

Culture Aura Rosenberg exhibition: Berlin childhood in pictures

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In his "Berlin Childhood around 1900," Walter Benjamin notes that the scope of what can be photographed in the modern city is shrinking. Like the train stations, photography no longer provides the real entrance into the city's landscape. "The train station gives the order, so to speak, for a surprise maneuver, but an outdated one that only encounters the old, and it is no different with photography."

When Benjamin wrote this look back at the Berlin of his childhood in narrative fragments and motifs in 1932, he was referring to the "soft image" of the late 19th century, the only side of the city, according to Benjamin, that is "really accessible to photographic recording."

Now someone today has dared to recreate Benjamin's children's world with a camera, someone who goes by the name Aura - "Aura", one of Benjamin's key terms. Coincidence. And again it's about a childhood in Berlin - but that's not a coincidence, but a conscious intention.

Eight years ago, New Yorker Aura Rosenberg started taking photos of her daughter Carmen, who started kindergarten in Berlin. Rosenberg and her husband, the DAAD scholarship holder and artist John Miller, came to a country that her parents had left for America in 1939. Aura Rosenberg liked Berlin: Here her daughter's childhood intertwined with the memories of her grandparents' childhood in a strange way.

Aura Rosenberg herself acted as the medium of mediation. Even after her year-long stay in Berlin ended, the American continued to come to the city for months and, equipped with a camera and Benjamin's book, followed in Benjamin's footsteps. Now her photos are being exhibited in the daad gallery.

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Of course, one shouldn't expect a translation of Benjamin's text from Rosenberg's "Berlin Childhood" around 2000, even if the Victory Column as a cake at the entrance to the gallery takes the book's motto literally: "O brown-baked Victory Column with winter sugar from childhood."

How do you photographically imitate the perception of the city from a child's perspective? Aura Rosenberg didn't even try the impossible. Her color photos only show the motifs that the chapters in Benjamin's childhood speak of: the mosaics of the "Victory Column", which reminded Benjamin of Dante's circles of hell, the "stocking" rolled up into a pocket, which taught that form and content are one, etc the "Carousel," where the child "perched as a faithful ruler over a world that belonged to him." Some motifs have changed little since Benjamin's time, such as the hated bathing establishment on "Krummen Straße". Here as elsewhere, Rosenberg photographed objectively and precisely, as she usually did, using a tripod for the camera view. Sometimes the photographer continues Benjamin's motif into her own present. For example, when the "Imperial Panorama" that she photographed in the museum is accompanied by a photo from the cybercafé.

Many of the beautiful images of a childhood around 2000 only gain their excitement because the viewer knows their hidden reference to "Berlin childhood around 1900". The images in this exhibition live in the space between the distance that Benjamin's text suggests and the closeness of the present that the photo presents.

Following Benjamin, one could perhaps call them dialectical images, since they cannot be pinpointed. Because the photographed objects only provide the occasion for these other, neither visible nor readable images, which oscillate between photo and reading, memory and imagination.

Ronald Berg