

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

Grand Central Catacombs: How a Century Left Order in Ruins

By SARAH BOXER

ONCE upon a time, machines looked shiny and sleek for the camera. It seemed that the gears of Charles Sheeler and the bolts of Margaret Bourke-White would last forever. Well, they haven't.

The proof is in "Tunnel Visions," a show of 18 large-format, black-and-white photographs of steam generators, control towers and switching mechanisms that have been working under Grand Central Terminal for a century. (The show is at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, right across 42d Street from the station.) At the end of the 19th century, when the terminal was built, it was pretty much alone in the neighborhood. But as the city grew, the land over the tracks was sold and leased for new buildings. The switches were electrified, and the terminal's steam generators started to provide energy for the new neighborhood. It was the height of modernity.

Somewhere along the line, though, those tunnels beneath Grand Central became strange and ragged passageways. In 1993, Accra Shepp, a young photographer, took his cameras under the terminal. What he found was not the remains of a rational system, but a crude labyrinth of pipes and ducts that seemed to



Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

"Steam Leak at 48th Street," by Accra Shepp, shows a blast of white steam spouting from a pipe, at right, and a burst of light over the tracks, at left.

have been patched together by moles. And he got there just in time. Soon after he finished his portraits of the station's old steam generators (five of which are in the show), they were taken out and shipped off to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington as relics.

Is it possible that the power behind one of the most beautiful, most sanely designed train stations has been nothing more than organized chaos? It looks that way. This is a place where giant steam leaks have gone

on for weeks without anyone's noticing. One of Mr. Shepp's four-frame compositions is titled "Steam Leak at 48th Street." On the right is a blast of white steam spouting from a pipe. On the left is a burst of lights on some forlorn-looking tracks. Not a soul is in sight.

Mr. Shepp treats the objects under Grand Central as artifacts from an archeological dig. Accordingly, his diptychs, triptychs and polyptychs are better than his single shots, for they give the sense of a layered,

more-than-human perspective, a place created by centuries of workers adding things and taking them away. To stress the constructed nature of his view, Mr. Shepp even left the marks of his negative holder showing.

One diptych is a floor-to-ceiling view (that a human being could never have) of a place with no apparent function. Near the ceiling is a thick pipe with a tiny pipette sticking out of it. At ground level is a doorway leading immediately to a dead end,

littered with bottles. Between them is bedrock adorned with hoses. Who knows why this place looks this way. That, by the way, is one of the frustrations of the show. Almost no attempt is made to say what these strange corners and machines are for.

The one composition that has some of the muscular beauty of the modernist works of Bourke-White and Sheeler is a triptych taken inside a pump room. Once again it is a floor-to-ceiling view, but here the whole

thing is united by one piece of machinery: a giant-pulley-with-chains-and-gears that begins at the ceiling and vanishes into a hole beneath our view.

There are also a few touching views of the nether world. For instance, Mr. Shepp took a shot of a small control station. Even though the building is underground, it was designed like a little house, with windows, cornices, drainpipes and a roof, as if someone forgot that it would be out of sight. In the picture, the ghost of a man holds a ladder for the ghost of another man climbing up. (Those ghost-figures are the traces of people who stepped briefly in front of Mr. Shepp's lens but not long enough to make much of an impression, given the exposure times he had to use in the dark tunnels.)

The irrationality of Grand Central's underground calls out for some explanation. But Mr. Shepp doesn't care what the machines did when they were alive and new. He is fascinated by the crypt for the mortal called modernity.

"Tunnel Visions" remains at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, 120 Park Avenue, at 42d Street, across the street from Grand Central Terminal, Through Oct. 10.