

ArtSeen

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# SABINE HORNIG *Transparent Things*

by Paula Burleigh

TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY | JANUARY 10 – FEBRUARY 23, 2013

## On Art's Opacity

Sabine Hornig's solo exhibition at Tonya Bonakdar is called *Transparent Things*, which describes both the objects she photographs and their resulting sculptures. Since 2001, Hornig (b. 1964) has photographed storefront windows in Berlin, which serve as the basis for large photographic transparencies mounted behind Perspex. These pieces are often juxtaposed with concrete, aluminum, and other industrial materials to become traversable sculptural installations. For instance, the aluminum overhang topping "Large Corner Window" (2012) looks like a bus stop enclosure. Beneath the aluminum are two large intersecting "walls" that are actually made of stretched sheer fabric printed with photographic transparencies. From a distance, however, they read as glass panes.

Hornig's physical construction of a large corner window merges with her photographs of a large corner window; thus the real physical object comprises a representation of that object. It is at once a thing and a representation of a thing, which is a strange, second-order version of reality. The work is utterly altered when one moves inside the sculpture and looks out through the fabric windows. From the inside looking out, the windows are diaphanous interruptions in the viewer's field of vision. Within the photographic image, strips of neon yellow tape forming two Xs stand out markedly, while other objects fade into obscurity. In this way, the X-marks anchor the surrounding images, as though taping them down, preventing them from disappearing into inchoate



Sabine Hornig, "Großes Eckfenster / Large Corner Window," 2012. Aluminum, wood, sublimation print on polyester, and concrete. Overall installed dimensions: 71 3/4 × 122 1/2 × 135". Photo: Jean Vong. Courtesy the artist and Tonya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

matter.

In “Mirrored Room”(2011), things get even more trippy: the artist photographed a windowed façade in which the reflections of both the street and trees behind her are visible. The resulting image is a confluence of intersecting, layered panels, in which architecture, nature, and the urban scene collide. Turned away from us, a man stands in the center as these reflections radiate around him. He is our surrogate and interlocutor, a classic Rückenfigur in the tradition of Caspar David Friedrich. Made small by his surrounding environs, we put ourselves in his place to contemplate this strange, mirrored world.

Aside from the literal transparency of the works and the windows photographed, *Transparent Things* refers to the eponymous novel by Vladimir Nabokov, published in 1972. In the story of Hugh Person, Nabokov explored the metaphysics of memory by interweaving accounts of four trips made by the protagonist over the course of two decades. Most germane to Hornig’s work is the narrative’s oscillation between external and internal viewpoints, in that the narrator’s voice shifts frequently between the personal and the omniscient. This suturing together of disparate viewpoints is only possible in fiction, and it points to the artifice of the novel and perhaps also to memory itself, which is, like a fiction, a distilled representation of something else. Hornig’s sculptures work in the same way: viewed from one direction, they resolve into coherent images, but as we enter into them from the opposite side, we become a character in an environment looking out, and our perception changes. This effectively destabilizes perception, suggesting that whether physical or optical, it is never a straightforward translation of reality. Thus the title *Transparent Things* points exactly to what Hornig’s works are not. That Hornig photographs windows is telling: once the dominant metaphor for art (the Renaissance “window onto the world”), a window is a transparent pane of glass through which we see clearly; it separates without mediating. But Hornig’s windows are not nearly so simple; they facilitate a complex interplay of reflections in which multiple realities coalesce into a composite image that makes less sense the longer you look. Indeed art is no longer transparent at all; in fact we might say that the paradigm for contemporary art is opacity. I don’t use the term opacity pejoratively, but to suggest that contemporary art is self-reflexively aware of its own artifice, and as such it demands discourse.

Art shifts according to its context, which Hornig’s work enacts through its literal transparency: looking through any of her constructions, the surrounding environment becomes part of the work. In her flat photographs of windows mounted on the gallery walls, we see ourselves seeing in reflection. And this is why writing and talking around artworks is important (I say talking “around” them because perhaps that’s the best we can do): viewers bring perspectives to artworks, drawing out meanings that are latent and perhaps only visible in certain contexts. If art were truly transparent, perhaps we could leave it well enough alone and simply look.

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