

Edgar Martins

What Photography has in Common with an Empty Vase

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For Martins “we need to rethink the set of practices, relationships and structures with which we look and relate to photographs”. For this rethinking he skews photography away from a preoccupation with the referent. The work still comes from experience and engagement with inmates and their families, it is not detached from the real. But he simply does not hold faith in the power of the photograph as document. Instead we move from the literal to the figural. Or rather he uses the literal figuratively, for all photographs are in many respects literal. And with this comes a certain freedom with images, a lack of restraint borne out through the sheer plenitude and abundance of images and image types he deploys. Our relation to photography has been very much determined by its content: a concern with what is in the picture and how what is in the picture has been represented. In many respects Martins frees us from this responsibility: his use of all kinds of photography liberates us from the usual strictures with which we tend to approach the photograph— documentary especially can be a very sober form— and in doing so extends the differing potentialities and possibilities that photographs (still) have to engage and move us.

(Mark Durden, *Against Documentary* in *What Photography & Incarceration have in Common with an Empty Vase*, The Moth House, 2019)

What Photography has in Common with an Empty Vase is a multifaceted body of work developed from a collaboration with Grain Projects and HM Prison Birmingham (the largest, category B prison in the Midlands, UK), its inmates, their families as well as a myriad of other local organisations and individuals.

Using the social context of incarceration as a starting point, Martins explores the philosophical concept of absence, and addresses a broader consideration of the status of the photograph when questions of visibility, ethics, aesthetics and documentation intersect.

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By productively articulating image and text, new and historical photography, evidence and fiction, Martins' work proposes to scrutinise how one deals with the absence of a loved one, brought on by enforced separation. From an ontological perspective it seeks answers to the following questions: how does one represent a subject that eludes visualization, that is absent or hidden from view? How can documentary photography, in an era of fake news, best acknowledge the imaginative and fictional dimension of our relation to photographs?

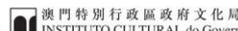
By giving a voice to inmates and their families and addressing prison as a set of social relations rather than a mere physical space, Martins' work proposes to rethink and counter the sort of imagery normally associated with incarceration.

The project thus wilfully circumvents images whose sole purpose, Martins argues, is to confirm the already held opinions within dominant ideology about crime & punishment: violence, drugs, criminality, race – an approach that only serves to reinforce the act of photographing and photography itself as apotropaic devices.

This work marks a significant transition in Martins' creative trajectory, signalling a growing inclination towards a broader, more hybrid and interdisciplinary perspective of images.



GRAIN



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EDGAR MARTINS was born in Évora (Portugal) but grew up in Macau (China), where he published his first novel entitled “Mãe deixa-me fazer o pino”. In 1996 he moved to the UK, where he completed a BA in Photography and Social Sciences at the University of the Arts, as well as an MA in Photography Fine Art at the Royal College of Art (London).

His work is represented internationally in several high-profile collections, such as those of the V&A (London), the National Media Museum (Bradford, UK), RIBA (London), the Dallas Museum of Art (USA); Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian/Modern Art Centre (Lisbon), Fundação EDP (Lisbon), Fondation Carmignac (Paris), MAST (Italy), amongst others.

His first book—Black Holes & Other Inconsistencies—was awarded the Thames & Hudson and RCA Society Book Art Prize. A selection of images from this book was also awarded The Jerwood Photography Award in 2003.

Between 2002 and 2018 Martins published 15 separate monographs, which were also received with critical acclaim. These works were exhibited internationally at institutions such as PS1 MoMA (New York), MOPA (San Diego, USA), MACRO (Rome), Laumeier Sculpture Park (St. Louis, USA), Centro Cultural de Belém (Lisbon), Centro de Arte Moderna de Bragança (Bragança, Portugal), Centro Internacional de Arte José de Guimarães (Guimarães, Portugal), Museu do Oriente (Lisbon), Centro de Arte Moderna (Lisbon), MAAT (Lisbon), CIAJG (Guimarães, Portugal), Centro Cultural Hélio Oiticica (Rio de Janeiro), The New Art Gallery Walsall (Walsall, UK), PM Gallery & House (London), The Gallery of Photography (Dublin), Ffotogallery (Penarth, Wales), The Wolverhampton Art Gallery & Museum (UK), Open Eye Gallery (Liverpool), among many others.

In 2010 the Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian (Paris) hosted Edgar Martins' first retrospective exhibition. Edgar Martins was the recipient of the inaugural New York Photography Award (Fine Art category, May 2008), the BES Photo Prize (Portugal, 2009), the SONY World Photography Award (Landscape category, 2009, Still-Life Category, 2018, Architecture Category, 2018), 1st prize in the Fine Art— Abstract category of the 2010 International Photography Awards and nominated for the Prix Pictet 2009. Edgar Martins was selected to represent Macau (China) at the 54th Venice Biennale.

Edgar Martins works and lives in the UK.

