

Driving technology

Edgar Martins has managed to combine the rigidity of machines with the lyricism of poetry. He spoke to Amy Davies about his project

You won 2nd place in the Professional Architecture category at the Sony World Photography Awards 2018. Tell us about the project.

The title of my project 'The Poetic Impossibility to Manage the Machine' was adapted from the title of the series I produced with the European Space Agency. It is part of an overarching, seven-year-long

project that engaged with environments as varied as hydropower plants, space facilities and car factories.

The projects go beyond mere documentation. For example, the one I produced with BMW at surface value surveys the fabrication, tooling and assembly of the modern day car, but it is much more than this. It is conceived around the

premise of 'slowing down time.' When I approached BMW, I asked them if we could stop production in order to make the relevant images. Much to my surprise they agreed, so the project was produced during enforced/scheduled production breaks. Car factories are the apotheosis of capitalism and mobility.

So I guess the project highlights a point of resistance: resistance to the world of flux and flow that we live in.

Is it difficult to gain access to the places in this series?



Edgar's work at the BMW factory was based on the premise of 'slowing down time'



The paint shop at the BMW Group Plant in Munich, Germany

Access is key – and it's not straightforward. In most cases it took months of research, meetings and negotiations before I could access these locations. But even when I was granted access by the relevant organisation's HQ, daily negotiation was required at a grass-roots level to get into the areas I wanted to shoot. Many of the people I engaged with were unfamiliar with my way of working and my goals and objectives. So I had to explain why I needed to be inside the clean rooms or at a touching distance from a multi-million-pound spacecraft.

What appeals to you about industrial photography?

Over the past decade, my artistic practice has been increasingly rooted in what I call 'hard-to-access environments'. I'm interested in the techniques of artistic

expression these collaborations activate and in the dialogue they provoke. My quest to understand these sorts of groundbreaking collaborations with organisations such as EDP Eneugas de Portugal, UK Metropolitan Police Service, The European Space Agency, BMW and more.

What are the obstacles in this kind of photography?

The main challenge is to manage expectations and quickly assimilate the operational culture of the institution with which one is collaborating. There is also a need to communicate clearly and clarify at each stage of the process the vicissitudes of the



A hydroelectric plant takes on a surreal kind of beauty



Edgar's minimalist approach creates bold, impactful images

artistic process so one can get people on board, while also maintaining a certain critical distance from the organisation itself (so the project isn't seen as a PR exercise for the company in question).

Edgar Martins was born in Portugal, grew up in Mexico, and moved to the UK in 1996 where he studied for a BA in Photography and MA in Fine Art in London. He has been exhibited in dozens of galleries, while several books of his work have been published. See more at edgarmartins.com

What would be your dream assignment?

I don't know if I have a dream assignment. But if someone came to me and said we will help you organise, fund and facilitate a shoot anywhere of your choice, the explorer in me would probably say the Moon, Mars or in the extreme depths of the ocean.

What gear do you use?

Primarily a 4x5m and 8x10m Toyo Field Camera (analogue).

What made you decide to enter the SWPA 2018 with this project?

I felt I had a strong selection of material at my disposal, so I decided to enter the awards. I was encouraged that the judges felt the same way. These sorts of accolades and awards bring artists work to the consciousness of audiences who perhaps we would not ordinarily be able to reach. In this sense it's advantageous to win awards. Given that so much of what we do is a one-way dialogue with an audience, I think it's important to get feedback once in a while, whether it be positive feedback or constructive criticism. How else does one's work mature? How else can we challenge ourselves and do better?

What's next for you?

I'm working on a project with Grain [the arts organisation] in Birmingham. Using as a starting point a collaboration with HMP Birmingham (the largest, privately run, category B prison in the Midlands, UK), its inmates, and their relatives, my new work uses the social context of incarceration to explore the philosophical concept of absence and address a consideration of the status of the photograph when questions of visibility and documentation intersect.

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