

Alpha City

Susan Fereday, catalogue essay for "Alpha City," exhibition of photographs of Milan by Christopher Köller at Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Melbourne, 2011

Glass meeting steel

Like the other Alpha cities in Europe – Paris, London, Frankfurt – Milan's corporate corners are sharp.¹ Glass meets steel in economies that lurch ever upwards, sprouting vertical erections not for the faint hearted. From a distance Milan's new skyscrapers look impressive. From inside, unless you're near a window on an upper floor, not so much. Especially if your desk is near the photocopier, or the cleaner's cupboard.

In 2002, a small private plane crashed into the Pirelli Tower, Milan's tallest building, killing three people and injuring dozens more. The Italian Interior Minister, Claudio Scajola, announced that 'it was probably an accident.'²

Black

Gotta wear black if you want to work in fashion. Don the garb, be background blank, all the better to show off the glamour that is all around you.

Gotta marvel at the catwalkers, with their *schickimicki* attitude, their clicky-clacky heels and their breasts glued-on backwards. And that entirely bizarre way they have of walking, especially viewed from the side: *Ker-clap, ker-clap, ker-clap*, arms flailing behind them like shot corpses, knees scraping audibly so their two feet tow the straight line, hips swaying like a drunken sailors, eyes cast upwards in a beatified expression overcast with regret.

Try not to look like you breathe or bleed.

¹ An 'Alpha city', according to the Global and World Cities Research Network, is a specialised city deemed to be an important nodal point in the global economic system. The GaWCRN identifies ten Alpha cities in all, the others are: Chicago, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, New York, Singapore and Tokyo. See Beaverstock, J.V.; Smith, R.G. and Taylor, P.J. (1999) 'A roster of world cities', *Cities*, pp.16, 445-58 (also located at <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/rb/rb5.html#f1> [retrieved 13 April 2011]).

² 'Plane hits Milan skyscraper,' *BBC News*, 18 April 2002 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1937976.stm> [retrieved 13 April 2011].

Smells bad

The fumes from the drains in the city are literally breathtaking. A shifting scale of shitty scents mix with mordant medieval-smelling detergent. Is this city under plague?

As you scurry down any street outside the historic *Quadrilatero*, you find yourself glancing furtively, anxiously, scanning the place for something that must surely lie dead and unburied and not too far away.

The present smells strongly of the past.

Mussolini. Futurism. Fashion. Fascism. All founded here.

And affirming: child poverty, social exclusion, football violence, street crime.

Shattered glass

To Have and To Hold, pledge the bride and groom. But in Christopher Köller's photographs it appears to be a brittle promise, a shaky oath, based not on thoughts but on things. Things you see in shop windows. Things that after you buy them can shatter your fantasies faster than you can say, 'Let me just flick through this glossy magazine before you start the drill,' at a dentist's waiting room.

Tasty tip

Even the cheapest pizza – especially the cheapest pizza – smells fantastic when you're a hungry tourist. Menus propose *Risotto alla Milanese*, *Ossobuco*, *Milanese cassouela*, *Pasta pungento*, *Minestrone Machiavelli*. (I made up those last two.)

But all you can afford is the day-old panini from the sandwich bar behind the train station. Heaven help the locals who have to pay this much for a bite to eat every day.

Leather chairs

Passing by the luxury furniture stores and design studios that *reproduce* here you can't help but marvel at the scale of their chairs. You wonder: What would it feel like to have that hulking creaking yielding leather meet your tired arse?

But the public places in which you find the opportunity are not for the likes of you. Private banks, corporate foyers, ritzy boutiques, embassies – all of them fronted by suited security staff whose glacial stares ensure you do not linger longer.

Sounds like

Taxi-driving, bus driving, street cleaning, paving, garbage collection, delivery services. These are jobs for you.

You're going to need earplugs. And a thick skin.

Surfaces

Glass, perma-stubble, botox, alabaster. What belongs to a face?

Window glass again. Is that tired mug mine?

Ebb and flow

Walking while studying their maps, guidebooks, PODs or GPSs at arm's length, you can spot the other tourists a mile away. Local *flaneurs*, on the other hand, dangle designer bags without a care and lightly rest their mobile phones against their ears like it's a gesture of consequence.

Are they listening to the Italian *Riviera*?

The city is awash with bleach-blonde, beach-browned women, who look like colour negatives of their former unhappy selves.

You wander aimlessly but you cannot stop. To stand still would make you an easy target for all the pickpockets and the racketeers. From a distance you have already seen a backpacker become one wallet lighter while this new arrival takes another lovely photo of the *Duomo*. Their scruffy sandals act like beacons. Silly. Sad. Sorry.

Metro

The Milan metro in winter is alive with the overwhelming odour of damp fur coats. In summer it's hot and humid and the sweat and sirocco winds combine with intense traffic noise to fray the nerves.

The trees have vanished. The tiny public gardens are dust pits.

Material world

Lifestyle and looks are everything, apparently. Yet, as a tourist bumping into all this *stuff* you might see Milan as a smoggy, clammy, cloggy mirage.

In Köller's large photograph, *Milano*, the city looks bone dry with raking light: elegant as an architect's desk lamp, laid out like a De Chirico dream.

You walk somewhere between the two things: the airy image of elegance in your head and the hard reality of the city's suffocating history beneath your feet.

Small Thing

What one small thing would it take for people to realise that this modern city in which they dwell provides them no real shelter?

No shelter from the hard heat, acid rain, race riots, violence, poverty, dirty water, decay.

No shelter from the corporate giants, fashionistas, sky-high prices, dog shit, smog.

No shelter from the negligence, the missing infrastructure or the bog-ugly 'burbs.

No shelter from the Beckhams.³

No shelter from Berlusconi.

No shelter today, and even less tomorrow.

Il Duce

Seems like only yesterday they kicked Benito Mussolini's head around Milan's sun-drenched *Piazzale Loreto*. On 29 April 1945, they strung-up the mutilated bodies of Mussolini, his lover Claretta Petacci, and sixteen henchmen, upside down on meat hooks from the roof of the Esso gas station. People spat and urinated on the battered corpses.

Before that – not much earlier, and for more than twenty years – the same people had accepted Mussolini and the police state of his National Fascist Party with little resistance.

Alpha male. Black shirt. Glass meeting steel.⁴

³ British soccer star David Beckham has played for A.C. Milan – the city's successful soccer club which is owned by Silvio Berlusconi – on a number of occasions on loan from his contract with the Los Angeles Galaxy. Both David and his wife, ex-'Spice Girl' Victoria Beckham, appear in current billboard advertising campaigns for Armani lingerie.

⁴ Köller uses this quote (by Gabriele d'Annunzio on meeting Mussolini in May 1925) as a wall text beside his photograph, *Project Superman*:
'To the visitor, do you bring with you the mirror of Narcissus? This is leaded glass, oh mask-maker. Suit your masks to your visage, but think – you are glass meeting steel.'

Il Cavaliere

Elegantly attired and brazenly opportunistic, Silvio Berlusconi is a native Milanese and Italy's second longest serving prime minister. He is also one of the country's three wealthiest men with a business empire that spans insurance, food, construction, advertising and the majority of Italy's media.⁵

On 13 December 2009, while attending a political rally in Milan's *Piazza del Duomo*, an angry man smashed Berlusconi in the face with an alabaster statuette of Milan Cathedral. Berlusconi's nose and two teeth were broken.

Alabaster meeting face.

Recovering in a nearby hospital, Berlusconi met Nicole Minetti, a dental hygienist, former dancer and reality TV show contestant and shortly afterwards announced she would run for his party in Northern Italy. Today she is a councillor in Lombardy.⁶

This is not the first starlet Berlusconi has promoted to political position. The septuagenarian playboy and prime minister has been involved with many sex scandals including paying for sex with an underage girl. He also has an extensive record of criminal allegations including mafia collusion, tax fraud, false accounting, corruption, and bribery of police officers and judges. He has been tried in Italian courts on numerous occasions but so far without conviction, often evading prosecution by creating new laws that grant himself as prime minister special legal immunity.

About the allegations of his persistent conflicts of interest as prime minister, playboy and business tycoon, Berlusconi has said: 'If I, taking care of everyone's interests, also take care of my own, you can't talk about a conflict of interest.'⁷

Glass meeting steel. Shattering into a million immoral pieces.

⁵ The financial magazine, *Forbes*, estimates Berlusconi's fortune to be US\$9billion, which is twice the wealth of Italian fashion icon Giorgio Armani and three times that of the Benetton family of billionaires, and makes him Italy's 3rd and the world's 74th richest man. See 'The World's Billionaires', *Forbes*, http://www.forbes.com/lists/2010/10/billionaires-2010_Silvio-Berlusconi-family_EEPT.html [accessed 13 April 2011].

⁶ Minetti has yet to be indicted but is suspected of procuring underage prostitutes for Berlusconi at so-called '*bunga-bunga*' parties at his villa. Minetti has conceded that the prime minister helped her financially but refuses to go into details. Tom Kington, 'Berlusconi's ex-dental hygienist quizzed over claims of procuring women for PM', *The Guardian*, 31 January 2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jan/31/berlusconi-italy-nicole-minetti-questioned> [accessed 13 April 2011].

⁷ 'In quotes: Berlusconi in his own words', *BBC News*, 2 May 2006 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3041288.stm> [accessed 13 April 2011].



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