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Review: Cool photographs at Luisotti pack existential heat



"Sevan, Dilijan 02", 2001, gelatin silver print by Ursula Schulz-Dornburg. (From Ursula Schulz-Dornburg / Gallery Luisotti)

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By Leah Ollman

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Born in Berlin in 1938, Ursula Schulz-Dornburg is a contemporary of Bernd and Hilla Becher and shoots with the same typological clarity, focusing on a single architectural form and cataloging its variants.

Each of the bus shelters in her photographs at Luisotti occupies the center of its frame with declarative plainness. The directness of this approach evolved out of New Objectivity photography of the 1920s and '30s (Renger-Patzsch, Blossfeldt) and into New Topographics of the '70s onward.

Considering the coolness of the format, this group of Schulz-Dornburg's pictures, made in Armenia between 1997 and 2011, packs surprising existential heat. There is nothing more mysterious, Walker Evans once said, than a fact clearly stated.

The structures reek of an expired political system. Heavy concrete forms with pillars and wings -- a cross between bunkers and modernist follies -- they stand compromised, their surfaces marred by graffiti and eroded by time. The bleakness of these ruins-in-the-making is amplified by the starkness of their settings. Each looks strangely displaced, afloat within a broad expanse of rubble and scrub.

Still functional, several of the structures are occupied by travelers with shopping bags at their side, waiting. Transition is the operative word here, and limbo the pervasive condition.

In silvery middle tones, Schulz-Dornburg pictures passage of several sorts, from solidity to decay, exhaustion to utter depletion, from facticity to subtle mystery.

Gallery Luisotti, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 453-0043, through May 17. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.galleryluisotti.com