a large, slightly rounded blade. Like a lever, a figure or a flag, the handle angles up and out as if to say: "see this pile of dirt on the floor of the grand hall." You see this as art: this shovel and pile of sand for making sandbags that are used to block explosions, or floodwater, or other disasters that don't immediately come to mind.

The entire floor appears to be covered with a fine film of dust or haze, but you can make out that it is comprised of a pattern of squares, each divided into four right angle triangles. It might be marble or it might be inlays of rare woods. You can imagine walking the straight line along the floor towards the faraway doorway. All movement in the photograph, finally, is towards it—and through it towards the emptied grand halls beyond.

Althea Thauberger is an artist based in Vancouver.