Visual Arts

Edward Hopper: the master of urban isolation in a new online show

A Wim Wenders film brings an added dimension to the Beyeler Foundation's exhibition

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A barelegged blonde in a pink slip, knees pulled up to her chest, sits alone on a bed at a window in an apartment high above the city. Jo Hopper was 69 but looked 40, taut, still and silent, when she posed for her husband in 1952 for "Morning Sun". In his uncanny new film *Two or Three Things I Know About Edward Hopper*, created for the Beyeler Foundation's current exhibition, Wim Wenders has reconstructed the scene with eerie 3D precision. In close-up, the woman, unnerved, suddenly blinks.

Wenders' camera scrolls to another mesmerisingly recreated vista of iconic desolation: the row of pumps at an empty petrol station in "Gas" (1940), shining neon on a deserted road at dusk. As if immersed in a Hopper painting, we wait beneath the dense forest; a streamlined Chrysler draws up from nowhere — the man-made plunged into the wilderness of nature.

"Gas", lent to Basel from MoMA, is the poster image for a show that turns on Hopper's ambivalent evocations of solitude amid the vastness of America. Framed as if flying over the canopy of treetops beyond the road, the Mobil logo of the winged horse Pegasus hangs on an aluminium sign dangling above the pumps and their solitary attendant: emblem of freedom, or the lonely dead end of the mundane?

If the Beyeler Foundation had predicted pandemic and lockdown when planning this year's big spring and summer shows, it could hardly have come up with more apt artists: Edward Hopper, lyricist of modern isolation and alienation, followed by Goya, master of anxiety and nightmarish imagining.

Hopper's 'Gas' (1940) © Heirs of Josephine Hopper

'Lee Shore' (1941) © Heirs of Josephine Hopper

Although postponed, *Goya* may be the first major European exhibition to take place as the continent emerges from lockdown. *Edward Hopper* meanwhile has moved online in imaginative ways.

Sun-bleached landscapes gleam on the Beyeler's website: from the foreboding "Cape Ann Granite" (1928), blocked by a boulder behind which rocks cast slanting shadows down a steep hill, to the dichotomy of inner/ outer space in "Cape Cod Morning" (1950) where Jo Hopper stands, as if imprisoned, at a bay window, leaning forward, gazing out at a world half shielded from view. Exploring famous and lesser-known paintings with guided visits, live, digitally, every Friday at 7pm, the museum offers serious art-historical engagement, but also smart entertainment. An Instagram quest #FollowHoppersView invites selfies posed like Hopper characters in desolate spaces — at a window, on a staircase — and Wenders' fanciful film sucks you into what he calls "the magical territory that opens up between painting, film, light and storytelling".

This was always Hopper's unique terrain. As early as the 1920s, he was treating the canvas as a movie frame. In "Automat", "Lighthouse Hill" and 1925's "House by the Railroad", the Gothic mansion set apart by the barrier of the railroad, model for the murderous Bates Hotel in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, he repeatedly honed scenography to its dramatic, essential structure by plays of light and shadow and cropped angles, infusing it with suspense.

'Cape Cod Morning' (1950) © Heirs of Josephine Hopper

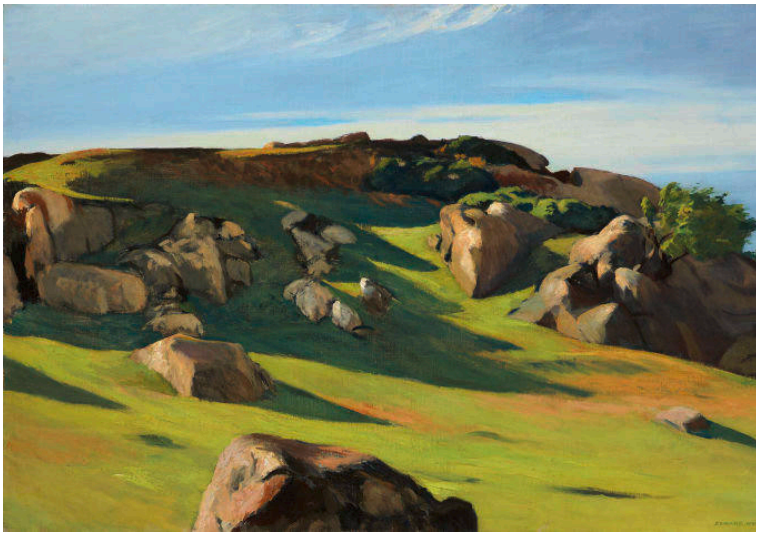
Highlighting Hopper's unfamiliar works on paper — which he rarely showed or sold — Beyeler curator Ulf Küster zooms in on the cinematic quality of even charcoal drawings. In "Road and Rock" Hopper depicts, as if glimpsed while travelling past, a huge boulder on the corner of a highway. He contrasts the fleeting view with the solidity of the stone, and his slow sketching — the pencil scratched deliberately into the surface — has a filmic "hidden expectation" of speed, of a car's tyres about to squeal.

Railway tracks span the entire width of “Railroad Sunset” (1929), built up in horizontal bands of fiery red, orange and greenish yellow. Stark against this sublime American landscape rises a signalman’s house, like a lone viewer. Hopper made buildings with blank walls, vacant windows, majestic façades that are almost anthropomorphic, the absence suggesting a mysterious presence. The blinds are down in each window in the remote, apparently deserted mansion in 1934’s “Cape Cod Sunset”, and in the pair of dwellings titled “Two Puritans” (1945). Are all the curtains drawn in the whiteboard cottage in 1949’s “High Noon” to prepare us for a moment of revelation? The woman at the door wears a blue robe, slit like a curtain pulled back, her breasts illuminated by the midday sun — a secular Annunciation.

Hopper loved “our native architecture with its hideous beauty . . . with eye-searing colour or delicate harmonies of faded paint, shouldering one another along interminable streets that taper off into swamps or dump heaps . . . cars and locomotives lying in Godforsaken railway yards . . . all the sweltering tawdry life of the American small town, this sad desolation of our suburban landscape”. Yet he insisted “I never wanted to do the American Scene . . . I always wanted to do myself.”

In *American Visions*, the critic Robert Hughes argued that while earlier American artists had painted the frontier, Hopper saw that in the 20th century “the old frontier had moved inward and now lay within the self, so that the man of action . . . was replaced by the solitary watcher.”

ɔbb's House, South Truro' (1930-33) © Heirs of Josephine Hopper



'Cape Ann Granite' (1928) © Heirs of Josephine Hopper

Conveying an urban experience of loneliness, of separation and distance from nature’s harmony, it is not surprising that Hopper has consistently been beloved — only shows of Matisse, Picasso and Damien Hirst have reached higher visitor numbers at Tate Modern than Hopper’s 2004 retrospective. Hopper, especially in his later work, wrought from isolation the richness of inner life and rendered it transcendent.

Küster draws attention to the little-known “Stairway” (1949), depicting the staircase and front door of Hopper’s childhood home on the Hudson River, but replacing the view with an extraordinary white light, a “surreal shimmer” — memory of a child’s wonder and absorption. In the Beyeler’s last painting, “Second Storey Sunlight” (1961) a woman in a bikini sunbathes on a balcony, light-flooded against the dark backdrop of the adjacent woods. Hopper found joy simply in how “the light on the upper part of a house was different than that on the lower part. There is a sort of elation about sunlight on the upper part of a house.”

Hopper always carried in his wallet his favourite quotation from Goethe: “the reproduction of the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is in me”. When American writer Michael Tisserand posted on Instagram last month that “We Are All Edward Hopper Paintings Now”, there were 200,000 likes: surely because Hopper, flagship for social distancing, is also a beacon for the pleasure of interiority.

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