

## Under Construction

The relationship between institution and artist somehow guarantees that art can function, that it is part of life rather than separate. All artists work to commission; in fact, it is now difficult for even a painter to do anything other than work on a series to order. It is almost impossible for an unestablished and not privately funded artist to work speculatively. A commission establishes the relation between context and place, between need and finance: a sculpture, sound piece, performance, book, mural, or photo series for a wall, a book, a courtyard or even for an online or print newspaper. When the artist is a photographer, however, the question of role can get more difficult.

The case of Edgar Martins and his photo essay for the *New York Times Magazine* is clear, but fascinating. It started well; there is a crisis in the housing industry, so let's ask an artist to show us - the paper, and the public - what a newspaper photographer never could. After all, is an artist not able to show us what we cannot see? The role of the artist, after the Romantic era, must be to help us approach things from a different angle, to cast light upon something that might not be found any other way. This is the dominant notion of art and its role in society; the excuse for art too, because, perhaps for some, it still needs an excuse. Art is to serve society; it has to fulfil a role, unlike in the simplistically characterised bad old days of 'art for art's sake'. But, like the 1970s boyfriend who, on finding his girlfriend to be sentient and complicated, says he finds the contents of the parcel different, the *New York Times*, which prides itself on accuracy, withdrew Martins' work from its website on hearing that the images had in fact been 'manipulated'.

Photography is still expected to serve, though, and the art photographer is forever trying to separate, to break away from this notion of function. No art photographer wishes solely to represent. Of course, everything has to be a matter of choice, of surprise even, and to play with clarity, with an exact image, further extends art's open, three-dimensional power to come from any angle. The breakdown of formal distinctions is now so complete that the photographer, who seldom any longer calls his or herself just that, not only takes photographs but is also an artist in other media. The sculptor, on the other hand, who would not dream of calling his or herself anything other than an artist, is just as likely to consider the photograph as 'found'.

Yet is Edgar Martins still seen as a photographer in that he only makes photographs and books of photographs? From work made at the Royal College of Art onwards, his photographs of empty, strange, heightened unreal places in contrasting light have been exceptionally strong. The role played by Martins' work is complex, however; the picture itself is a mere beginning of an extension of physical and mental possibility; the atmosphere remains consistent throughout, and landscape and urban landscape are treated in the same way. These images, which represent the beginning of an idea, are a mere means to a flow of associative thought that goes far beyond observational truth into individual and collective understanding. Fantasy and theatre, face value observation, surreal and unreal atmospheres, are united beneath a surface of production.

So Martins was invited to make a photo essay on, about, the collapse of the housing market in the United States. By asking Martins, the *New York Times Magazine* was obviously expecting imagery that would go further than anything a newspaper photographer could produce. Even the most 'unusual' winning photograph in a world press award could not have the same range of quality as a

work by Martins. For a start, the touching, formally grave use of light and dark, the volume of mass, the invention as well as the knowledge of art history, already recognisable in his previous work, has no part in reportage.

Reasons for making a picture, or taking a picture, are complicated at the best of times, and Martins' self-motivation guarantees that his work has never been illustrative of anything other than, perhaps, his own invention. The common thread running through the works, however, is a formal quality, where the small shifts achieve an extension of an historical commonwealth of language. Neither reportage, nor documentary, the work exists, in part, for another world.

'The Ruins at Holyrood Chapel' at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, was painted as an extension of Louis Jacques M. Daguerre's play with illusion. This very romantic view of the Chapel ruins, by the father of photography, with heightened, glowing moonlight seen through a filigree of partially collapsed Gothic window frame, is almost monochromatic. The painter here makes a sort of prop for a commonly established and anticipated visual language. The ruin, from Durer's 'Madonna with Iris', with Mary in front of a set of scaffolding, throughout visual and literary language, indulges a sense of romantic past, of irrational transience; it also acts as a metaphor for the value of art over and above the representation of fact.

Of course, the buildings in Martins' series are all, in any case, ready-made ruins in that they are already in a state of flux, some way between disintegration and construction. His awareness of the history of the ruin in painting and photography allows the artist to step into this to provide an instant metaphor for non-place, non-existence, and the ultimate value of the manipulation of expectation.

Daguerre, the inventor of the daguerreotype, used the stage to set the scene, to adopt a theatrical approach right there at the very beginning of the history of photography. So much later, after the medium has fully merged with, and then overtaken, painting as the provider of portraits of soldiers, sailors, street vendors, as well as landscapes, battle scenes, genre, state openings, and criminal and anthropological records, the digital era ends the relationship between captured moment and truth. Photography, with the use of post-production techniques, can reveal itself as the unfocussed harbinger of broken time, to set up and aid the representation of reality.

The ruin here does not refer only to American photography and past coverage of downturn and depression. Rather, it is rooted in the history of painting. A post-modern tendency to equate the representation of something almost with the thing itself can lead to terrible problems. The photographic commission is a difficult thing to agree to or want, because it lends itself to description, to the artist doing what is, in a way, expected. When the editors of the *New York Times* asked Edgar Martins to deal with, in the artist's words, the 'shame' of these partially built, abandoned, usually aspiring luxurious places, for both their magazine and the accompanying slide show on the NYTimes.com website, they must, in a way, have wanted him to say something expected, but different perhaps. But where was the art to 'lie'?

The Jean Nouvel building in New York; empty, unfinished, with flapping plastic and touching graffiti, presents an edge of fashionability with orange plastic, a series of planes, ready for an artist to see, or capture, or make happen in his or her terms. Where, what? Going into, at, a subject. But then what is that subject? A commission for a newspaper seems to involve a different set of considerations; truth to story, lack of embellishment, a level or approach that implies a true and honest take on the subject. Journalistic words are gathered by a combination of hunch, habit, received

knowledge, politics, expectation, and stance. A subject, such as the downturn and virtual halt of the housing industry, is a given, the idea anyway dripping with strange pathos, about something that was meant to happen but never materialised in a more general context of profligacy, waste, breakdown and poverty.

Martins had submitted a synopsis to the *New York Times* that followed formal and factual lines on the new experience of architecture. He called it 'Ruins of the Second Gilded Age'. But a subject like this is also no subject; it can be really individual in terms of experience, disappointment and bankruptcy, and equally general, open, factual, fictitious, and emotional. How can this best be represented? Why would, or could, an artist, who happens to be a photographer, make something different, and how can the photograph manage to be a source of surprise? Was it Martins' job to transcend and extend the point at the same time? Does a commission inevitably carry with it a sense of disappointment? How can a subject be bettered? There has to be a way to speak differently, for an artist not to change a subject, yet 'say' or 'express' it better.

The places photographed by Martins were not dead but alive, unravelling. Perfection has not been achieved; the places, hidden and shaken, have been torn apart by visitors taking things away. Everything that can be taken has been removed; sections of floor cut to order, to fit housing elsewhere. The Show Home becomes a site of underdone undoing, never having reached that pinnacle of high finish; the shiny, fresh, promise of a new, albeit fake, old. So the real changes very fast and who is to say what is what, when wind, weather, human need, and greed, knocks at a door that is about to be lifted from its own hinges. Is not the composition of a picture, the arrangement, as much a matter of time as anything else? Walker Evans, an important documenter of a different American downturn, would perhaps have arranged the furniture in a room before photographing the scene.

This commission provided Edgar Martins with a classically fictional, staged opportunity as he photographed vacant stages, portentous but still unvisited by the normality they promise. The empty shell of the stage prop home, in various stages of completion, promotes a pretence and projects a fiction; a serving suggestion to be served up by an artist intercepting an idea. A serving suggestion already set up anyway, from hunting lodge to high modern, with its inbuilt range of thematisation. From the pile of rubble fed through the side of an otherwise virgin building. From the leaves on the floor but also from the extreme shift between the artist's preferred relationship to his audience, through the production of large vertiginous prints which release illusory space free of gravity, to the very different context of a newspaper magazine and online slide show.

Except nobody can stay in the real space of these gated separate communities which will, in this case, never materialise. There is perhaps only one person in all these pictures. The only participants are actual members of an audience in front of the huge reproductions, which tip, or tilt, against the forced march of architectural symmetry. The illusion places the spectator there, really there, but it remains unreal as the artist and audience are expected to play judge, jury, defendant and even custodian of a general idea. The overview is indeed achieved, the artist doing what he can. Whole streets, infrastructures, new roads, corners, sign posts, waiting, half-wrecked, appear like a false town centre erected solely for soldiers training in contemporary urban warfare.

Martins explains that he uses symmetry to reinforce the image of architecture; he places us in the undoing of a subject as much as its construction. His work suggests a relation to the architect's 'artist's impression'. Architecture is purely

notional, from proposal, through drawing and three-dimensional simulation, right up to and even including the building process itself. Long before computer graphics, it has been important to project, draw, collage, and model how something might eventually look; with streets lined by trees, people for scale, and children running down the projected sloping bank. Here in the case of the Second Gilded Age, everything is also pared down, laid bare, naked and fast becoming a ruin. Martins takes time backwards and forwards with this symmetry. The new is lost, prematurely aged, in depictions of collapse and breakdown; balanced, literally, by the return of these uninhabited areas to the bare bones of possibility.

The image itself is built up of many parts, many components. The mirroring of architectural elements conveys this. Martins makes symmetry almost fearful in its insistence. An image of Dawsonville, Ga, a suburb of Atlanta, 'was conceived by making use of multiple flashes'. This build-up of elements not only reflects the proposal stage of an architectural cycle but also alludes to the moral understanding of a language that matches ambition that will collapse. Perhaps the structures have not all been conceived by architects, and are just as likely well-worn plans laid down by builders in a mock local genre. The mirroring from side to side enters the point where the idea matches a reality that marches backwards. But so much of this lends itself to a discussion of time. Is this as the artist found it when he arrived? Is he being true to the idea or moment? This is not a fast-changing situation involving the actions of others. Did the commission afford, allow, a real relationship with place? Were the visits fleeting?

How moralistic in terms of individual experience, how keen the insistence on physical interaction, on the authority of individual sight at the moment of seeing? Not exactly static, these 'ruins', which are in a perpetual state of undoing, are in retreat from expected use. Things do not change as if hit by a bomb here, and death is offstage. Misfortune is not made suddenly visible as in any natural disaster. Breakdown here is not an act of God: it happens. Going backwards in time, unravelling labour, re-tracing effort, the financial confidence that financed the construction was, in any case, a chimera.

Places often feel on the edge of somewhere, and the pictures cannot but help to allude to the loneliness of the expanded town, the hinterland of half-light, of waiting at the edge of a nature keen to encroach once again. The solitary wait on the edge of expansion reminds us of Edward Hopper's paintings of the colonial dream threatened by loneliness. The property slump, the housing crisis in other words, is not exactly natural, but capitalistic growth and collapse also has a cyclical nature.

There are no figures though, because none are there. Martins enters a world of metaphor so easily: it is there, that unreality, and you could never make it up. He need never make it up because it is there to see, to know, but not to grasp. A photo essay takes the general and yet the artist is able to grasp the strange, the fictitious, the uncanny, the uncontrolled; to display a desire for romantic fulfilment in artistic rather than personal terms, for the projection of self into another place, for camping it seems, precariously, in a space on the way out of possibility.

The story starts with a sense of expectation but soon runs into notions of honesty and dishonesty, truth and lies in photography. Round and round like an old record this plays, never going away. An artist might be thoroughly versed in the fact that image is pure construction, in part because it is the artist who constructs the image, but the newspaper editor, who also constructs the news, might have difficulty understanding the nature of that construction. The role of the photographer gets mixed up, in this particular case, with a sense of truth to story more normally

expected of a journalist. The artist loses out to the notion of the photographer as conveyor of truth. However manipulative they might be, a particular combination of words can be broken down and challenged, while the speed with which the overall effect of an image arrives at the eye means it functions in a very different way.

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2010

**Sacha Craddock** is an independent art critic and curator. Co-curator for Bloomberg Space and respected post-graduate tutor, she writes numerous articles and catalogue essays, gives public lectures and makes television appearances. Craddock serves in many consultative and official capacities; she is the Chair of New Contemporaries, chair of Braziers International Workshop, co-founder of Artschool Palestine and Public Art Advisor for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Recent publications include a section in 'Goodbye London, Radical Art and Politics in 1970s London', just been published in Germany, and a book on Angus Fairhurst. After studying painting at St Martins and then Chelsea School of Art, she started to write criticism in the Guardian Newspaper and then the Times. Craddock judges numerous art prizes, including the Turner Prize in 1999 the John Moores Painting Prize 2008.