

Prostratio

by Rafael v. Uslar

Claus Rottenbacher began his series *Prostratio*, showcasing imposing church interiors, in Rome in 2009.

A portrayal of “God’s Kingdom on Earth,” church and cathedral architecture of past centuries employs plentiful strategies to visually overpower anyone entering. Ideally, heavenly grandeur was to be brought closer to those on Earth by making use of a maximum of spatial expansion. Apart from all the material and pictorial splendor, the most important tools employed in the architectural propagation of divine greatness were vast spatial volume and immense ceiling heights. There is no doubt that throughout its different epochs and eras, art history owes some of its greatest masterworks to this ambition to overwhelm all human scale.

Such a dramaturgy, relying on a maximization of effects and strategies of expansion and elevation, is skillfully juxtaposed with a liturgical choreography comprising gestures of physical diminishment towards those targeted by this artistic spectacle. Kneeling down, or the “*prostratio*”—throwing oneself down on the ground—add an additional level of drama to the experience of the space.

Claus Rottenbacher’s photographs, however, taken from a floor level

perspective, show that despite such an apparent logic — this is not the point of view that the space was intended to be seen from. In Rottenbacher’s images the ceilings seem forced downwards. A strange tension evolves in the works between homage to the grand scale of the interiors, and a lowered vanishing point; which brings the whole space visually down to the ground. Here “heavenly spheres” seem to suffer from the force of gravity.

The viewer who enters the interior of a church or cathedral will find that their eyes are elaborately directed through the building’s entirety. They enter a spectacle that is set up to sequentially unfold its narrative. Rottenbacher’s perspectival change creates an alienation that engenders a new approach to experiencing such sights. Whereas the eye is normally gradually guided through the space by the architecture, and up into its heights—the photographs present rather a concurrence of top and bottom.

The view is no longer a guided one; rather it finds the form of a “tunnel view,” in which all appears simultaneously visible. This does not result in a caricature of the space. Instead it draws heightened attention to architectural and conceptual characteristics of the interiors that would otherwise be harder to detect. This

short cut into spatial depth creates an extraordinarily intensified perception of the architecture—and offers a new perspective on the seemingly familiar. In this way, certain selective aspects—like the geometrical order of the architectural construction—become more prominently visible.

This geometry coalesces with the planimetric order of the photograph to form a pattern structure that dominates the perception of the photo beyond its image content. Here the portrayed spatial depth and the flatness of the photograph conjoin. Ultimately, the geometrical surface pattern and the depicted spaces appear indissolubly interconnected.

A photograph of an interior may be intended to represent a space in a way that tricks the viewer into the illusion that what is on show would be seen by the viewer’s own eyes if only they were there in the space—instead of the camera. Claus Rottenbacher’s photographs deny such an illusion. Instead, by surpassing the level of mere depiction, they draw one’s focus to their pictorial autonomy. What they show can clearly only be seen in the imagery that they represent—and the viewer is right there to see it.