

Seamless Digital Collages Capture Europe's Church Façades

by Claire Voon on October 15, 2015



Markus Brunetti, "Cortegaça, Paróquia de Santa Marinha" (2013–14) (all photos courtesy the artist unless noted otherwise)

Many people have photographed the world's great cathedrals and churches, but rarely do these pictures manage to capture their architectural grandeur without the distracting figures of tourists or the markers of restoration projects. For his photo series FACADES, which portrays Europe's old religious structures head-on, from top to bottom, German artist Markus Brunetti strips these sites bare of such elements. Fifteen of these prints are now on view at Yossi Milo Gallery in the artist's first exhibition in the United States. Large-scale, with five reaching as tall as 10 feet, they are incredibly detailed, quiet portraits of mostly historic buildings that afford an unhindered appreciation of each one's unique architecture.



Markus Brunetti, "Köln Hohe Domkirche St. Petrus"
(2008–14)

Inspired by the black-and-white photographs of Germany's industrial landscape by Bernhard and Hilla Becher (the latter of whom just passed away), which focused on the architectural variety within one type of structure, Brunetti adopts a similar, highly systematic approach. He photographs cathedrals from the same point of view so the collection forms an encyclopedia of sorts, representing an array of styles from the Romanesque to the Gothic to the Baroque.

With the subjects themselves such intricate works of art, it's difficult to fully appreciate Brunetti's photographs unless seen in person (although the digital representations are also gorgeous). The gleaming blue-and-white tile work of the Parish of Santa Marinh in Cortegaça, Portugal, recalls porcelain in a five-foot-tall image that allows one to notice details from the mosaics on the frontal towers to each sculptural carving. Framed by two lanky palm trees, the hyperreal structure almost seems like a whimsical creation for a film set. . In another image of the same size, one can closely observe the busy bas-reliefs and golden mosaics that seem to cover every inch of the 14th-century Roman Catholic Cathedral of Orvieto in Italy.

Brunetti manages to achieve such perfection partially because he employs digital imaging technology, carefully stitching together photographs he took on site and editing out everything aside from the original building and its landscape, such as fences, light fixtures, and flagpoles.

"A part of the visual idea behind the FACADES series is to present an ideal picture of the buildings as their architects must have envisioned them in their first drawings and plans," Brunetti told Hyperallergic. "Still, my interference when removing such contemporary details is as minimal as possible."

His actual process of photographing is itself extremely time-consuming, an effort at which the works' attached dates hint. Some images took up to eight years to complete, since Brunetti had to revisit sites several times due to restoration work or until he managed to capture all the details of their facades. An ongoing series, FACADES began in 2005, when Brunetti and his partner Betty Schoener — like the Bechers — traveled across Europe in a truck that also served as their home, essentially hunting beautifully decorated sacred buildings. The pair studied guide books and history books related to the regions they visited but also discovered many churches by chance or through word of mouth from locals they met along the way. Growing up in a family of architects and builders, Brunetti often visited as a child construction sites and developed a lasting interest in architecture and history. For each cathedral he selects, he studies existing architectural material before taking study shots then shoots a few hundred to a few thousand individual frames, focusing on every minute detail. He usually works in the early morning to reduce as much as possible the amount of foot traffic he has to later edit.

The results are timeless and, so far, a decade-long, reverent tribute to the religious structures of Europe's many regions and cultures. Brunetti is still on the road and continues to discover little-known gems and the tweak his collaging and editing process, which he emphasizes is extremely complex.

“We constantly refine our working method and our visual strategies to achieve the ideal picture,” he said. “As long as there are interesting new buildings to discover and as long as we feel challenged by working on new FACADES, we will continue.”