

The architectural photographs of H el ene Binet

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Light Lines at the Royal Academy of Arts in London

H el ene Binet is a Swiss-French architectural photographer who was raised in Rome and currently lives in London. Her first architectural photographs are from the late 1980s and since then she travelled the world photographing historical and contemporary buildings, as well as underconstruction projects. She has collaborated with leading contemporary architects such as John Hejduk, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind and Peter Zumthor, providing fascinating and compelling interpretation of the spaces created by their buildings. Moreover her photographs have been shown at national and international exhibitions including *Dialoghi*, a solo exhibition at the Power Station of Art, Shanghai in 2019, that looked at affinities and echoes between spaces shaped by different architects and by landscapes¹. Among her most significant publications are *Composing Space*, a monography published in 2012, and more recently *The intimacy of Making: Three Historical Sites in Korea* (2021) and *The Wall of Suzhou Gardens: A Photographs Journey* (2021).

Binet's photographs are mainly "fragments of buildings or phenomena of light within their spaces or on their surface"², stylistically characterized by tight framing, strong contrast, and deep shadows. Of particular fascination is her ability to catch the essence of architectural works by framing, also the temporality of her images that focus on the present and catch a dimension of time that escapes us, that being the instant where everything is and nothing needs to become. The lack of narrative being one of the most interesting and original features of Binet's photographs.

As she likes to point out, she uses the camera not to represent the world, rather to understand it³ and her photographs allow us to think about some key ideas of the so called "metaphysics of light" of Robert Grosseteste a medieval philosopher, who thought that light is the first form of corporeity and elaborated an original cosmological theory founded on emanation, reflection and refraction of light⁴. According to Grosseteste light is a self-

generative power that spreads everywhere and, by joining with the passive matter, engenders physical bodies. This is the idea that we can perceive looking at Binet's images where the light, joining with the matter of architecture, creates bodies that have the form and the matter of space.

Light Lines. The Architectural Photographs of H el ene Binet was the title of the exhibition held at the Royal Academy of Art in London from 23 October 2021 - 23 January 2022. Curated by Vicky Richardson and designed by Martin Perrin, it was Binet's first major retrospective in the UK and called attention to "her mastery of light, shadow and surface". It was an "intimate exhibition" of around 90 photographs that captured in a very significant and effective way the essence and the beauty of her images.

Binet's photographs were displayed in a space consisting of four galleries connected to each other. These galleries were called the North Gallery, the West Gallery, the South Gallery and the North-East Gallery and formed a circular path that suggested the idea of a cyclic, rather than linear temporality (Figure 1). An interesting insight of the exhibition space was provided by Binet's video tour wherein she explained how each gallery aimed to create a specific atmosphere and dealt with different ways to connect with the world and to understand it⁵.

The entry of the exhibition was in the North Gallery which aimed to create "a very meditative atmosphere" to explore "the existential meaning of architecture": "it is about us – said Binet – the human being walking on earth and trying to understand who we are and especially trying to grasp dimensions in buildings and in nature that are difficult to grasp"⁶. In this gallery, Binet's photographs of the Jantar Mantar Observatory in Jaipur, India, of Le Corbusier's Couvent Sainte-Marie de la Tourette, near Lyon and of different projects of John Hejduk were displayed.

One of the most beautiful and interesting images of this gallery and of the entire exhibition was that of Hejduk's Kreuzberg

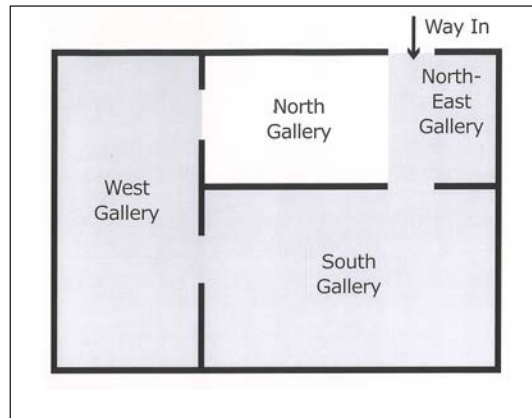


Figure 1 - Light Lines: The Architectural Photographs of H el ene Binet, exhibition plan. (  Royal Academy of Art, London)



Figure 2 - H el ene Binet, John Hejduk, Kreuzberg Tower and Wing, Berlin, Germany, 1988. (  H el ene Binet)



Figure 3 - H el ene Binet, Le Corbusier, Couvent Sainte-Marie de La Tourette, Evieux, France, 2002. (  H el ene Binet) ▷



Figure 4 - H el ene Binet, Zaha Hadid Architects, Riverside Museum, Glasgow, United Kingdom, 2010. (  H el ene Binet)

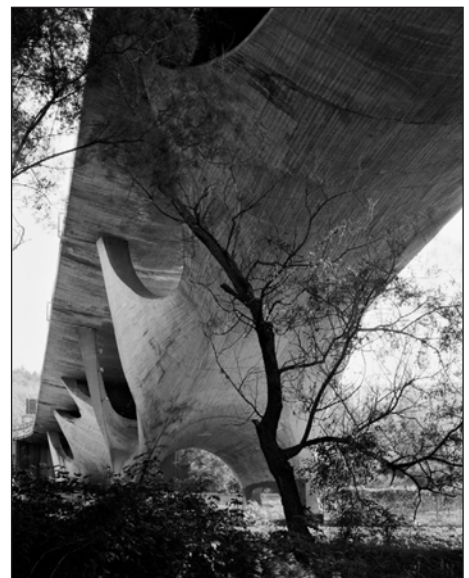
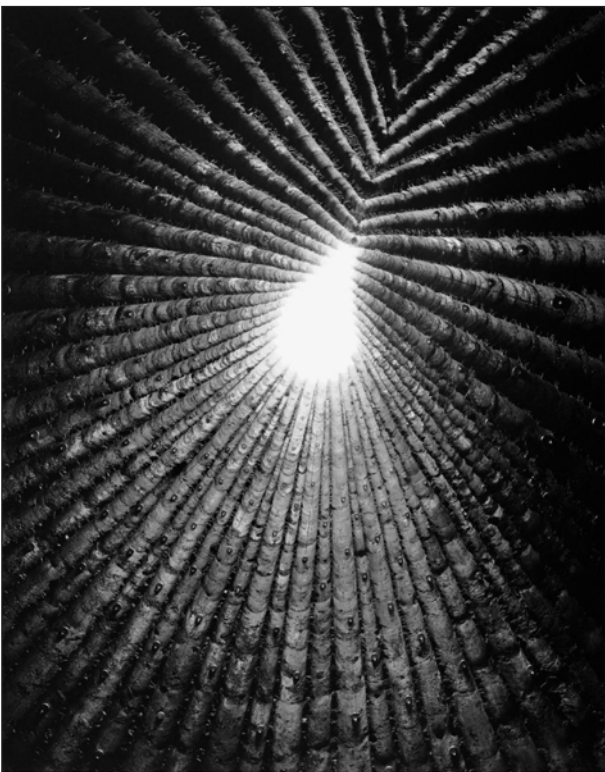


Figure 5 - H el ene Binet, Sergio Musmeci, Ponte sul Basento, Potenza, Italy, 2015. (  H el ene Binet)



Figure 7 - H el ene Binet, *Classical Gardens of Suzhou, Lingering Garden, Suzhou, China, 2018.* (  H el ene Binet)

Figure 6 - H el ene Binet, *Atelier Peter Zumthor, Therme Vals, Graub unden, Switzerland, 2006.* (  H el ene Binet)



Tower in Berlin (Figure 2), the first building photographed by Binet in 1988 and one of the few realized by Hejduk. It is an image where, by framing the building, she captured the space in which consists the essence of the building. A space that we cannot see when we look at the real building and which Binet's photographs have the power to let us perceive.

Very fascinating were also the photographs of the interior of Sainte-Marie de La Tourette (Figure 3), where she looked at shadows produced by the windows created by the composer Iannis Xenakis and managed to catch the liturgical function of these very special shadows that led the way to the church of the convent and are "at their best at the end of the mass" when the church doors open⁷.

Characterized by strong graphic valence, tight frames and deep shadows the images of the North Gallery embody the intuition "that architects do not shape matter but essentially spaces" and that the function of architectural photography consists of catching these spaces and in making them visible.

Described as having an "energetic atmosphere" and dealing with "the love of making new buildings and inventing new

Figure 8 - H el ene Binet, *Atelier Peter Zumthor, Bruder Klaus Field Chapel, Wachendorf, Germany, 2009.* (  H el ene Binet)

forms of construction”, the West Gallery focused on Binet’s relation with architects.

It drew particular attention on Binet’s work with Zaha Hadid showing photographs of Hadid’s most important works, including the iconic image of the Riverside Museum in Glasgow (Figure 4) where the roof of the building turned in a landscape “reminding us of dune formation or of lava flow”⁸. Also displayed in this gallery were photographs of Sergio Musmeci’s Ponte sul Basento at Potenza (Figure 5), whose dynamic forms share significant affinity with those of some of Hadid’s late works, and images of a set of churches designed and built in concrete in the 1960s and in the 1970s by Gottfried Böhm. Capturing the energy and power of Hadid’s and Musmeci’s constructions as well as the complexity and spirituality of Böhm’s churches, the images of the West Gallery offered a compelling insight into Binet’s way to interpret architectural works and to use them to create her own images.

Of particular fascination were the photographs of the concrete structure of Musmeci’s bridge where we can perceive the function of light in manifesting the beauty of concrete, a matter that Binet likes to photograph and that, under her gaze, acquires powerful aesthetic qualities.

The South Gallery, having a “brighter atmosphere” and focusing on “fundamental elements of architecture, such as walls, apertures and ground plans” created a space where imagination played a fundamental role in shaping and understanding the world. In her video tour Binet talked about walls that by hindering our view, stimulate our imagination to create other worlds.

The images of this gallery were mainly surfaces where light designs abstract forms, suggesting space beyond and concealed views. Walking around the gallery we could perceive the material intensity of Binet’s images, as well as their fascinating power to evoke alternative worlds and stimulate our productive imagination.

Among the most impressive photographs in this gallery were that of Peter Zumthor’s Therme at Vals (Figure 6) where, as noted, the light seems emanate from matter rather than from a source of illumination⁹ and that of the wall of Suzhou Garden in China (Figure 7) that emphasize the imaginative potential of aperture in revealing unknown spaces.

Intrinsically connected with the North Gallery with which it formed a unity, the North-East Gallery, created a small and contemplative space to display Binet’s photographs of Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin that she took when it was under construction, and of Peter Zumthor’s Bruder Klaus Field Chapel in Wachendorf (Figure 8) and Kolumba Museum in Cologne.

These being works that embody key aspects of Binet’s way to shape images and to understand the relationship between light and matter. The emblematic image of the gallery

and of the entire exhibition was that of the oculus of the Bruder Klaus Chapel (Figure 8) where the light is the subject matter of the photograph and creates a space that connects the earth with the sky. Looking at this image we could perceive the beauty of light in itself and its power to disclose spiritual dimensions of our existence.

Light Lines was an interesting and powerful exhibition that provided a comprehensive overview of Binet’s accomplishments and created a sort of *genius loci* where the viewer could connect deeply with the universe of Binet’s images, perceiving its essence and experiencing its exceptional beauty.

Inspired by the idea of atmosphere¹⁰ the layout of the exhibition managed to bring about a symbiotic relationship between the space of the exhibition and the space of Binet’s images and offered the possibility to explore the aesthetic of Binet’s photographs, where the light played a fundamental role in understanding the world and revealing its beauty. Moreover, the exhibition gave an interesting insight into the power of photography in catching and understanding spaces created by architecture and in making them visible.

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1. *Dialoghi* was an exhibition of more than 100 works where “by emphasizing the echo between architect and architect or between architect and landscape, Binet divided her works from different series into groups of two or three to form dialogues featuring varying themes”, <https://www.powerstationofart.com/whats-on/exhibitions/helene-binet-2019>.

2. J. Pallasmaa, *Alchemy of the Photograph*, in: H. Binet, J. Pallasmaa, V. Richardson, *Light Lines: The Architectural Photographs of Hélène Binet*, Exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Art, London, 2021, pp. 9-11, p. 9.

3. See H. Binet, *Composing space*, lecture at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, March 19, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkpeFr87wOo&t=2622s>.

4. See R. Grosseteste, *De luce seu inchoatione formarum*, in: J. Floor (ed.), *Robert Grosseteste and his intellectual milieu: new edition and studies*, Toronto, 2016 (italian version R. Grossatesta, translation C. Pantì, *La Luce*, Pisa, 2011).

5. See *Light Lines: Tour with Hélène Binet*, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/helene-binet>.

6. *Ibidem*.

7. See H. Binet, *Photographing Shadows at La Tourette*, in: H. Binet, R. Casati, W. Oechslin, T. Ando, Deutsches Architekturmuseum, *Das Geheimnis des Schattens: Licht and Schatten in the Architecture = The Secret of the Shadow: Light and Shadow in Architecture*, Tübingen, 2002, pp. 102-105, p. 103.

8. See *Light Lines: Tour with Hélène Binet*, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/helene-binet>.

9. J. Pallasmaa, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

10. With regard with the concept of atmosphere and its aesthetic function see G. Böhme (ed. J.P. Thibaud), *The Aesthetics of atmospheres*, London-New York, 2017.