

ANDREAS GURSKY – HAYWARD GALLERY – LONDON

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Based on the atmosphere in the initial two rooms of the much anticipated Andreas Gursky retrospective at the Hayward Gallery, my first reaction is mild despondency. The crowd is by no means sparse but it seems they are rapidly looking at the first few works neither pausing for long nor even barely stopping at all. All seem desperate to get to the famous massive sprawling images in which to get the mandatory selfie. In my opinion, this is far more indicative of the nature of large scale 'must see' exhibitions than the work itself. Whilst the work is, perhaps, not as formidable as his larger pieces, it carries an interest and insight into where the artist has come from and acts as an introduction to the visual techniques and themes that await us in the later rooms.

The first image that catches my eye is a viewer's view of three Turner paintings in the second room. The inclusion of this image feels like a statement about our role as the viewer; a play on the multiple layers that are implicit, not only in viewing art as a whole, but specifically Gursky's work. This is further strengthened by a large print, *Untitled 1, 1992*, which consists of an extreme close up of a piece of grey carpet. Known far more for his distance from his subject matter, the choice of extreme close-up is almost disarming but by zooming into the fabric, however, the artist achieves similar results. The rows of material emulating the rows of supermarket shelves or Siemens workers from his more famous photos. Gursky's play on perspective is making us an active viewer, forcing us to look deeper into the image and question what is contained within it. I realise now that the purpose of the first two rooms is to get you into the mindset of a Gursky viewer; a mini tutorial into how he wants you to look at his photos.

The next room along we are treated to his massive sprawling compositions that we've all come to see. And they are all here. The Stock Exchanges, *99 cent, Frankfurt 2007*, his *Pyongyang* series and *Kamiokande 2007*, all of which are worthy of their praise. Seeing them together like this, not only allows the viewer to appreciate the scale and impact of the Gursky aesthetic but it allows us to appreciate the technicality behind his images. The use of a telephoto lens from a distance to flatten everything means that every single detail is prominent and vital. Much like the modern life he depicts, Gursky overpowers us with information to the point of exertion.

That said I was surprised to find that it was his more barren images that really held my gaze. The sparseness of his large Antarctic landscapes were, for me, just as mesmerizing as *Paris Montparnasse 1993*. Much like the carpet image from the start of the exhibition, the frugal amount of detail has us questioning, even more so, what we see before us. Is it really Antarctic or just a burst of white powder? Using scale and detail, or lack thereof, Gursky keeps us questioning what we are seeing and how we should be seeing it; concurrently making us see both the bigger and the smaller picture.

Some would feel cheated to know that his work is heavily post produced but Gursky's use of it only adds to his work. The artist himself justifies it by comparing his work to that of a writer. 'You look out of a window and get an impression but when you write it down it will be what you imagined.' His creative and technical choices ensure that we see what he wants us to see, giving the images way more depth and narrative than one would have thought possible. By using post production to enhance his images Gursky is shedding light on a reality within a situation or a landscape that we wouldn't have otherwise seen.

Some of his later work, which were referred to as fictionalised depictions, fell a little short for me. Having just bared witness to these overwhelming, high definition masterpieces, works like *Review 2015* felt a little crude and lacked the integrity of some of his earlier work. Another low point is a small image of a Madonna concert crowd. Without the usual Gursky scale this shot falls short and ends up looking a bit like a bad mobile phone image. Here, I am reminded of the artist Bill

Drummond and his 10 commandments of art where he states that 'art shouldn't have worth or influence based on scale.' I find it hard not to question whether I am impressed by Gursky purely based on the size of his images. Thankfully, this moment of doubt is fleeting and the quality of the collection, as a whole, overshadows these minor downturns.

One of the final images of the exhibition is *Amazon 2016*, a commentary on the omnipresent multi corporations in today's society. The many rows of products and insane amount of detail become symbolic of the enormous level of consumerism that innocuously infiltrates all our lives. This image is a successful conclusion to the exhibition and allows the visitor to leave satisfied. *Amazon 2016* not only proves that Gursky's method is still relevant and necessary today but it also helps show how much photography has moved away from merely documenting life. By using modern photographic techniques Gursky has created a way of recording life that successfully explores and exposes the narratives of the modern world and the myriad of lives and ways of living that are contained within it. It acts as a the perfect full stop to an impressive exhibition and highlights the importance of Gursky's work and the way in which he shows us the world.