

'Edgar I Nothing Am'

I could not be less interested in dams, power stations and hydro-electricity if I tried. So the subject matter of Edgar Martins' new work held next to no fascination for me. Now, a book of words can be interesting irrespective of its subject matter. Photographs, however, are so obviously or - as people in the business like to say - indexical linked to what they depict that it's hard to imagine how someone with any kind of canine phobia could enjoy a book of Elliot Erwitt's dog pictures.

I should also add that the kind of practice (that is to say, the kind of photography that involves using words like practice) that Martins is involved in tends to leave me cold. I like Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand. I'm far more interested in photographers who are just photographers than photographers who are artists.

All of which is a lengthy preamble to say that these pictures had to be truly exceptional to win me over. They did so, obviously, partly because they seemed to anticipate my reservations; as rugby players like to joke, they got their revenge in first. Pre-emptively chilly, they are - to revert to matters canine - the opposite of pictures of a much-loved puppy; they are thoroughly indifferent to how we respond to them at a human level. So much so that I began to wonder if they might best be considered from a non-human point of view. Could it be, in other words, that my indifference to the subject matter might not be simple personal prejudice but an impersonal, even ideal response engendered by the work itself? Wait and see.

Many of the apparently bright places photographed by Martins are, in reality, quite dark. During the necessarily long exposures required remedying this he darts around with a flash filling in bits that would otherwise be consigned to shadow. So somewhere in these pictures the photographer lurks invisibly. They are self-portraits in which the author-subject has been irradiated, vaporised or somehow *absorbed*. The effect is to make it seem as if the equipment on display has somehow photographed itself, recording what it has observed during the lengthy exposure time of its functioning.

One can trace photography's fascination with the aesthetic potential of machinery back at least to Charles Sheeler's modernist visions of the industrial technology of the 1920s. Martins'

immaculately post-modern sensibility creates scenarios of a retrospective future or futuristic glimpses of the past: the future as it might have been conceived fifty years ago or more. A similar elision manifests itself in a slightly different way: as time and technology have moved on so the gizmos in pictures 12 & 15 (web) have taken on the quaint aspect of driers in the laundry room of an out-of-date space station. More generally, the technology on display often seems to operate in some precisely delineated - but still uncertain realm - where mechanical meets digital so that there is a congruity between the subject matter and the photographer's technique (view camera, digital processing etc.).

The temporal compression is complicated by the way that, as is invariably the case in Martins' work, the views are entirely static. There is no narrative, either within an individual picture or the series as a whole. There is no before and no after – and (this is symptom and cause) there are no people. If the pictures had people in them one suspects they would resemble the figures who populate Maurice Broomfield's photographs of technologically advanced factories and plants from the 1950s: industrious, real-life equivalents of Dan Dare and his crew from *The Eagle*. One's suspicion remains resolutely unconfirmed. The lack of people - with their tell-tale haircuts and costumes – makes the pictures difficult to date. The people have been taken out of the pictures and, as a result, the pictures have been *taken out of time*. This is reinforced by the way that many of the places look too clean and neat to be functioning. Are they working or are they the contemporary equivalents of museum pieces (i.e. art installations) in a Turbine Hall? If they have fallen into disuse they have not crumbled into Tarkovsky-style dereliction (parts of whose *Stalker*, incidentally, were filmed in and around an abandoned hydro-electricity generating plant). One way to tell might be to listen as well as look. Is there a rumble or even a hum of activity? Impossible to say. But the pictures are tense with a silent power.

On this subject of absence – a trope in Martins' earlier work - there is not a single glimpse, here, of that frequently noisy, fast-moving and densely populated place, the outside world - only a token representative in the form of an etiolated tree in a pot [picture 32]. Hence, I think, the special allure of the picture of the rough-hewn tunnel (picture 7) with what might be a view of blue sea or sky at the end - except it's just a sky-coloured wall. We are hermetically sealed within the inner workings of this immense project.

In each of Martins' series there is often an image which serves as a diagram of the larger work of which it is a part. In this case picture 2 shows a grey corridor or stair well. Are we looking

up, down or along? It is as if the sets of the weightless interiors of *2001* had been redesigned by Escher and adapted for use as a prison so secure that no one can even get *in*.

I used the word 'immense' but the absence of people - in carceral terms, inmates - means that in spite of a frequent abundance of space there is sometimes no sense of scale. This is especially the case with the pictures of tools. In 1955 Walker Evans published a small portfolio of black-and-white photographs entitled 'Beauties of the Common Tool'. Devoid of context, there was no way of measuring the individual items but their familiarity meant that we had a pretty clear idea of the size of a wrench or a pair of scissors. In Martins' hands even a simple screw could be the size and weight of an artillery shell, specially designed and constructed to hold in place an inconceivably massive piece of equipment. There's no way of telling, and the purpose of many of these items is similarly impossible to fathom.

Which is why, I think, one seizes on two pictures in particular as though they comprise, as a pair, a kind of unreliable Rosetta stone or legend (in the sense that maps have a legend). The first is of a row of empty chairs (we know what they're for!), powerfully suggestive of the different physiques of the many people who sat on them - and therefore of measurement, size, scale [picture 31]. How did this assortment of chairs - some distinctly shabby and tired-looking in the midst of equipment which, in other images, shows little sign of wear and tear - come to be here? It is as if an entirely different, less efficient economy is petitioning for our attention, hoping we will grant it the visual equivalent of a hearing (a seeing). Apparently there were civilisations in the east that did without chairs; to western eyes this seems an almost inconceivable omission. To be human is to want to take the weight off one's feet. The other quality of being human is the need to spend a certain proportion of one's life waiting (for the above mentioned hearing). So this, evidently, is that most human - all too human! - Of places: a waiting room.

This picture alerts us to the abundance of chairs elsewhere, further emphasising the absence of people who might sit in them. It also provides a clue, albeit a potentially misleading one, to the meaning of the other crucial image, in the section devoted to tools [picture 19]. Try, for a moment, to share my own indifference to the subject matter of these photographs. Then take it a stage further and convert indifference to ignorance.

Imagine that you are an alien intelligence studying pictorial data from this strangely depopulated technological world. Wouldn't you assume that this was not a tool at all but a religious artefact? A representation either of a seated petitioner or worshipper - a waiter, as it was - or

even of some kind of God? Comparison with other priceless relics from earth - modernist sculptures and the “primitive” African carvings from which they were obviously derived - would confirm that we are in the realm of the strictly non-functional, previously the domain of religion, now more widely known as art.

And so we are led, like visual archaeologists from a distant future or planet, to the ultimate source of power, the sanctum at the heart of what was presumably a temple or some other kind of holy site [picture 52]. It is not clear exactly what is shown here - it is entirely non-representational - but this grey recess surrounded by rounded white and dull red rectangles might be some kind of installation or environment of the kind designed by James Turrell in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Such installations offered a spiritual experience that used light and required sophisticated technological back up for their operation. Reliant on electricity, such works are, effectively, tributes to the power on which they depend. Without further research and documentation any conclusions can only be tentative, but if we bear in mind the earlier suggestion about certain images serving as explanatory diagrams or maps then it seems likely that this series is about the generation not only of power, but also of meaning.

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