



Virtual Reality

by Huntington Witherill



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #117

Commentary

There is one aspect of photography that continues to bother me — and even more so in recent years: the predisposition of viewers to think they can understand a photograph with a glance. Minor White famously said that you haven't really seen a photograph until you've looked at it for 30 minutes. I first heard this advice in the 1970s when looking at a photograph for several minutes was somewhat normal, and 30 minutes seemed like an decade. Now, in the age of the Internet, looking at a photograph or 30 minutes seems like an eternity. Nonetheless, I still believe Minor White was correct. I suppose this means that most of us never really see a photograph.

This is precisely why I love a photograph like this one from Huntington Witherill. Quite simply, there is so much going on in this photograph that it is impossible to take it all in with a glance. You have to stop and look and allow your eyes to wander to every corner and through every layer. It is only by doing so that we can fully comprehend such simple things as the scale of this place. For example, did you see the woman coming down the curved staircase in the lower left corner? Her size provides a scale for these carved figures that suddenly gives us a sense of how large this interior is.

And speaking of layers, I've tried on several occasions and failed to count the number of layers I find in this photograph. There are planes that are obvious as we move from near to far, but there are also the vertical planes from bottom to top and curved

planes because of the architectural shapes. I can't help but believe that M.C. Escher would love this photograph!

The next aspect of this image that fascinates me is how the architecture style is so at odds with the reality of its purpose. Doesn't it seem as though the architecture reminds us of some cathedral, a holy place of worship? At first glance that would be an easy conclusion. Of course on closer inspection, we realize this is a shopping mall — a place that is neither holy nor one of worship, I suppose.

The revelation (pun intended) that this building serves a more mundane purpose is only understood if we take the time to look closely and comprehend the tiny details — particularly the shoppers and the storefront windows. Without those details, it would be very easy to misinterpret this location — and perhaps that is precisely why Witherill chose this composition and point of view. A virtual reality, indeed.