

Architecture of Density at the Robert Koch Gallery in San Francisco Jan. 6 - Feb. 26, 2005

Photographer Michael Wolf has the eye of a minimalist painter, only his has the grit of city living in it -- which makes his images all the more compelling. In one Hong Kong cityscape, a strict modern facade with rectangular pale yellow, peach and sky-blue balconies is irreverently interrupted by clotheslines and mops left out to dry; it's as though people had taken up residence in a faded Mondrian painting. By night, Wolf captures light beaming blue, gold and green from apartment-block windows, gracing the concrete boxes with an unexpected cinematic grandeur worthy of great Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai. Indoors, residents go about their business, watching TV, doing the dishes, apparently unaware that their actions are echoed by their neighbors ad infinitum in a relentless but somehow reassuring urban rhythm. By day, Wolf's hulking, drab gray tower block makes us all the more attentive to colorful details: a child's red pajamas hung out to dry, a blue plastic bag of groceries dangling perilously from a window handle. This is Hong Kong at its intimate best and anonymous worst, all in one photo -- but it's much more than that, even. Wolf's photos distill all of city life as we know it down to its oxymoronic essence: layer upon layer of existential ennui and pulsating vitality, slabs of concrete and the signs of life that miraculously break through it. For better and for worse, there's no denying: this is the life. -- Alison Bing

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