

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS



Luigi Ghirri,
Modena, 1979,
C-print, 10 3/4 x 15".

Luigi Ghirri

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Among the millions of lives changed upon seeing astronaut William Anders's 1968 *Earthrise* image was that of a young Italian land surveyor. "It was a picture of the world, and it contained all the pictures in the world at the same time," Luigi Ghirri (1943–1992) later recalled of the photograph, taken on Christmas Eve from *Apollo 8*. Ghirri began his career as a photographer and photography critic shortly after this moment, alongside (though apart from) a cohort of Americans in the 1970s—William Eggleston, Richard Misrach, and Stephen Shore among them—who squired the unseemly, commercially tainted medium of color film into the palace of fine art. Like them, Ghirri tended toward unsensational subjects, in his case the empty landscapes and buildings, washed in a subdued palette, of his home province of Reggio Emilia. Ghirri is often called a nostalgist, but he deployed his nostalgia trenchantly, using amateur aesthetics to ask how images might estrange us from, or perhaps return us to, the world and to ourselves.

That question lingered throughout "The Idea of Building," an exhibition of Ghirri's photos curated by American abstract painter Matt Connors at Matthew Marks Gallery. The show focused on the artist's

tendency to “conflate and confuse the physical world with the world of the image,” per the press release. The show commenced with the spectral *Modena*, 1979, a snapshot of anonymous hands assembling or perhaps dismantling an ambrotype—a photograph made via an obsolete method in which a positive image on glass is placed against a black background—featuring a couple and their infant child. A rectangular velvety void is partially inserted into the frame, rendering the portrait only half visible. Elsewhere, we saw a postcard of a sunset taped onto a picture of another sunset, a thicket of music stands in a deserted piazza, two beds with opulently illustrated footboards, a bowler hat resting on the smooth, dusty surface of a nineteenth-century painting, and a *mise en abyme* of infinite archways. Like photographers Berenice Abbott and Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Ghirri scrutinized his environs through a documentary and Surrealist eye, locating in everyday illusionism metaphors for the peeling and heavily touristed (if only by oneself) construction of memory—reified perhaps in the Giorgio de Chirico–esque *Fenis*, 1991, which depicts a frescoed castle courtyard of bygone medieval splendor, its hyperlinear view of carved balustrades, harlequin-patterned walls, and stone staircases crudely bisected by a wooden pillar.

Ghirri’s pictures remind me of the short story by Jorge Luis Borges that describes a map preposterously coterminous with the empire it charts. In how they collapse reality and representation, and in their rigid frontality and stillness, Ghirri’s images all seem to share the same wan veneer, the same moment. As a prolific contributor to architecture journal *Lotus International* who frequently collaborated with architect and designer Aldo Rossi, Ghirri left a significant imprint on contemporary architecture (and vice versa). But, for the most part, building exteriors themselves were intriguingly absent in this show. Instead, Connors grounded viewers in more intimate and cathected surfaces, such as crinkled starry tissue paper, the worn packaging of an album by forgotten “mood music” pioneer Paul Weston, and vitrined passe-partouts and children’s books owned by Ghirri. We didn’t see one of Rossi’s dauntingly elemental postmodern edifices, but rather two photos of his cozy Milanese atelier, images from a well-known photo shoot that reflect Ghirri’s understanding of architecture as not only the built environment, but one of psychic interstices and embodied histories.

The exhibition materials quoted Ghirri, asserting that he pays tribute to the “photomontage” of “the physical world itself”; this analogy, like much of his art, feels at once outdated and prescient in an era increasingly experienced through an endless stream of digital media. The presentation’s virtual counterpart—an online exhibition—came across as a missed opportunity to draw connections between Ghirri’s ideas and the ongoing pandemic, which has so irreversibly remade the threshold between real and artificial spaces, and of which this show’s memorializations of vacant stages and static interiors served as chance reminders: exemplars of Ghirri’s ability to bring us, like Anders’s famous snapshot, closer to life by suggesting a world without it.

—Zack Hatfield