

## **How do I Know What I Know Until I See Shat I See – the enigmatic photographic works of Edgar Martins**

In Conversation

Edgar Martins and Gerry Badger

*Edgar Martins' images of 'terrains vagues' – the bleak spaces' that contemporary urban development seems to throw up in abundance – can be positioned initially within the minimalist tradition of an artist like Lewis Baltz, the most conceptually rigorous member of the influential 'New Topographical' School of the 1970s and 80s. In his intellectual aspirations too, Martins seems a fellow traveller with Baltz, developing an art that raises the cerebral quotient as it pares down the photographic description to almost nothing. His new series, When Light Casts No Shadow – images of airport runways in the dark – is so seductively reductive it might be termed 'Post Topographical'. Yet it is so richly referenced and allusive that any attempt to label it seems in itself a reductive exercise.*

*It could be said that, throughout the course of his oeuvre, Martins has been moving from a position where topographical elements are described more or less naturally – or as naturally as photography can describe space – to one in which even terrain vague is depicted in a manner that is increasingly indeterminate. When Light Casts No Shadow drives from his previous series, The Accidental Theorist, the first time he devoted a whole series to nocturnal images – although its actual genesis was a commission he did for the Portuguese Airports Authority.*

*Shot on a set of beaches near Lisbon, The Accidental Theorist featured a space which was both natural and artificial, possessing depth yet at the same time flat, a *mis en scène* against which various 'props' – beach objects – created a theatrical or filmic scenario which was not a theatre at all, but simply what was there.*

*Of course, this is what photography does - it brings 'real' elements into what may be wholly random relationships within the frame. Or not, as the case may be. It is the task of the artist using photography to make some kind of meaning out of each single act of framing, and further, as Edgar Martins avers, even begin to communicate ideas. Every still photograph is a paradox. We are compelled (and it is a powerful compulsion) to believe implicitly in a photograph's verisimilitude, yet in essence each frame is a frozen, artificial simulacrum of reality. The photograph cannot be trusted, its very meaning is*

*open to question. Narrative flow is difficult to achieve in still photography, a condition that makes it an extremely fragile vehicle for conveying complex ideas. Yet that – the conveyance of ideas – is what Edgar Martins, as a former philosophy student, demands of the medium.*

Q. I've just written, and you've stated that it is not easy to make a photography of ideas, so why do you wrestle with this recalcitrant medium?

A. I have always found photography to be a highly inadequate medium for communicating ideas. However, it is this very anxiety with the medium that spurs me on to find a new visual language to work with and, I suppose, a new vocabulary from which to derive my glossary of life. So what motivates me are not the possibilities it opens up, but its inadequacies.

My work has an aesthetic quality that some define as being precise. However, the process by which the images are created is everything but precise – and this duality interests me. For so long photography has been about control: I like to relinquish some of this control and utilize the serendipitous aspects of the medium. Photographing in the dark, for instance, is a chancy business, and you never really know what you will end up with until you see it.

Photography offers me a structure, the structures of the world. Using these as a starting point I am then able to redefine the parameters of the medium (whatever these may be). I comment on the world around whilst at the same time trying to resolve my relationship with the medium. However, the process of resolving is always much more interesting than any resolution, which I never come to in any definitive sense. In process there is no real end product, just a set of propositions.

Paradoxically, the very language of Photography which I find restricting and inadequate, helps channel my thoughts and ideas.

Q. Let's begin with *The Accidental Theorist* as the precursor to *When Light Casts No Shadow*. How did this series come about?

A. The imagery of *The Accidental Theorist* is series of moments that have become independent of reason.

I do not see the objects which take centre stage in these images as objects, but as events. At a glance one could argue that this work too deals with the impact of Modernism on the environment, but I hope it goes much further than this. I am interested

in theatre, in performance - yet not in the traditional sense of the word. I am interested in recording the world's performance of itself as a set of processes and facts. And the only way to achieve this is to slow down time. That is why I often use long-exposures and, in some ways, why I use my photographic camera like a video camera.

I like the idea that any given space changes, for you and you only, every time you are there observing it. And if you slow down time for long enough you may just be able to capture this. I interpret this change as a performance of space, as the manifestation of its kinetic energy.

*Between 2006 and 2008, after completing a commission for the Portuguese Airports Authority – entitled Approaches – Edgar Martins made When Light Casts No Shadow. Much of the series was made in the Azores, where the airports used to both be a compulsory stop for early Transatlantic flights and important military bases in both world wars. Some of these airports are unique in that the runways and standing areas are surfaced in tarmac and not the usual concrete. Over time, parts of these airports have fallen into disuse and become dilapidated, and it is this that drew Martins to them.*

*Again, he chose to photograph almost exclusively at night, utilising long exposures of up to two hours in order to register minute tonal differences between blacktop and night sky, his camera picking out fluorescent signs and markings on the ground – and also the patterns of the weeds that had grown in cracks that had occurred due to lack of maintenance. The result is an imagery that is even more abstract and enigmatic than that of the earlier series.*

Q. This new series clearly relates to *The Accidental Theorist*, in that was shot at night and deals with the interstitial spaces and black voids you have already talked about. But it seems to me that you have taken these ideas further, in that the spaces depicted are even more contingent and fragile, the ideas you convey even more condensed, yet at the same time more concentrated, more enigmatic yet paradoxically more lucid?

A. Yes – as with *The Accidental Theorist*, I am addressing a peculiarly contemporary landscape – *the terrain vague*. This work was directly informed by the ideas and research of architect Rem Koolhaas and cultural critics Jean Baudrillard, Henry Lefebvre, Marc Augé, amongst others. In this vast literature *terrains vagues* are assessed as places without histories, without identities, and without a public realm beyond roads and airports. Indeed, Koolhaas wonders if the generic city is synonymous

with the contemporary airport. He speculates that '*its main attraction is its anomie*'. In my images sky and constructed ground merge in darkness, with only the lights and airport hieroglyphics to orientate us. Everything is indeterminate and difficult to decode. The juxtaposition of sign and shape represent an overlapping of time, of language, of space.

*When Light Casts no Shadow* calls to our attention that all is flow, all boundaries are provisional, all space is permeable - the *mis en scène* for spatial and temporal dislocation. In this realm, we are in a landscape of uncertainty, within a culture landscape of permanent flux, transition and opposition. Spaces are primed with a sense of purpose yet they are marginal, fragmented and dispersed. In the delicate weight of these landscapes, human perception seems to enter a different register. It is as if everything expresses contingency, as if space and time are about to simmer and disperse. In these images, space cannot be perceived as absolute form, it is fluid, relational, migratory.

Q. The psychological tenor might be vague and ominous, but the abstract qualities of this new imagery are absolutely beguiling. Do you think much about their relationship to painting?

A. The debate as to whether Photography is just another picture making tool, or a not yet fully understood cultural language, has always interested me. Borrowing references from the dimensions of painting and art helps me to comment on photography's primary semiotics and to create a simple but layered language, that is universally accessible but which draws on a multitude of subjects. Creating new ways of thinking about the uncertainty of the references is a means to capture what is missing, the thing that separates photography from reality. I am then able to create visually precise images that elude precise meaning.

The precise minimal image can be a space for imaginative projection but it can also be unnerving. This gives the work a multiplicity of layers. We cannot deduce the process and so language becomes as important as message. Or should I say, language becomes part of the message.

My images depend on photography's inherent tendency to make each space believable, but there is a disturbing suggestion that all is not what it seems. This process of slow revelation and sense of temporal manipulation is crucial to the work. Above and beyond this, in having to shift between the various codes, the viewer becomes acutely aware of the process of looking, of the reconciliation required between sensory and

cognitive understanding. Painting and photography accomplish this 'union' in different ways.

*Together with his two photographic series, Edgar Martins is also showing a series of lithographs, entitled When Light Casts No Shadow, which were made by scratching lines onto litho film, then printing the film on photographing paper, scratching over the existing grid, and finally shooting the print and leaving the film exposed to time, buried in some form or way, to oxidise. The result is images that look like very precise drawings or grids from afar, but which, at close up, reveal all the incongruities inherent to the process and the passing of time - the skewed lines that result from drawing the images in near darkness, the corruption of the film by the weather, and being buried in total darkness. These drawings represent the same kind of process as his photographs – the serendipitous nature of the process of making art, a rational yet irrational action we cannot identify or quantify, but which we can experience. The lithographs result from a failing, or a corruption of the process, which is what Martins also likes about photography – its inadequacies, which he regards as its possibilities.*

*In order to both illuminate it, and reinforce some of the ideas in his work, Edgar Martins is also showing a audio installation in a darkened room. The connection between the room and his night photographs is perhaps obvious, but will give those in this darkened room a direct, and startling experience of the process of making the photographs.*

Q. How did you make the audio piece, and how do you think it relates to the processes at work in your imagery?

A. Initially I had conceived a separate space in this exhibition for a projection room, where I was planning to exhibit *The Accidental Theorist* series. But I was keen to make the viewer engage with some of the issues which underpin my work and way of working in a more direct and engaging way, so I conceived the audio piece, which I worked on with a colleague of mine who is an artist, author and sound engineer. The piece carries us into the realm of the aural and, pushing us to inquire about broader and deeper connections and divisions in the modes of our experience. What is the image of a sound? What is the sound of an image? What is the relationship between the visual and the aural, between seeing and hearing? Furthermore, in the same way as a lithographic drawing can say as much about Photography as a photograph does – illuminating its failings and its process - can sound also achieve this?

Although structured, the piece has no clear beginning or end, but it encourages us to inhabit, rather than merely to observe, its audio-visual space. This is very important as it alludes to the way in which I experience the spaces I photograph. As with all the photos on display, it is poised on the edge of abstraction, yet it denotes a psychological presence. I have always felt that my images, silent as they are, capture moments of lost or absent sound. So although this piece in no way seeks to enjoin the imagination to fill in the missing sonic register, it creates a simulacrum of sorts.

It allows us to embody the larger temporal reality contained in my images. But it also places us in two distinct spaces at the same time - both outside and inside my images. It recreates the way in which I experience these spaces photographically. By slowing down time, thus providing a platform for the world to perform for me, I relinquish some control over the image-making process.

The visual narratives suggested in this room stem from an inability to control the surrounding environment. While unnerving to begin with, we gradually approach that zone of indeterminacy where the aural and the visual, the sensible and the conceptual, the repetitive and the random blend and correspond. By making so many connections and disconnections, the piece rewires our imagination. For me it opens up a new pathway allowing new leaps and transferences between reality and its image, hearing and seeing, sound.

Space, in my images, embodies a wider a-temporal dimension. Similarly to all the projects on show this piece portrays an occurrence, a moment or moments - *temps vagues* in *terrain vagues* - but which we cannot fully identify, quantify or deny. They offer encounters with time suspended before or after events.

However, like the last act of a theatrical play, in this room the element which links all three projects is revealed – the Sea. Whilst obscured in the images, by the high horizon lines or the night, the ‘Sea’ is an integral part of the spaces portrayed in my images. These spaces are defined by their proximity to the sea. In my photographs, they are defined by its gnawing absence. So in this sense, the ‘Sea’ is also a powerful metaphor for my work. My images are as much about what you don’t see as what you do see.

My work is produced generally in peripheral regions, in spaces of arrivals and departures where there is a dialectic of stasis and flux that is in a constant state of uncertain transformation.

The ‘Sea’ embodies all of these characteristics. It is the landscape that survives our absence.

