

At the end of April 2014, Shirana Shahbazi undertook a three-month road trip with her family, from Zürich to Teheran, making many stops along the way. The images the artist brought back are straightforward holiday photos of her daughters, friends, relatives and strangers, scenic views, the odd-looking building, etc. Taken with a point-and-shoot camera, these images are private keepsakes. And even if among the literally hundreds of pictures one might be tempted to see behind a few particularly well-composed images an “artist’s eye”, the potential of photography is that perfect moments simply tend to happen. Stumbled upon beauty: a sunset, a seascape, a city at night. Stumbled upon oddity: a bust of a politician abandoned alongside a fun fair dolphin in someone’s backyard. Stumbled upon exoticism: a desert road sign announcing 885 km to (for us Westerners) a far-off destination. Upon her return to Switzerland, Shirana Shahbazi carefully selected a small number of images, which she enlarged and printed on a lithographic press, reducing her palette to two colors per picture. The ghostlike presence of the ensuing works blunts the sense of nostalgia one might find in any family album and instills these images with an unreal, dreamlike quality. What is more: the brightly colored walls of the Kunsthalle on which they are displayed act as a stage, making the viewing experience all the more abstract.

The artist’s series *Monstera* exhibited in the Kunsthalle’s lower galleries are photos of leaves of the eponymous common houseplant. As the artist remarks, botanical photography is as ubiquitous of a practice as taking holiday pictures. Shot in controlled studio conditions, backlit, in some cases against a backdrop of multi-colored lights, printed on a hyper glossy photographic paper, the resulting artworks glow with the artificial intensity of a neon-lit icon.

While these works may appear from a distance to be computer-generated imagery, just as the patina of the holiday picture could at first glance seem to be the product of some filter found on any cell-phone camera, these objects are instead the result of an involvement with the concrete, material properties of photography that borders on the fetishistic. Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it. Jasper Johns’s famous definition of art applies here. Shirana Shahbazi continuously interweaves formal and processual categories belonging to the history of photography, creating in the process objects of an otherworldly beauty.

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