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Museum der Moderne
Salzburg

THE POETRY OF THE EVERYDAY

Photographs by Elfriede Mejchar

April 26—September 15, 2024

Altstadt (Rupertinum)

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Intro

Elfriede Mejchar (1924–2020 Vienna, AT), the grande dame of Austrian photography, was in the employ of the Federal Monuments Office for almost forty years. Meanwhile, she also began her groundbreaking work on the outskirts of Vienna. Harnessing the photographic series as a documentary and investigative medium, she limned an imposing portrait of the urban landscape. Her work, which had a lasting influence on the evolution of photography in Austria, now also stands as an important documentary record of the country in the postwar period.

As a professional photographer, Mejchar traveled to various regions throughout Austria, including in Lower and Upper Austria and Styria, to capture buildings and cultural assets of art-historical significance in photographs. Yet she also used her official trips and her scant free time to pursue her own photographic interests, which focused on the small and seemingly trivial and the traces of civilization that humans leave in nature or along the edges of the urban fabric and that receive little if any attention. It may seem that the documentary dimension is less important in the resulting works, that it is eclipsed by the narrative element. In fact, Mejchar fuses both,

scrutinizing her motifs with an attentive eye that picks up on the singular or peculiar and registers it without manipulation.

Elfriede Mejchar was not interested in the so-called “pivotal moment” and did not care for the conventional photo-journalistic style of her time. Her work began when people had left, and she approached her themes from a very conceptual angle. Both the documentary series she created under the open sky and the object photographs, still lifes, and collages she made in her studio reflect this approach. She photographed the “evanescent before it evanesces”, in urban and rural landscapes and everyday scenes, capturing the changes that affected the particular scenery and its distinctive atmosphere.

The Creative Element in Documentation

Produced between 1967 and 1976, the photographic series “Simmeringer Heide and Erdberger Mais” is Mejchar’s first long-term cycle, for which she takes hundreds of pictures over the years. The series uses the photographic medium to explore the Viennese periphery. Simmeringer Heide and Erdberger Mais are areas on the southeastern outskirts of Vienna that were altered by humans and gradually taken over by commercial operations which transformed them into an industrial landscape. Mejchar first discovers them at a time when unused parcels of land (locally known as “Gstätten”), derelict market gardens, and scattered industrial structures are still defining features of the scenery. What sets the series apart is the choice of subject and the matter-of-factly manner in which the photographer treats it, compiling a kind of anecdotal inventory—empty lots, paths and roads, utility poles and a select few close-ups. The shots demonstrate that Mejchar’s objective in her art—as in the documentary photography that is her day-to-day work—is to render exactly what the objective and precise eye of a topographer sees. In framing an area in the urban periphery as a landscape, she trains this eye and her lens on a subject that has been largely absent from Austrian photography.

The use of a sulfur-based solution to tone the photographs—which is the cause of the brownish tinge—reflects a recurring concern in Mejchar’s photographs: existence in time and impermanence. In this instance, the technique’s purpose is not to alter the color, but rather to make it more durable.

The Artist as Chronicler

Portraiture plays a role early on in Elfriede Mejchar's work; she receives her professional training in a portrait studio. She subsequently makes a conscious choice to avoid the genre, but then, in the 1950s, returns to it.

“Künstler bei der Arbeit”, 1954–1961

The series “Künstler bei der Arbeit” (Artists at Work) is her first major cycle of portraits, comprising over 340 gelatin silver prints. Mejchar is often brought in to capture exhibitions in installation shots, especially at the Vienna Secession, where she is introduced to many young artists waiting to make a name for themselves as well as some of their older colleagues who have been active since before 1945. The incomprehension with which the visitors gaze at abstract art that does not represent anything with any accuracy prompts the young photographer to record the intensity and seriousness with which the artists dedicate themselves to their craft, often braving considerable hardship. The series accordingly focuses on visualizing the real studio and workplace settings of thirty-six artists, including Christa Hauer, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Josef Mikl, and Arnulf Rainer.

“Porträts von Künstler-Photographen und Kunstvermittlern”, 1988–1994

In the body of work “Porträts von Künstler-Photographen und Kunstvermittlern” (Portraits of Artist Photographers and Art Educators), by contrast, Mejchar undertakes to depict everyone involved in fine art photography in Austria in the late twentieth century. Over the years, the series grows to comprise eighty double portraits, each composed, in accordance with a rigorous conception, of an en face portrait side by side with a three-quarter view. The works have a distinctly staged quality, underscored by the unvarying austere setting and the emphasis on the hands, among other aspects. In this respect they recall Mejchar's final examination, in which she had to realize a portrait both in profile and en face to demonstrate her command of photographic lighting designing and the handling of human sitters.

With these two projects, Mejchar becomes an important chronicler of the Austrian arts scene.

The Other Gaze

“Hotel (Fremdenzimmer)”, 1970–1986

As part of her work for the Federal Monuments Office, Elfriede Mejchar has to travel a great deal, mainly to more rural areas. The photographic series “Hotel (Fremdenzimmer)” (Hotel (Guest Room)) is a kind of lasting documentary record of these trips and perhaps the most significant one. Bed, table, chair, mirror, wardrobe, patterned wallpaper, and sometimes a washbasin: for over fifteen years, the photographer captures her rooms with their often spartan furnishings in the numerous modest hotels and inns that—though it may not look like it at first glance—provide her with accommodation. Here and there one does espy a toothbrush, a pair of shoes, a ruffled bedcover, all traces that reveal the ostensibly absent photographer’s presence. A certain melancholy suffuses these shots of hotel rooms as witnesses to a world that has all but disappeared

“Die Monats sesseln”, 1986–1988

The same melancholy is also unmistakable in the photographs of objects that have outlived their usefulness and been discarded and, it seems, forgotten. In the series “Die Monats sesseln” (The Armchairs of the Month) Mejchar portrays found motifs such as discarded seating furniture. The series shows a

wide variety of such items, from kitchen chairs to living-room armchairs and even car seats, that have become part of the natural or other scene where they were dumped. No less diverse than the pieces of furniture and their environments are the feelings they elicit; as Mejchar puts it, “a mess can be beautiful in its own way.”

“Oszillation (Salzburger Landesatelier)”, 1988

The dreariness of the hotel rooms contrasts with the sober-mindedness and lucidity of the photographs in “Oszillation (Salzburger Landesatelier)” (Oszillation [Salzburger Landesatelier]). Yet although the two series are very different on the surface, both are sustained by a minimalism that is operative on the level of the motifs, in the austere interiors, as well as in Mejchar’s precisely chosen camera angles. These photographs capture the rooms of the State of Salzburg’s studio residence for visiting artists, located, like the Salzburger Kunstverein, in the historic Künstlerhaus. Mejchar herself lives there for a while in 1988, a change of working environment that is reflected in her output from the period.

Nobody Is Perfect

In the late 1980s, Elfriede Mejchar branches out in a fresh creative direction. She has been retired for some years and feels free to take on new challenges. Setting aside the flaneur-like practice underlying her earlier bodies of work, she starts photographing in the studio.

Tapetenbild. Triptychon, 1988
(Wallcover Picture. Tryptic)
“Eine Kostümierung der geliehenen Identität“, 1989
(A Costume for the borrowed Identity)
“Tagebuch Jänner 1988“, 1988
(Diary January 1988)
“Nobody Is Perfect“, 1996

Faces change shapes, snakes coil around heads, open and closed eyes alternate. For the collages in “Tagebücher Jänner 1988,” Mejchar reuses her own photographs; in other series, by contrast, she works with found images such as shots of female models from print advertisements or fuses figural representations with fabric and wallpaper patterns. The works are rapidly composed out of visual fragments that she often only loosely places side by side or in overlapping arrangements, dispelling their aura of perfection. “I build pictures for myself on the wall, from materials that are at hand in the public sphere, that are on public display, but I

strip away the ideal of flawless beauty that is constantly rubbed in our faces by dismembering it or covering it up.” It is the temporary and easily mutable that fascinates Mejchar, qualities that had had no place in her professional work.

“Amaryllis“, 1994–1997

Pictures of flowers in fine art, whether painted or photographed, inevitably have a clichéd dimension. Mejchar photographs only a special selection of flowers such as amaryllises, lilies, and tulips that she grows in her own garden. In the studio, rather than recording the flowers with a romantic gesture, she captures their gradual transformations—full blossoms, some full of delicate life, some already wilting and recognizably perishable. Showing them between florescence and decay, in a kind of liminal instant, she revisits a theme that surfaces throughout her oeuvre: the capturing of a state of affairs at a defined point in time.



Elfriede Mejchar: biographical note

1924—2020 Vienna, AT

Elfriede Mejchar is raised in Lower Austria. In 1939, she moves to Germany, where, from 1941 until 1944, she trains as a photographer with Ernst Ley in his small photography studio in Nordenham, completing her education with the official apprenticeship examination.

In light of the political developments, the young photographer and her mother return to Vienna in 1944. She gets her first job when the Federal Monuments Office (BDA) hires her to document historic architecture with a view to potential bomb damage. She witnesses the turbulent final weeks of the war in Austria, then returns to northern Germany, before settling in Vienna in 1947. From then until her retirement in 1984, Mejchar works as a photographer for the Federal Monuments Office on a steady contract. She buys her first own camera in 1953, and in 1960 she earns a master's certificate in photography as an external student at the Graphische Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt Wien. Busy with her daytime work for the BDA, she also starts pursuing her own photographic interests in the 1960s, although she does not publicly exhibit her output until 1976, when the Museum of the Twentieth Century in Vienna mounts the fifty-two-year-old photographer's first solo exhibition. After retiring in 1984, she dedicates herself entirely to freelance and fine art photography.

Elfriede Mejchar does not win the public recognition she merits until old age; in 2002, she is awarded the Honorary Prize for Photography of the Federal Chancellor's Office, followed in 2004 by the Honorary Prize for Fine Art Photography of the State of Lower Austria and the Prize of the City of Vienna for Fine Art.

List of works

From the series “Künstler bei der Arbeit”,
1954–1961
(Artists at Work)
26 gelatin silver prints on baryta paper
Each 31,5 x 28 cm
Arnulf Rainer
Josef Mikl
Christa Hauer
Friedensreich Hundertwasser
Austrian Federal Photography Collection at the
Museum der Moderne Salzburg
DLF 1604_1-30

From the series “Simmeringer Heide und
Erdberger Mais”, 1967–1976
48 gelatin silver prints on baryta paper,
sulphur toning
Each 24 x 30 cm or 30 x 24 cm
Museum der Moderne Salzburg
F 37_1-28, GF 39_1-109, GF 470_1-91

From the series “Hotel (Fremdenzimmer)”,
1970–1986
(Hotel [Guest Room])
11 gelatin silver prints on baryta paper
Each 40,5 x 28 cm or 28 x 40,5 cm
Austrian Federal Photography Collection at the
Museum der Moderne Salzburg
DLF 741_1-11

From the series “Die Monatssesseln”,
1986–1988
(The Armchairs of the Month)
12 gelatin silver prints on baryta paper
Each 40 x 30 cm
Museum der Moderne Salzburg
F 465_1-12

From the series “Tagebuch Jänner 1988”, 1988
(Diary January 1988)
7 collages, gelatin silver prints on baryta
paper and chromogenic prints
Each 28 x 22,5 cm
Museum der Moderne Salzburg
GF 464_1-16

Tapetenbild. Triptychon, 1988
(Wallpaper. Triptych)
Collages, gelatin silver prints on baryta paper
Series of 3, each 50 x 40 cm
Museum der Moderne Salzburg
F 468_1-3

From the series “Oszillation (Salzburger
Landesatelier)”, 1988
(Oscillation [Salzburger Landesatelier])
9 gelatin silver prints on baryta paper
Each 19 x 24,5 cm or 24,5 x 19 cm
Austrian Federal Photography Collection at the
Museum der Moderne Salzburg
DLF 742_1-11

From the series “Porträts von Künstler-
Photographen und Kunstvermittlern”,
1988–1994
(Portraits of Artist Photographers and Art
Educators)
20 gelatin silver prints on baryta paper
Each 29,5 x 23,5 cm or 24 x 19,5 cm
Prof. Dr. Otto Breicha, 1988
Herwig Kempinger, 1992
Aglaja Konrad, 1989
Nikolaus Korab, 1991
Karin Mack, 1992
Michaela Moscouw, 1990
Christoph Scharff, 1990
Günther Selichar, 1993
Margherita Spiluttini-Krischanitz, 1989
Dr. Margit Zuckriegl, 1988
Austrian Federal Photography Collection at the
Museum der Moderne Salzburg
DLF 916_1-79

From the series “Eine Kostümierung der
geliehenen Identität”, 1989
(A Masquerade of Borrowed Identity)
3 collages, gelatin silver prints on baryta
paper
Each 47 x 36,5 cm
Museum der Moderne Salzburg
F 620_1-3

From the series “Amaryllis”, 1994–1997
8 gelatin silver prints on baryta paper
Each 40 x 50 cm
Museum der Moderne Salzburg
F 1165_1-8

From the series “Nobody is perfect”, 1996
14 collages, chromogenic prints
Each 31 x 32 cm or 32 x 31 cm
Austrian Federal Photography Collection at the
Museum der Moderne Salzburg
DLF 1169_1-13

Colophon



Museum der Moderne
Salzburg

Booklet published in conjunction with the
Exhibition

The Poetry of the Everyday Photographs by Elfriede Mejchar

April 26–September 15, 2024
Museum der Moderne Salzburg

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Druckprodukt mit finanziellem
Klimabeitrag
ClimatePartner.com/11616-2404-1002



Produziert nach den Richtlinien des
Österreichischen Umweltzeichens,
Druckerei Roser Gesellschaft m.b.H.,
UW-Nr. 1037

Publication

Edited by Harald Krejci and Katharina Ehrl
for the Museum der Moderne Salzburg

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English Translation: Gerrit Jackson
Grafic Design: Tommi Bergmann
Production: Museum der Moderne Salzburg

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Elfriede Mejchar, from the Series “Simmeringer
Heide und Erdberger Mais”, 1967–1976, gelatin
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Elfriede Mejchar, from the series “Die
Monatssesseln”, 1986–1988, gelatin silver print on
baryta paper, Museum der Moderne Salzburg
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