

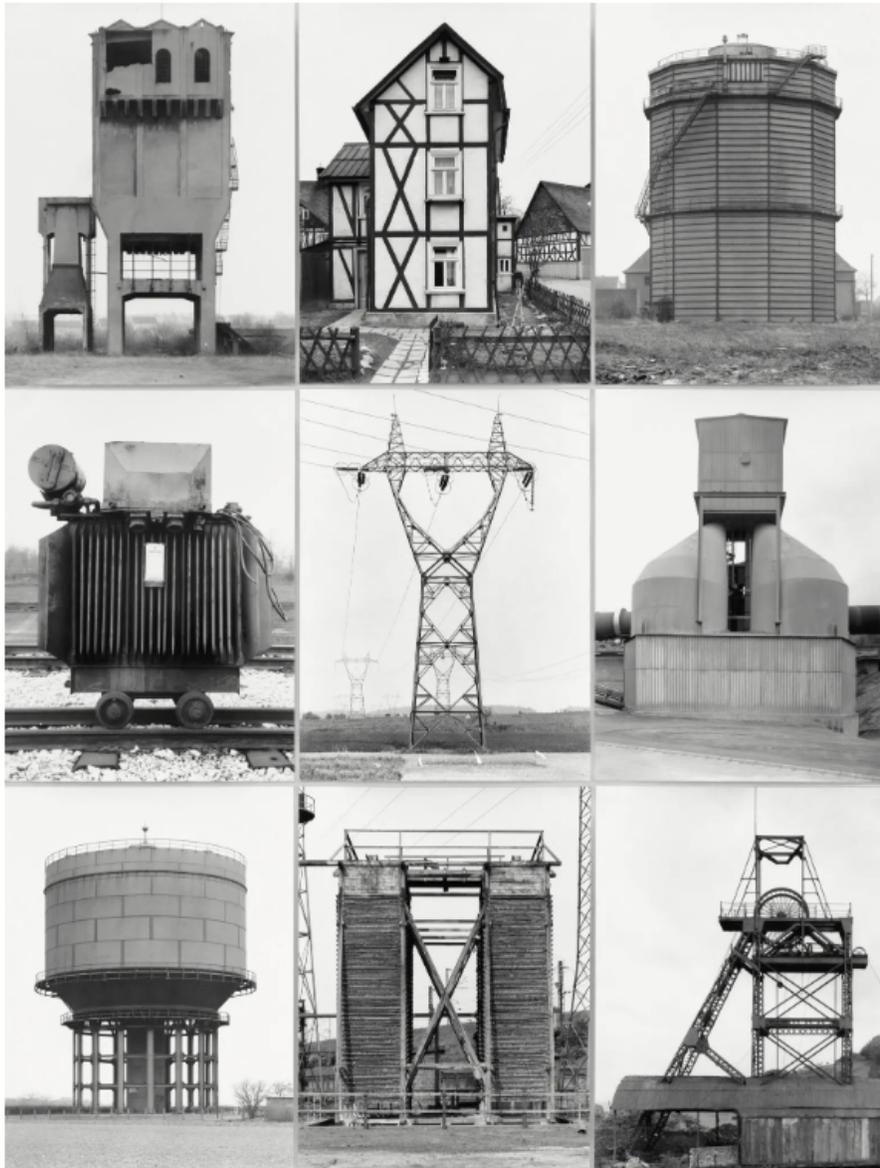
PAULA COOPER GALLERY

Gopnik, Blake. "Photography's Delightful Obsessives," *The New York Times*, July 28th, 2022; <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/28/arts/design/becher-met-review-photography-industry.html>

CRITIC'S PICK

Photography's Delightful Obsessives

The Met surveys Bernd and Hilla Becher, who turned Machine Age monuments into alluring collectibles.



"Comparative Juxtaposition, Nine Objects, Each with a Different Function," 1961-72, shows that the photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher were sometimes more interested in aesthetic form than in what industry actually does. Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher; via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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By **Blake Gopnik**

July 28, 2022

One wall is gridded up with photos of industrial cooling towers, portrayed in wildly detailed black-and-white.

Another gives us 30 different views of blast furnaces, at plants across Western Europe and the United States. You can just about make out each bolt in their twisting pipework.

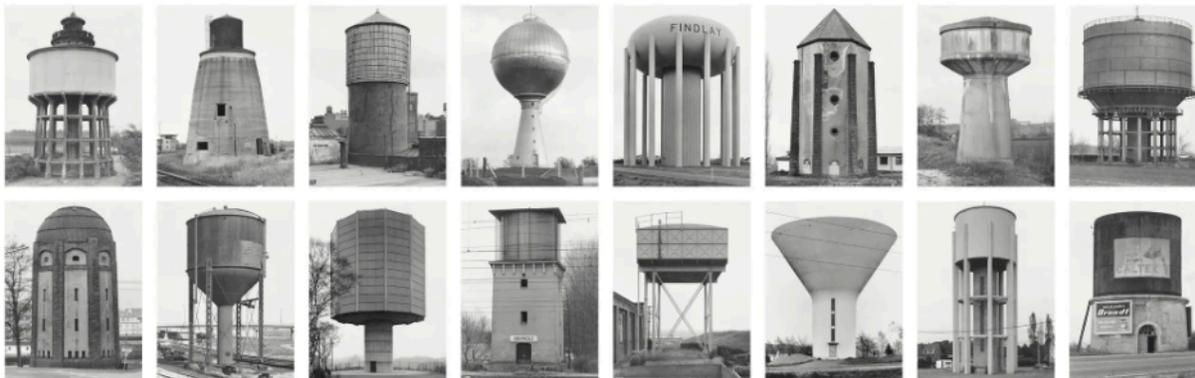
An entire gallery surveys the vast Concordia coal plant at Oberhausen, in Germany: Teeming photos present its gas-storage tanks, its "lean gas generator," its "quenching tower," its "coke pushers."

These and something like another 450 images fill "[Bernd & Hilla Becher](#)," a fascinating, frankly gorgeous show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Met's curator of photography, Jeff Rosenheim, has organized a thorough retrospective for the Bechers, a German couple who made some of the most influential art photos of the last half century. Bernd (1931-2007) and Hilla (1934-2015) mentored generations of students at Düsseldorf's great [Kunstakademie](#), whose alumni include major photographic artists like Andreas Gursky and Candida Höfer.

But for all the heft of the heavy industry on view in the Met show — it's easy to imagine the stink and smoke and racket that pressed in on the Bechers as they worked — you come away with an overall impression of lightness, of delightful order, even sometimes of gentle comedy.

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"Water Towers (Germany, France, Belgium, United States, and Great Britain)," 1963–80. Is there some quiet comedy in revealing all the ways industry has managed the single job of storing water? Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher; via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

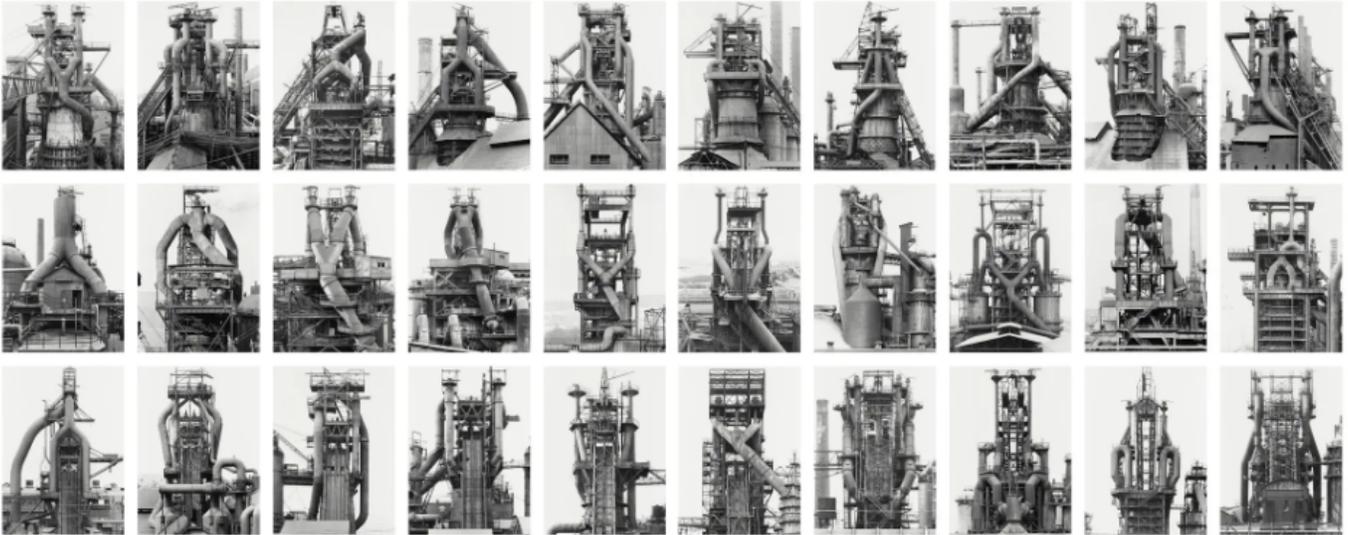
Wall after wall of gridded grays soothe the eye and calm the soul, like the orderly, light-filled abstractions of Agnes Martin or Sol LeWitt. The very fact of gathering 16 different water towers, from both sides of the Atlantic, onto a single museum wall helps to domesticate them, removing their industrial angst and original functions and turning them into something like curios, or collectibles. A catalog essay refers to the Bechers' "rigorous documentation of thousands of industrial structures," which is right — but it's the rigor of a trainspotter, not an engineer. Despite their concrete grandeur, the assorted water towers come off as faintly ridiculous: Whether you're collecting cookie jars or vintage wines — or shots of water towers — it's as much about our human instinct to amass and organize as it is about the actual things you collect.

Consider the [32 Campbell's Soups](#) (1962) that launched Andy Warhol's Pop career, which are a vital precedent for the Bechers' ordered seriality. You can read the Soups as a critical portrayal of American consumerism, but a catalog of canned soups also reads as a quiet joke, at least when it's presented for the sake of art, not shopping. Ditto, I think, for the Bechers' famous "typologies" of industrial buildings, presented without anything like an industrial goal.

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Indeed, the one thing you don't come away with from the Becher show is real knowledge of mechanical engineering, or coal processing, or steel making. In long-ago student days, I cut out and framed a wallful of images from the Bechers' glorious book of blast-furnace photos. (Their art has always existed as much in their books as in exhibitions.) After living with my furnaces for a decade or so, I can't say I could have passed a quiz from Smelting 101.



"Blast Furnaces (United States, Germany, Luxembourg, France, and Belgium)," 1968-93. Such series may have been less about the glories of heavy industry than its approaching demise in the West. Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher; via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Early coverage referred to the Bechers as "photographer-archaeologists" and the Met's catalog talks about how they revealed the "functional characteristics of industrial structures." There are certainly parallels between the preternatural clarity and unmediated "objectivity" of their images and earlier, purely technical and scientific photos meant to teach about the constructions and processes of industry. The Bechers admired such pictures. But however systematic their own project might seem, its goal was art, which means it was always bound to let function and meaning float free.

I think it's best to imagine that they cast a doubting eye on earlier aspirations to scientific and technical order. After all, the Bechers hit their stride as artists in the 1960s and early '70s, at just the moment when any aspiring intellectual was reading [Thomas Kuhn's "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,"](#) which pointed to how the sociology of science (who holds power in labs and who doesn't) shapes what science tells us. The French philosopher Roland Barthes had killed off the all-powerful author and let the rest of us be the true makers of meaning, even if that left it unstable. European societies were in turmoil as they faced the terrors of the [Red Brigades](#) and Baader-Meinhof gang, so brilliantly captured in the [streaks and smears of Gerhard Richter,](#) that other German giant of postwar art. The Bechers were working in that world of unsettled and unsettling ideas. By parroting the grammar of technical imagery, without actually achieving any technical goals, their photos seem to loosen technology's moorings. By collecting water towers the way someone else might collect cookie jars, they cut industry down to size.

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Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Ensdorf Mine, Saarland, Germany, in 1979 (artist unknown). Their camera's lens, facing Hilla, has been raised higher than the film plane that's facing Bernd, a trick that lets them capture the tops of tall structures. Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher; via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Bechers weren't the only artists working that seam. Their era's conceptualists also played games with science and industry. When John Baldessari had himself photographed [throwing three balls into the air](#) so they'd form a straight line, he was simulating experimentation, not aiming for any real experimental result: The repeated throwing and its failure was the point, not the straight line that could never get formed, anyway. When the Bechers' friend [Robert Smithson](#) poured oceans of glue down a hillside, or bulldozed dirt onto a shed until its roof cracked, he was mimicking the moves of heroic construction, not aiming to build anything.

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What made the Bechers different from their peers is that they did their mimicking from the inside: They used the language of advanced photographic technology to inhabit the technophilic world they portrayed. Their photos are almost as constructed as any "lean gas generator" they might depict. The just-the-facts-ma'am objectivity of their images is only achieved through serious photographic artifice.

Take the Bechers' four-square photos of four-square workers' houses. Several houses are photographed from so close that, standing right in front of them, you'd never take in their entire facades at one glance, as the Bechers do in their images. It takes a wide-angle lens to allow that trick, and only if it's installed on the kind of technical view camera whose bellows lets lens and film slide in opposite directions. That's how the Bechers manage to line up our eyes with the top step on a stoop (we see it edge-on) while also catching the home's gables, high above.



"Framework Houses of the Siegen Industrial Region, Slated Gable Sides, Germany," 1961-78. The Bechers didn't only capture the great cathedrals of industry. Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher; via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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The preternatural level of detail on view, and its glorious range of grays and blacks, require negatives the size of a man's hand, a tripod as big as a sapling, lens filters and an advanced darkroom technique. And the couple were relying on such labor-intensive technology at just the moment when most of their photographic peers, and millions of average people, had moved on to cameras and film that let them shoot on the fly, in lab-processed color. With the Bechers, the "decisive moment" of 35 mm photography gets replaced by a gray-on-gray stasis that feels as though it could last forever — as though it's as immovable as the steel girders it depicts.

But in fact those steel girders were more time-bound than the Bechers' photos let on. "Just as Medieval thinking manifested itself in Gothic cathedrals, our era reveals itself in technological equipment and buildings," the Bechers once declared, yet the era they revealed wasn't really the one they were working in. In many cases, their factories and plants and mines were about to close when the Bechers shot them — a few were already abandoned — as Western economies made the switch to services and design and computing. The outdatedness of the Bechers' technique matches up with their subjects. Both represent a last-gasp moment in the "industrial" revolution, which is why there's something almost poignant about this show.

But one of its most revealing moments involves a film, not a photo, and it's not even by the power couple. The Bechers' young son, [Max, who has since become a noted artist in his own right](#), once captured his parents in moving color as they set out to document silos in the American Midwest. Max filmed Bernd and Hilla unloading their heavy-duty equipment, still much as it was in Victorian times, from a classic Volkswagen camper of the 1960s. It was an absurdly underpowered machine, but who could resist its colorful paint job or its mod lines and stylings?

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To get the full meaning and impact of the Bechers' Machine Age black-and-whites, they should really be viewed through the windows of their Information Age orange van.



Still from Max Becher's film "The Bechers in Ohio, 1987," showing his parents at work. Bernd and Hilla Becher shot industrial monuments from the Machine Age at a moment when those were losing ground to high-design objects like their Volkswagen camper. Estate Bernd & Hilla Becher, represented by Max Becher; via The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Bernd & Hilla Becher

Through Nov. 6 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, (212) 535-7710; metmuseum.org.

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