

## Life is a Beach

For all those hedonists who, every summer, offer up their bodies in homage to the sun, where the hot sand of the beach offers an altar for their acts of worship and self-abandonment, the photographer Edgar Martins presents this ghostly trace as a wan reminder of the good times. We are called upon to use our imaginations here, there is an absence of life, a paucity of purpose, and a sense of the uncanny that permeates the silence of these photographs, whose scenes, like a black hole, seem to have consumed all traces and signs of life. The sun has been usurped, in its absence, by a powerful floodlight, that pushes back the blackness of the night and we are obliged to fill in the absences that it relentlessly exposes. All that represents the ambience of a holiday beach is missing here; this could be an inanimate model in the mode of the miniature *mise en scene* landscapes of the American artist Michael Ashkin. The precision of the ripples in the sand, the fine detail of the tyre tracks, and the neatness of the sunshades are all too good to be true, too true to be real, we could be assessing the authenticity of a simulated scene here. The pervasive tranquillity is paradoxical, not calming but disturbing, discordant, incongruous, the viewer longs for the signs and symptoms of life to pump up the visual volume and superimpose the social identity of this place. Looking at this image is like looking at a portrait bereft of facial features - a sudden downpour of little identical men in suits and bowler hats a la Rene Magritte would offer a welcome relief here.

Given the paucity of clues offered, our curiosity is inevitably aroused and the detective in us begins to prowl around this scene. Which country are we being shown here, which season could it be, spring, summer or autumn? What time of night is this? We might reasonably guess the early hours of the morning, so why the copious floodlighting? Is this a redundant film set awaiting the actors' return, or perhaps a civil defence exercise prepared and ready to simulate the scene of a terrorist attack? The possibilities proliferate but there are always more questions than answers, always more assumed reasons than reality could hold down.

The sand has three different modes, wave rippled, tyre smoothed and foot pummelled, but even the wave rippled sand wears the tracks of tyres, denying nature any foothold here, nature is fugitive from this scene, this is a synthetic sham which without the sun becomes vacuous. Of the mandatory sun, sea, sand and sex only the sand remains, the dream beach has dissolved into its own dolorous shadow. This is the flip side of Massimo Vitali's photographs of North Italian beaches which teem with life and action where our gaze becomes satiated by detail, our eyes and our minds held firmly within the frame, here in Martins' image our mind begins to wander beyond the frame. In an attempt to reinforce the rickety ontology of this image we are tempted to rove beyond the confines of the frame, under the red-hot glare of analysis the frame begins to melt, imagination breaks through its thwarted threshold, the party's over and we want to find out where the revellers have gone, denied access to the social *raison d'etre* of this scene we inhabit it with our own imagined populations and their narratives.

The uncanny density of the black backdrop does not ring true, the luminous net that girdles the western hemisphere at night, as seen from space, pollutes and dilutes any primeval blackness. We no longer witness the dense blackness that night-time might once have brought, so, as in the eerie minimal, floodlit, night-time scenes of the English

photographer Sophy Rickett, this solid blackness in Martins' image has an air of the supernatural reinforcing that intangible yet somehow persistent presence of the uncanny – an abyss whose threshold teeters on the edge of credibility, where the indexicality of the image can only be tentatively maintained by the viewers suspension of disbelief.

Ironically, shadows, usually endowed with enigmatic or sinister qualities, bring a touch of reality and credibility to this scene. The solidity of these shadows, however, like those in Giorgio de Chirico's *Pittura Metafisica*, brings a feeling of foreboding. The dark holes in the sand - like the pools of black void created by the sunglasses which mysteriously shroud Apollinaire's eyes in de Chirico's *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* of 1914 - seem to offer a conduit to that whelming black void of interstellar space that signals things eternal – time is not just frozen here but eternity-touched. These shadows take on their own existence whose stillness and silence can only be suggested, a suggestion decisive enough to strongly signify a gnawing absence, an overwhelming sense of the melancholic. The sober and solemn reflections that haunt us after the euphoria of the party has passed and worn off, as entropy picks at its remains, as conversations fade into memories that bridge the void, all imbue the mood of this scene.

Edgar Martins is fond of things peripheral, those liminal and often paradoxical holes in reality that pass us by, skirting and eluding our driven lives, and here he has found the peripheral in something pivotal to and evocative of the mass holidaying experience, familiar and enduring to millions, by capturing it out of hours at its least typical, in its most contradictory state, he has caught a wistful and enigmatic facet of this scene which denies its essence and casts it in a different mould, totally transforming the message that it traditionally conveys. As in his earlier series of images *'The Diminishing Present'* he has brought a touch of magic and enigma to something which in the bright light of day is familiar enough to be almost banal and in this way he perpetuates that tradition of the gifted photographer who is able not only to see things in a different and unique way but also allows us to share his oblique vision through the very special qualities of his photographic imagery.

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(text commissioned by Anamnese [www.anamnese.pt](http://www.anamnese.pt))