

IN THE BELLY OF BMW

Through the lens of Edgar Martins



Storage area for crash test dummies at BMW Group Research & Innovation Centre (RIC), Munich / Each dummy, weighing 54-106 kg, has an ID tag attached, indicating its weight, the configuration of the test sensors, the calibration status, and the test history.

After his tantalising project photographing the inner workings of the European Space Agency (see DAMN'42), Edgar Martins sashayed into BMW, eager to capture equally evocative views of scenes to which others aren't privy. Unlike rockets, though, the production of cars is repetitive and constant, which proved slightly tricky when it came to taking people-less pictures inside the plants. But it was absolutely achieved, and in the artist's own inimitable style.

ANNA SANSOM
PHOTOGRAPHS BY EDGAR MARTINS



An ambience of silent efficiency permeates Edgar Martins' new photo series on BMW plants and research & development centres in and around Munich. Taken during production breaks, the body of work "surveys the fabrication, tooling, and assembly of the modern-era automobile vehicle", says Martins. However, fully assembled cars are conspicuously absent, as are the members of BMW's workforce. Rather, the photographs home in on wind tunnels, crash centre dummies, and body and paint shops where car parts are assembled and painted. The high-tempo, technological sites, emblematic of Germany's automobile industry, appear frozen in time. Indeed, the series is aptly titled 0:00.00. "It references a digital clock – you could either see it as time suspended or time to resume operations", says Martins. "I was interested in photographing what would otherwise be a highly productive and dynamic environment, when it's completely still."

Martins, 38, has a longstanding fascination with technology, machines, and the automated process. Born to Portuguese parents who moved to Macau when he was three, he grew up during China's in-

dustrialisation. "I've always been around places in perpetual change, and this has impacted on my life and work", he explains. At 18, he moved to London, where he completed an MA in Photography and Fine Art at the Royal College of Art. His previous series focused on Portuguese hydropower stations and on the European Space Agency (ESA), which has private aerospace sub-contractors on the outskirts of Munich. "During the ESA project, I knew that I would end up spending a lot of time in Munich, so I felt I could reconcile this and the BMW project", Martins says, adding that he chose BMW's Munich plant because of its historical relevance.

Aware of BMW's history in working with artists (over the last 40 years, the company has commissioned Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Alexander Calder, and Jeff Koons, among others, to design cars), he was hopeful that his independent proposal would be accepted. BMW authorised him to make several research trips and granted him unprecedented access to photograph its premises. A member of staff was allocated to accompany him on shoots, in

Paint shop, BMW Group Plant Munich | This is one of several lines where automated painting robots and technicians paint all surfaces of a car body.



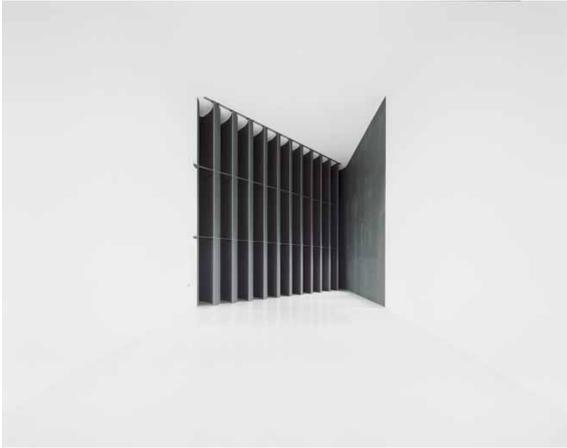
case anybody became suspicious about him taking pictures. "Car production is shrouded in secrecy, so some conditions are imposed", informs Martins.

"There were instances when I was photographing the assembly lines before new models were released. But BMW knew that my project would be launched two years later, and therefore I was allowed to photograph some of those cars." The main issue to resolve was when to shoot such that BMW's employees would be out of the frame. "Luckily, my first visit coincided with the seasonal break in production. The covers over the cars and the spaces in the assembly line gave me the idea of experimenting with production pauses. So we spent a lot of time finding locations and waiting for 30-minute-long shift breaks in order to take pictures." For certain images, such as those of the presses, advance coordination was necessary. "The presses are continuously bearing down on the metal [of a car body], which creates a terrible amount of vibration; if you were to use a long exposure, the picture would end up completely blurry. So we arranged specific times when BMW would be able to temporarily halt the presses."

The 18-month-long project culminated in a body of images characterised by precision and symmetry, sometimes to the point of abstraction. Martins attributes this formalistic, visual language to the ethos of the spaces. "These places are quite abstract because they're very geometrical and linear", he explains. He photographed at three different locations: BMW's main plant in Munich, its research and development centre called the FIZ – where cars are tested prior to production, and a crash-test centre in the nearby town of Aschheim. The crash test dummies, according to Martins, have around 200 embedded sensors, in order to give accurate readings as to what would happen if a certain body part were hit in a crash. Another crash-test image shows five figures in the middle of a large space. It transpires that these are made of sound blocks printed with pictures of people. Martins also ventured into the big electromagnetic chamber (recognisable by the white, spiky elements on the walls), where tests are carried out on a vehicle's electric components.

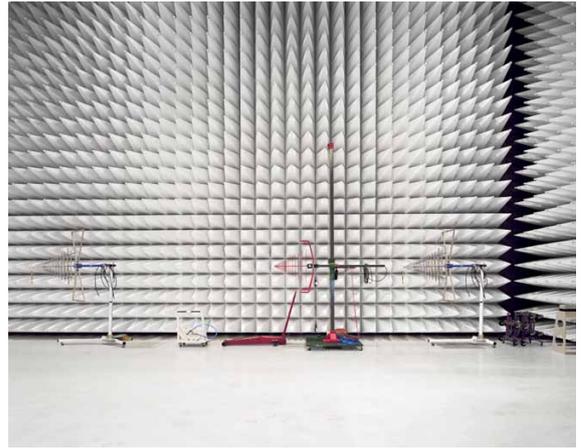
Martins admits to being "in awe" of the technological spaces he has visited. But he adds, "You're always

Crash test centre, one of BMW's two such centres in Aschheim (just north of Munich) specialised in rollover tests



Wind tunnel test centre at the FIZ / This section is where the air is redirected from the large turbine to the test area, recreating the airflow pattern in a driving vehicle.

View of a stamping system for the design and form of BMW and MINI car bodies, at the tools and dies facility, BMW Group Plant Munich



Robots covered in blue cloth apply a protective spray coating to car underbodies at the paint shop, BMW Group Plant Munich

EMC (Electromagnetic Compatibility) test centre at the FIZ, where a vehicle's electric components are tested



Press shop, BMW Group Plant Munich / Around 250 tonnes of steel are formed into sheet metal components for car bodies on a daily basis, totalling 200,000 parts per day.

wrestling with ideas about the impact of technology on our individual and social consciousness. How technology influences us and how we influence it is something that will always define us as human beings. The car is seen [in my project] both as a catalyst and a product of market economies but also as a metaphor for the world of mobility, flux, and flow that we live in, a symbol of the wider dreams and aspirations we attach to technological development." Now, however, Martins is making a radical rupture in his work by moving into a totally different domain. His latest project is concerned with the contradictions and problems inherent in the conceptualisation, definition, and representation of death, particularly violent death (namely, suicide), which involves collaborating with the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences in Portugal. "I wanted to move onto something a lot more personal, because I think I've really made my peace with this theme of technology", he muses. <

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