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At the Hammer, Luisa Lambri makes herself at home

Architecture is a favorite subject for the Italian photographer, who approaches the houses subjectively. 'I am photographing myself being there,' she says.



Italian photographer Luisa Lambri stands in the pool area of the Sheats-Goldstein home in Beverly Hills. (Stefano Paltera / For The Times)

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'Luisa Lambri: Being There'

By Sharon Mizota

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"Los Angeles is maybe my favorite place on Earth," says Italian photographer Luisa Lambri. "Everything I like and I need to work with happens to be there." The artist is enthralled by the region's dazzling natural light but is especially fond of its architecture, in particular the classic Midcentury Modern homes that dot the hillsides. Many were designed by European expatriate architects such as Richard Neutra and R.M. Schindler who were similarly entranced by the wide-open possibilities of life in L.A.

"I can relate to that move and that kind of dream very, very much," says Lambri, who is based in Milan but has traveled the world taking pictures inside iconic modern buildings. "I'm

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kind of doing the same thing with my photographs," she says. "I'm kind of building my own house."

One such "house" is now on view at the Hammer Museum through June 13. Titled "Being There," the exhibition is composed of images that Lambri took in 2007 inside two local homes: Neutra's Sten-Frenke house in Santa Monica and the Sheats-Goldstein residence in Beverly Hills by American architect John Lautner.

Signs of her presence

Most of the photographs are from the Lautner building. Designed in the early 1960s, the home is a well-known example of the architect's dramatic, Space Age aesthetic. Yet Lambri wasn't interested in its spectacular vistas or sharply

angled spaces. Instead, she looked up, focusing on skylights in the kitchen and the bathroom.

"He had a very special, very sensitive way of working with the skylights," she says of Lautner; he "put outside and inside together at the same time." Indeed, on a recent visit to the house, the petite, bird-like artist seems more comfortable outside, meandering through the site's network of hillside stairways and pointing out the beauty of the surrounding trees. Lambri typically pays close attention to such elements. "I usually just focus on a little detail and try to spend time there and work with it," she says. "It's not at all about photographing everything around me."

Usually, it's a modest feature that catches her eye. "She will often photograph windows, corners, half-open doors," says Darsie Alexander, chief curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. At the Baltimore Museum of Art, Alexander curated a show of Lambri's work in 2007. In Lambri's photographs, she says, "there's always that sense of there being a presence there."

Actual people never appear. Rather, the images evoke human occupancy with subtle details such as cabinet doors left ajar or window shutters opened at different angles. "It's the ghost of the human being that's always in the photographs," says Hammer chief curator Douglas Fogle, who organized the current exhibition, originally planned for Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art.

In most cases, the "ghost" is that of Lambri herself, who often makes small changes as she moves through the house. "Even if it's just letting more light in a place," she says, "then this space somehow becomes mine."

Depending on her agreement with the owners, she spends an hour or two alone in each house or returns over a period of several days. She works in series, shooting the same views at different times of day or in different seasons. In the exhibition brochure, Museum of Contemporary Art curator Alma Ruiz writes that Lambri heightens this effect by "meticulously adjusting the tone and saturation of each image -- as if capturing the passage of time."

Letting in more light

In the past, Lambri has done some of this work digitally, but the Sheats-Goldstein pictures, which feature little more than open sky and trees, are more straightforward. "What I did was simply just to point the camera to the sky and photograph the light. So there is nothing but light and maybe one or two very thin lines," she says. It's "very little to do with architecture. It's more like a sense of a space."

"It puts you literally in the house," says Fogle. "You're looking through Luisa's eyes, but you are there, embodied in that house." Her work, he adds, provides a more human perspective on modern buildings that otherwise might "end up looking like museums."

Lambri's fascination with modern interiors was inspired by the classic midcentury photographs of Julius Shulman, whose carefully composed images of modern L.A. homes showcased flawless, pristine spaces. "I always really wondered what was happening inside and what it felt like to really actually live there," Lambri says.

This curiosity led her to visit and photograph famous homes in Houston, Mexico City, the Czech Republic, Brazil and elsewhere. "Modern homes, more than any, any home really, embody this idea of

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an ideal: an ideal place, an ideal home," she says in her characteristically effusive fashion. "They're always, always out of reach even when you're actually there."

This tension between utopian ideas and real life is at the core of Lambri's art. Suspended between abstraction and documentary, her images can be seen as highly subjective responses to the Modern ethos of progress and innovation. This intimate quality differentiates her work from Shulman's and that of her European contemporaries, such as Candida Höfer or Thomas Struth, who also photograph buildings and interiors. Many of them were influenced by the 1970s images of German artists Bernd and Hilla Becher, who used photography to catalog different types of buildings in a dispassionate, almost scientific way.

By contrast, Lambri, who has no formal photography training, feels a greater affinity with Los Angeles artists Catherine Opie, James Welling and Uta Barth, even though their work often looks very different from her own. Another important influence was the Light and Space movement that emerged in L.A. in the 1960s. Artists such as Robert Irwin and James Turrell played with light effects and the passage of time to draw viewers' attention to their immediate perceptions and sensations.

In this sense, L.A. is a kind of artistic home for Lambri. She first visited on a six-month residency at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture in 2002, and for each of the last few years has spent three or four months here. "Homes are sort of where you find them," she says. "It doesn't even need to be the place where you were born."

'Sense of finding a place'

For Lambri, 40, photography has always been part of this search for "home."

As a teenager growing up outside Milan, she was frequently allowed to travel on her own. She would take snapshots of places where she felt a personal connection, even if it was just the inside of a hotel room. In her 20s, she began to actively seek out specific buildings, but sometimes didn't even develop the film.

"What mattered to me then was the trip and the discovery and the sense of finding a place," she says.

Perhaps because of this intimate connection between life and work, Lambri sees her images as a form of self-portraiture.

"I am photographing the house, but I am photographing myself being there," she says.

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