

Michael Borek's Unnerving Photos at the Czech Embassy

Posted by **Louis Jacobson** on Jul. 14, 2014 at 10:47 am



It's been more than a quarter century by now, but my recollection of reading **Franz Kafka's** *The Metamorphosis* in my freshman-year European literature class remains fresh. Even for a cocky college kid, reading about **Gregor Samsa's** transformation into a "dung beeeeeetle"—as my eminent, French-accented professor enthusiastically pronounced the creature—was unnerving.

There's nothing quite as absurd, or creepy, as Kafka's famous insect character in the photography exhibit at the Czech Embassy by **Michael Borek**, which commemorates the 90th anniversary of Kafka's death. Still, many of the works exude an uneasy vibe.

One image features the shadow of an older man who's sandwiched between a translucent window dripping

with water and a wall covered with unsightly brown stains; another image documents an empty room with an ominously toppled lampshade. A third (middle) lays bare the scarred surface of a wall where a metal silhouette had once been affixed; it now reveals several drilled holes that suggest bullet wounds.

A photographer and freelance interpreter based in Bethesda, Borek is originally from Prague, so the the Eastern European emptiness also captured in the work of Yugoslav-born **Vesna Pavlovic** haunts some of Borek's photographs, too. Some images feature lonely furniture in deserted buildings, while others show empty gardens inhabited by weathered humanoid sculptures.

Borek's most appealing work comes when he locates what **Paul Simon** calls "angels in the architecture"—a bit of whimsy in an otherwise sterile context. One photograph finds what appears to be a small bit of rococo grillwork casting a shadow on a stretched sheet, while another (bottom) reveals the whitewashed surface of a building arranged in a pleasing geometry that suggests the stripped-down, planar shapes of **Charles Sheeler**.

Through at least the end of July at the Embassy of the Czech Republic, 3900 Spring of Freedom Street, NW, Washington, D.C.

