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Urban shots zoom in on claustrophobia

By Gretchen Matis

The Verdict: Wolfgang Zurborn's large color photographs of urban crowds make a fascinating, though unsettling, sociological study.

Wolfgang Zurborn wants to get in your face. By using a wide-angle lens for his close-up crowd scenes, he puts the viewer right in the picture. His exhibition at the Goethe Institut is the first in a series featuring young contemporary German photographers.

Zurborn's large color photographs emphasize the chaotic living of our time. The rock concert, carnivals, parades, trade shows and busy sidewalks of cities such as his native Cologne, Los Angeles and Paris are his subjects. These photographs reflect the claustrophobic, overwhelming feelings we experience when surrounded by masses of people. There are bodies everywhere, bright colors and hot white sunlight. You can imagine the cacophony of odors and sounds.

Some of his pictures give no clue as to what is going on. You cannot distinguish one person from the next, only conflicting patterns of clothing. Zurborn's photographs are confusing and deliberately disorienting.

Because they are so large and the camera has frozen a moment in time, we are able to closely examine these people and places.

Nearly everyone looks uncomfortable, exhausted and anxious. It's ironic, because usually the intent of such an outing is to have fun.

Zurborn's images also point out the irony in a group of human beings where no one connects to another. Separateness is felt, vacant expressions are common. In one Paris sidewalk scene, the people look especially gloomy. A young Asian woman is in the foreground larger than life. Zurborn used a flash so she is electric with light. She looks to be on the verge of tears.

This is a hyper-real depiction of urban "living". It is a fascinating, though unsettling, sociological study.