

## The Void. \_ Nothing. but. Space.

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*The visible, the existent, gives form to work. The invisible, the non-existent, gives it essence and meaning.<sup>1</sup>*

In her series of room images, Sarah Straßmann focuses on the depiction of the invisible, the visualisation of emptiness – and, ultimately, on disproving its existence.

The subjects of the images, which are all located within a domestic context, appear familiar at first glance, but, after closer scrutiny, they arouse ambivalent feelings. Aspects which appeared inviting at first suddenly seem forbidding; what first made us feel at home now seems sinister. The photographer's subtle integration of image detail, perspective and lighting mood intimates something forbidding and lends a perceptible degree of depth to the everyday motifs.

Two of the six large-format colour photographs are very light, dominated by white areas; in the others, darkness, the black portion, predominates. The focus on the non-colours black and white is to be regarded symbolically. Both are associated to a certain extent with emptiness – either as the absence of light where the sense of blackness completely bars the existence of colour, or in the sense of emptiness which emanates from a sheet of paper on which a white area has been left unprinted. In order to disrupt the viewer's often far too stereotyped patterns of perception, Straßmann uses ingenious contrasts of light and image composition. The phenomenon of light – which is the prerequisite for something to be seen at all – generally opens up an area of visual experience which can be measured by the eye and whose dimensions are thus perceived in relation to one's own viewpoint. However, when one looks at the motifs *Weißer Wand* (White wall) and *Lamellentür* (Louvre door), one is prevented from visually penetrating the space inside the image and from moving around freely within it – the observer is excluded. In both cases, the view into the depth of room is blocked by structural elements which are arranged parallel to the surface of the image. The uniform lighting and the image structure which is focused on central perspective give a disconcerting impression of flatness and spatial abstraction, causing the observer to immediately try to fill the invisible volume of space – which is hidden from him – with imaginary content, in an attempt to breathe life into the void.

The fact that, within the spatial outline, there are no objects which could in any way be regarded as being significant, encourages the viewer to focus his search for traces on the basic architectural structure of the image, meaning that every irregularity in the surface texture and every sign of de-

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<sup>1</sup> Laotse

terioration appears to be an important reference to the past. At the same time, these apparently insignificant details which would disappear completely into the background in rooms which were full of life or filled with objects evoke individual associations here.

In the two works entitled *Schrank* (Cupboard) and *Keller* (Basement), space is readily allowed for these personal thoughts, as the creator of the images deliberately permits the structure of a wooden cupboard door or the leg of a bookshelf to emerge from the darkness into the light. The haptic stimulation emanating from these surfaces, accentuated by the use of light, indicates that a change has been brought about in the way in which we perceive dark images in contrast to light images. The contours of room disappearing into the darkness and the dissolution of the objective nature of the piece of furniture and structural elements in the room make visual-analytical perception difficult, causing the perception of atmosphere to become the predominating sensory impression.

However, the feeling of warmth and being enwrapped which is evoked by the dark mood of the lighting is again counteracted by the structure of the image. The stairway in *Verspernte Tür* (Blocked door) has a sinister feel about it as it climbs into the darkness, and the blackness inside the cupboard leaves room for fears of the imagination. The fact that the observer is incorporated or drawn into the space inside the image due to the large-format presentation of the series in general, and because of the specific choice of perspective used for the dark motifs, encourages the evocation of such feelings all the more. The way in which a spatial situation opens up indefinitely, as the case with the *Flurtür* (Hallway door), which is only open to a crack, encourages the observer to fill the empty spaces with hypothetical activities and to imagine things which are located outside the limits of the image while looking at the photograph. We don't know what it was that actually happened inside these rooms, however, their material emptiness now evokes the presence of something which apparently happened, i.e. of an individual fiction which becomes palpable. This is how Straßmann arrives at the conclusion that there is no such thing as a truly empty space. Nonetheless, the essential elements within a space remain invisible.