Pavel Mára
Between Abstraction and Description

Abstract: This presentation of works by the Czech photographer and teacher Pavel Mára (b. 1951) is based on a selection of four scholarly articles that were written about him (and are published here in their entirety or in part). Together with his biographical information and a brief overview of his exhibitions at home and abroad, the magazine provides information about Mára’s activity as a creative photographer. The articles, by Anna Fárová (1989), Tomáš Pospích (2012), Antonín Dufek (2015), and Radana Ulverová (2017), are arranged chronologically. They offer interpretations of his key series, which move between description and abstraction, which he began in the 1980s and has occasionally returned to in variations. The articles are accompanied by more than forty photographs, in black-and-white and in color, mostly of which were made as triptychs. They provide a cross-section of the individual series, Anna Fárová, Tomáš Pospích, Antonín Dufek, and Radana Ulverová.

Pavel Mára: Photographs, 1988–89
Leading Czech commentators on fine arts and aesthetics write about the photographer Pavel Mára. They are attracted by his work, which, rather than being solely photography, is on the boundary of fine arts and what fine arts are concerned with. With his work, Mára raises new questions about abstract photography and its link to objective reality. His work consists of pictorial messages, often highly coded, in which the subject matter fades away, leaving only volumes, tones, and signs. We know that photography is tied to reality, and if Mára’s pictures often seem not to depict anything and could be called abstract, they are still essentially concerned with their subject matter, though the latter may be concealed by a complicated creative process. The photographer’s striving for excellence and his pedantic perfectionism lead him to the verge of unintelligibility, as in his Mechanical Still Lifes from the early 1980s. Though underpinned by reality, they have extracted the essence of shape, line, and colour. The titles also correspond to the nature of mechanical contemporary civilization: Signals, Machines, Toys, Sheet Metal, though we sense a subtle vibration and concealed sensitivity behind the rigorously technical execution and the minimum of remaining signs. The layering of surfaces, the choice of colours, bringing thoughts and ideas to the verge of incommunicability make this a situation pregnant with anxious brilliance, gradually revealing far more than is obvious at first sight. Shapes have not been flattened out; they are alive in the vibration of structures and surfaces. The compositions are constantly renewed in new relations, symmetric and asymmetric. By losing their true scale, children’s building blocks evoke a new notion of monumentality and recollections of unknown monuments.

Can photography be truly abstract if it works with its own means of expression and reality? After all, it is continuously tied to the subject matter, and simply working with it can provide the experience of it being non-figurative. A change in scale, an unusual angle of view, taking an object out of its context, a choice of artificial colours, can all help to move photography beyond the bounds of reality and create a new, parallel world. It is true that Mára’s photographs speak to us in the language of the modern technical age, though not only by means of dependence on mechanical objects. That modernity actually consists in Mára’s smoothness of vision, in which the eye glides over the photograph as if over the highly polished body of a car or the most luxurious imported wrapping paper. Mára the photographer is elegant, and seems exotic in the midst of our everyday life. While we stagger around in feelings of past centuries, which are supported by everything around us, he seems like a visitor from another land on his way towards another era. He thus takes himself out of context, and becomes abstract by his stance, his way of thinking, and his perception of the visible. At times he seems to be somewhere between art and utility. It is easy to imagine how well his photographs could be used, but it is equally clear how decorative they are, something between a sophisticated work of art and an object of everyday use.

Anna Fárová (1989)

Pavel Mára: Usually Less
Pavel Mára graduated twice from the Film and Television School of Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU), Prague, in the 1970s, having been trained as a director of photography and then as a photographer. He has been teaching at the Institute of Creative Photography, Silesian University, Opava, for more than fifteen years. And yet, despite his being linked with such important photographic institutions, his work has taken place on the strange margins of the Czech scene. Since the 1970s, he has applied strategies and approaches from the world of advertising photography and has aroused great interest with his experiments with technology, large formats, and with what was then the exceptional use of colour photography, something that almost never appeared outside the world of advertising. He has not shied away from the concreteness of colour or the technical difficulties connected with its use.

At a time when the most popular exhibition format for photographs was 30 × 40 cm paper, he was one of the few to follow the example of Čestmír Krátký and Jan Svoboda and use the largest format photographic paper available. Like these two artists, he elevated the photographic print to the status of a special artifact, and original photographs thereby once and for all became unique, irreplaceable by reproductions, and had to be seen in the studio or gallery in order to appreciate their true size and quality. From there, it was but a short step to the transition into space, to reliefs and sculptures made of photographs on zinc sheet metal (for example, Head of 1. B., 1983) that almost never appeared outside the world of advertising. He has not shied away from the concreteness of colour or the technical difficulties connected with its use.

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continuous even when he seems to have moved to completely different themes, for example, from nudes to machines, construction sets and signs, and from the human face to the digital image. The black-and-white photographs of the Bodies series (1994) and the subsequent seriographs, zinc and glass reliefs, and paintings on transparent film in the Torsos series (1983–85) significantly shaped the style of their spatial ‘graphism’. By filtering out details and cut-outs, he reduced human torsos to a few basic shapes and lines. In the next large series, Mechanical Still Lifes (1976–84), he was discovering the artistic values of various metal and plastic objects. In their depiction, he achieved almost abstract geometric forms by radical reduction to elemental lines, surfaces, colours, and gleams. In the early 1980s, Mára returned to human figures, the human body. This interest resulted mainly in the Figures series, which was gradually developed in several sets of photographs between 1986 and 1990: Portraits (1988–89), Vails (1989) and Madonnas ‘90. His approach to the body, matter-of-fact and free of eroticism, culminates here in studies working with backlighting and motion blur, in references to op art (Figures ‘83), and increasingly larger formats, until he gradually came to three-dimensional objects and instalations. In the early 1990s, a striking shift occurred in Mára’s work in the Triptychs series (1990–93). Here, he again not only pushes the boundaries of the huge formats of his work, but also, indeed mainly, makes photography a conceptual art. As his element of expression, he transfers the traditional principle of balancing vertical lines (which is used in the technical photography of architecture) to the genres of the nude and the portrait. The larger-than-life-size figures and faces, photographed from below, straight on, and from above, are juxtaposed, while maintaining the parallelism of the verticals. The consistently rational construct and the minimal shift in three sequences causes an unusually suggestive shift in psychological expression and thus forms a meaning which originates not in the space of the photographic surfaces but in the narrow gap between the sequences. The rational construct is also evident in the second of Mára’s distinctive series from the 1990s, Mechanical Corpus (1997), which refers, and not only by its title to the depiction of minimalist objective motifs in Mechanical Still Lifes. Like his earlier still lifes, Triptychs and Mechanical Corpus from the 1990s are, among other things, an interesting contribution to thinking about colour photography. Colour is not borne by the subject matter but by light, and it directly serves to create expression. In contrast to his previous works, Mára, manipulating colour in his own special way, made Madonnas ‘99 in the late 1990s, a series of half-figures of naked female bodies, which, mainly in their gestures, make reference to the Virgin Mary. Applying a somewhat cool and detached ‘technician’ treatment, he was clearly not concerned with the spiritual charge of this Christian theme but rather with the contexts of current perceptions of woman.

Mára’s new works, starting with the breakthrough Space in Space series (2002), also have their origins in the ideas of the preceding years. It is not only that here Mára has left the studio after many years, and concrete space appears in his photographs, but it is also, indeed mainly, that he has begun to explore the technology of digital photography, making it the second parallel theme of his work as he had previously done with analogue photography. In this connection, Lucia Lendelová Filarová has written about the pixelated web of the digital image that the photographer chose to appear and about Mára’s ability to make the medium itself take over and transform the theme. In the following years, Mára created several series, in which he varied and further developed his earlier technological and visual experiments. The titles of the series, Black Corpus: Family (2000), Triptychs (2005–06), Memory (2009), and Negative Heads (2010–11), attest to this tendency in which his experience with technological and specifically photographic innovations, colour, and the large format all comes together and is capitalized upon. He has in this way created an extensive multilayered system of allusions to his earlier work.

Tomáš Pospích (2012)
of its appearance, and the negative image also is abstract. Though it is mysteriously inscribed in the image, the definiteness of the depicted person will not appear until the positive image is made from the negative print or enlargement. Nevertheless, in Mára’s treatment, the series has a certain range in terms of the definiteness of the appearance. Statue-like heads appeal to the viewer’s visual repertoire, and are able to evoke, for example, the portrayal of the Buddha, a death mask, a classical Greek statue. But some of them also have the indications of facial expressions that belong only to the living – for example, a smile; when they are perceived, the whole series comes to life. The negative images, moreover, radiate light, thereby linking them to the universe and, for many people, also linking them to the existence of the spiritual world. They are something like pre-pictures, apparitions, whose presence,Their existence as the search for the meaning of being an individual in society and the universe. It is not a search that leads to an achievable aim; rather it is a troubled journey, the point of which is the journey itself. In Mára’s conception, it is a certain struggle with heroic features. Although highly aestheticized, his pictures represent an unsettling counterpart to the complacent existence of consumer mass society.

Antonín Dufák (2015)

MATER
The semantic status of photographs has been one of the most disputed topics ever since Charles Sanders Peirce called them icons, indexes, and symbols. How, then, in this connection, should one interpret Pavel Mára’s photographic series, Mater, six monumental canvases on which the artist has portrayed, larger-than-life, his mother as she currently appears?

The face has from time immemorial been a central subject of social attention and human interaction. It express emotions, but facial features also say something, together with facial expressions, about a wide range of social and psychological aspects. In Mater, great details of the face, stripped of its volume by showing only a section, evoke sovereign intimacy – not only between the artist and the sitter, but also between the son and the archetypal mother.

Mára has conceived the series as two complementary triptychs. In comparison with his colour portraits of young girls from the Faces set (2012-14), which in their reversed tonality radiate light (like Madonnas ‘99, exhibited at Expo 2000, in Hanover), these are mercilessly revealing black-and-white pictures of a mother. The eyes are lacklustre, the skin wrinkled, the lips closed tightly, as if she were looking at us from the depths of time. Yet we have already seen this naturalistic mode of depiction in Mára’s work: recall, in particular, his large-format Triptychs of K. M. (1992); the ‘topographic’ approach to a live model, however, also appears in the thematically identical ‘time-lapse’ series Family: Triptychs (1991-2010). Counterpoint is, for that matter, characteristic of Pavel Mára. The oscillation between realism and abstraction, negative and positive, and colour and black-and-white is present in all his work.

Taking photographs with a large-format camera from several angles of view is a reflection of the artist’s training in cinematography. Yet his photographs do not tell a story. They communicate by means of the image which, when reproduced, results in something like a synonymic set. The shifting of the horizontal and vertical lines, typical of architectural photography, is something Mára was applying to his photographs of people even before the wave of conceptual photography represented by Bernd and Hilla Becher had reached Bohemia. Nevertheless, there are many correlations here: Mára’s Triptychs from 1990-92, and also his most recent series, Mater (2016), are as descriptive and technically precise as the Bechers’ black-and-white photos of industrial buildings and landscapes, arranged in thematic series.

Radana Ulverová (2017)
Body I (Bodies), 1969

Body II (Bodies), 1969
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Black Cylinder (Mechanical Still Lifes, Machines), 1978

Construction Set VI (Mechanical Still Lifes, Toys), 1981
Corpus (Corpuscles), diptych, 1988
V. P. – Viktor Provence I, II (Portraits), 1989
Veil (Veil), 1989

Imago III (Imago), 1990

Photographers Na Chmelnici, group exhibition, Junior klub Na Chmelnici, Prague, 1989
Triptych of Eve I (Triptychs), 1990

Triptych of K. M. (Triptychs), 1992

Funke's Kolín photo festival, group exhibition, Castle Brewery, Kolín, 1993
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Embracing II (Mechanical Corpuses), 1997

Embracing IV (Mechanical Corpuses), 1997

Corpuses and Figures, solo exhibition, Kolín synagogue, Kolín, 1998
Between Abstraction and Description
Memory XVI (Memory), 2009

Memory, solo exhibition, Kotelna Karlin Gallery, Prague, 2010
Son, Mikoláš, (Family: Triptychs), 1991, 2011

Mum (Family: Triptychs), 1991, 2011

The Intimate Circle in Contemporary Czech Photography, group exhibition, City Gallery Prague, Municipal Library, Prague, 2013
Pavel Mára
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Face I (Faces), 2012

Face II (Faces), 2014

Faces, solo exhibition, New Lviv Synagogue at Palacký, Prague, 2015
Mater I–VI (Mater), 2016

Mater, solo exhibition, Festival Fovember, Orthodox synagogue, Košice, 2016
In his work, the photographer Pavel Mára is concerned mainly with the portrait and the nude. His realistic, often even ‘descriptive’, records of human figures and faces (including Triptychs and Mater) are a certain counterpart to his abstractly conceived series like Mechanical Corpuses, and Memory. His oeuvre includes more than thirty solo exhibitions and has participated in many prestigious group shows of Czech photography, both at home and abroad. At present, he teaches at the Institute of Creative Photography at Silesian University, Opava. He lives in Prague.

Training
1971-77 The Cinematic and Television Image, the Film and Television Academy of the Performing Arts (FAMU), Prague.
1977-80 Art Photography, FAMU, Prague.

Exhibitions (a selection)
2017 At First Sight. A selection of Czech photography from the 20th and 21st centuries / The Intimate Circle in Contemporary Czech Photography. Muzeum Slásky Opolskiego, Opole
2016 Pavel Mára: Mater. Festival Fovember, Synagóga, Košice
2015 Pavel Mára: Retrospektiva, Staroměstská radnice v Praze, Křižová chodba a Rytířský sál, Praha.

1999 Czech Photography of the 1990s. Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago
2000 Pavel Mára: Mechanical Corpuses, The Eli Lemberger Museum of Photography (Czech Photography in the 20th Century), Tel-Hai Industrial Park
1999 Czech Photography of the 1990s, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago
1997-98 Pavel Mára: Obyčajné mení / Usually Less, Dom umenia (Mesiac fotografie), Bratislava.
2010 Pavel Mára: Memory, Kotěína Karlin Gallery, Praha
2004 Pavel Mára: Obyčajné mení / Usually Less, Castello di Rivoli, Turin
2009 Pavel Mára: Mechanical Corpuses, The Eli Lemberger Museum of Photography (Czech Photography in the 20th Century), Tel-Hai Industrial Park
1996 Pavel Mára: Le corps objet, Centre tchèque (Photo Saint-Germain-des-Prés), Paris
1992 What’s New: Prague, Contemporary Photography from Czechoslovakia, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.
2000 Pavel Mára: Retrospektiva. Kotelna Photo, Žilina
2015 Pavel Mára: Mater. Festival Fovember, Synagóga, Košice
2013 Pavel Mára: Obyčajné mení / Usually Less, Castello di Rivoli, Turin
Articles and books about the artist (a selection)


Collections holding his works (a selection)

Galerie hlavního města Prahy
Galerie Municipale du Château-d’Eau, Toulouse
Galerie umění Karlovy Vary
Moravská galerie v Brně
Museum Ludwig, Köln
Muzeum umění Olomouc
Národní galerie v Praze
The Eli Lemberger Museum of Photography, Tel-Hai Industrial Park
Uměleckoprůmyslové muzeum v Praze

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