

AnOther

Mesmerising Photographs of Frescoes in a Florentine Monastery

Architectural photographer Robert Polidori turns his lens to the paintings of Fra Angelico in Florence – to beguiling effect

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The Mocking of Christ by Fra Angelico, Cell 7, Museum of San Marco Convent, Florence, Italy, 2010© Robert Polidori, Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery

Canadian-American photographer Robert Polidori has devoted much of his esteemed career to exploring the effects of time, nature and human intervention on buildings and landscapes. His works are both poetic and melancholy, his treatment of spaces reverent. He views rooms as “memory theatres”, and deftly employs his medium to elevate their status to that of precious relics, regardless of their current condition. His previous projects have spanned devastated New Orleans homes in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, through to the crumbling buildings of Havana, majestic in their faded splendour. Earlier this month, a 2010 series of Polidori’s photographs depicting the interior of the Convento di San Marco in Florence went on display at Paul Kasmin

The Dominican-monastery-turned-museum invited Polidori to lens the celebrated frescoes of Renaissance painter and Dominican monk Fra Angelico which adorn many of its walls. Considered some of the most important paintings of the early Renaissance, these mesmeric, pastel-hued works, including the painter's iconic depiction of The Annunciation, were designed not merely as story-telling devices, as was the purpose of paintings in the previous Byzantine period, but as tools for reflection. They depict the life of Christ with striking realism: the figures are fleshed out with flowing robes and realistic features, while architectural spaces are rendered in impressive perspective. For the monks living in the convent, they served as daily reminders of Christ's mortal suffering and the universal condition of mankind.

In his capturing of the frescoes, Polidori has explored their harmonious integration with the spaces they fill, while masterfully enhancing their beauty. The arch-like framing of The Mocking of Christ, for instance, is pleasingly mirrored by the shape of the doorway to its right, while the Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saints is lensed through a roundel in the wall of the adjoining room – a clever use of architectural detailing to enhance the painting's visibility, which also makes for a particularly pleasing photograph. A sense of meditative calm pervades the series, an apt encapsulation of both the works' intended function and Polidori's unique ability to capture the essence of spaces and the history they've born witness to. Happy (zen) Monday!