

PRINT

Text by Cristian Nae

The photographs presented in the PRINT exhibition belong to a broader approach of artistic research on the technological and cultural history of printing, initiated and developed by Matei Bejenaru during 2020-2021. The cultural archeology and material history project proposed by the artist combines the recovery of forms of technological knowledge specific to industrial modernity with the analysis of the way the analog photography production process conditions both the visual culture and the material culture of the present. He analyzes the materialness of photographs, their existence as cultural objects whose social circulation is facilitated and conditioned by the technological potential and limitations of the way they were produced, as well as the frailty of memory, by exploring the contrast between perishability and persistence of photographic images transposed on paper. Given the social proliferation of photographs as digitally mediated information, analog photography influences the ways in which we store information, interpret the recent past and (re)construct the collective memory. The artist investigated the specifics of the analog photography printing process, both by the *gelatin silver print* technique and the *platinum palladium* technique, developed in the 19th century and gradually abandoned after the first decades of the 20th century.

Taken at the MAE foundry in Iași, one of the last cast iron foundries in Romania, these photographs are more than mere documentary traces of a form of industrial manufacturing less and less common in today's post-industrial society. They are not just remnants of an almost extinct form of life and social organization, although these qualities and meanings, which trigger a sociological and anthropological interest in viewers, are not entirely indifferent to the artist's intentions and interests. Empathetically presenting the difficulty of industrial work in compositions that evoke the aesthetic vocabulary of modernist abstraction and socialist realism, the artist shifts the emphasis from the subject of representation to the research on the limitations and potentialities of the photographic medium.

The artist focuses in particular on the manufacturing process of the element representing the end-point of the production chain specific to analog photography: the print. Produced in various shapes, sizes, volumes, textures, tones and chromatic assemblies, the photographic objects maintain a distant dialogue not only with painting as an art, but also with sculpture. The surface of the photographs produced by Matei Bejenaru bears almost unnoticeable layers of emulsions, chemical materials and precious metals that, in contact with the photosensitive paper, add texture to the images the way a sculpture does. The isomorphism between the subject of representation (the iron dust present in the foundry) and the manufacturing process of the photographic objects is preserved throughout the entire series of images exhibited, emphasizing the metal and mineral materiality of the photographic surface.

Placing the artist's labor in close vicinity to that of an industrial worker, Matei Bejenaru ennobles both forms of work. The audience is invited to attend the laboratory of artistic production through a slide show, which doubles the gaze cast on the intimacy of industrial praxis in some of the images on display. The museum-type presentation device, carefully constructed for each image, monumentalizes the document, which in turn records

the massive silent presence of the almost abandoned industrial equipment. The exhibition thus evokes a forgotten industrial imaginary, which multiplies the forms and meanings of modernity. After all, both forms of material practice - the raw exploitation of ferrous material and analog photography - though belonging to different social spheres, come from the horizon of the same era, determined by similar forms of technological production.

The volumetry of the photographic objects is highlighted by the projection device, which extends, in space, the dialectic between opacity and transparency present at the level of the photographs. The sculptural presentation of the photographic images draws attention not only to the texture, volume, size and opacity of photos, but also to the intrinsic value of these objects, due to both the nobility of materials used in their composition (platinum, palladium, silver) and the unmatched quality and resilience of the image obtained through the use of platinum and palladium.