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The chapped skin of urbanity
Paul Albert Leitner's photographs of Vienna

It has been many years since Paul Albert Leitner left behind the confinement of the Tyrolean mountains to roam through Vienna and other grand cities. Yet he has not turned into a zippy city slicker, deftly going after his business. He has retained a circuitous and stubborn cautiousness, an outside viewpoint, an almost child-like sense of wonder, a very sensual joy of discovery. The city of Vienna, where he has been living since 1986, has never become his home – it has remained an alien, exotic place. Leitner is able to photograph things, even those familiar to him, as if he has seen them for the very first time. An artist, then, who with stoical ease watches the city getting on with being a city. Leitner's city images are sensual micro-flirts with seeing and finding, triggered by small details in the scruffy and chapped skin of urbanity. Paul Albert Leitner, the poetic recordist, gets involved neither with psychologising interpretations nor any duties of documentation. His images – especially the ones that he has collected in Vienna, where he has been living since the 1990s -- form a travelogue.

Leitner's Vienna does not align with the glamorous imperial Vienna that presents itself so magnificently to the tourist. Neither does one find the grey and morbid gloom, which many cultural pessimists time and again have described as the essence of Vienna. No, when Paul Albert Leitner saunters through the city, he always has the sun on his back. In the alcoves and behind the façades of a wealthy city he finds cheap, garish, almost tropical colours that tell stories about improvisation, coincidence, vitality, poverty and immigration. It is possible that this openness for the pure energy of the ephemeral is connected to Leitner's frequent photo expeditions to places such as Dakar (Senegal) and Havana (Cuba). It is noticeable how Leitner stays clear of the heroic single image. The artist compares his photographic work in the city to the pages of a book; he draws 'moments' from his vast collection and combines them into series: façades, wasteland, signs and advertisements, typefaces. Ultimately every city is a depot of essentially abstract shapes and colours. The art of the magical realist Paul Albert Leitner consists in allowing us to realise that this is not unimportant, dead stuff, but rather are more or less mysterious signs of life. Much in Leitner's images seems makeshift, just as Vienna itself is not eternal and static, but a city in perpetual flux.