

Artnews, February 2001, international reviews

Ilse Bing
Galerie Zur Stockeregg
Zurich

Essentially unknown outside photography circles, Ilse Bing, once dubbed the "Queen of the Leica," ran with the Paris avant-garde of the 1930s. In the 1920s, she fled her native Frankfurt and its bourgeois environs for France, where her discovery of the small, portable Leica camera allowed her to cruise the city's streets in search of subjects. These photographs document her artistic love affair with urbanity--in Paris mostly, but also in Frankfurt and New York. Yet they are not like the metropolitan images of Alfred Sdeglitz, whose prints transformed Manhattan into a sort of metallic Mount Olympus.

Instead, Bing captures scenes from a middle distance--close enough to feel the emotions, but far enough away to make the photo's borders seem like a proscenium arch. In *Quatre Balayeurs* (Four Sweepers) from 1947, for example, a lone street sweeper works away, while three colleagues lollygag on their way out of the frame, brooms held casually vertical at their sides, resembling fresh baguettes. Likewise with *Avenue de Moine at Night, Paris* (1932), a deserted nightscape where tree branches stripped by winter loom above a bleak sidewalk. It is a picture fraught with portent, just waiting for a lone character to walk into the frame.

But Bing also brought to life the city's inanimate occupants. In the 1937 *Dächer und Saint Sulpice, Paris* (Roofs and Saint Sulpice, Paris), the city's rooftops stretch across the bottom half of the image, voluminous and ribbed like some section of a large animal's spine. More theatrical, two empty metal chairs dominate the foreground of *Chairs in Rain, Champs-Elysees, Paris* (1931), angled slightly away from each other as if they were lovers in an awkward public quarrel. Across the muddy promenade, a dozen chairs stand in orderly rows, a Greek chorus bearing witness. Bing walked away from photography in 1959, pursuing other arts until her death in 1998, but she still deserves greater renown than she commands, if only for her sharp eye and soft touch.

Marc Spiegler