

Ruhrgebiet by Ulrich Mack

Photographic reproduction in books has vastly improved since the early letterpress or offset printing. Gravure had its richness and as duotone improved, the scale of grays has been increasing steadily leading into tritone plates and ever finer screening technologies. The gold standard of 600 line screen and quadtone printing in the Lodima Press books was the farthest I have seen the process achieve to mimic even the large format plates from Nicholas Nixon's 8X10. Oddly, as photographic reproductions have improved to this point there is another movement which is leading in the opposite direction with more work simply existing on-line at a screen resolution of 72 dpi or in poorly printed Blurb books and the like.

The idiosyncrasies of cheaper printing can be a joy. The uneven and dusty callo-type plates of Atget's first book *Photographe de Paris* has its charm for me because they feel touched by the pair of hands that made them and since Atget considered himself to be a craftsman rather than an artist. so for me it is a more fitting match more than the beautifully done recent books of his work. Not every book needs a 600 line screen or a quadtone plate to be felt by the viewer but undoubtedly those improvements seduce with their clarity and exquisite tonal range.

A new printing system developed by Dieter Kirchner, High Definition Skia Photography, is a process which has gone even further to define a longer visible range of tone and deeper black range in ink on paper to create the most natural three dimensionality to date. The German publisher Moser Verlag in Munich has just released *Ruhrgebiet* from the photographer Ulrich Mack which was one of the titles that came home with me from the Arles festival last month.

In the autumn of 1959, Ulrich Mack left Hamburg with two Leicas and films and stayed in the region between the rivers Ruhr and Emscher for a couple weeks and was drawn to describing the industrial architecture which dominated the landscape.

Making images just for himself and without plans for publication, he explored the hard edges of factories and coal mining plants as their structures contrasted with the oft heavy gray sky. The division between sky and ground is disrupted by these beautiful monstrosities which seem to be absorbing the light and gathering it like dust on every surface – the dampness from rain providing some necessary highlights.

Mack's vision attempts an objectivity which would later be played to the umpteenth degree by the Becher's and their students but Mack's photographs hold a balance between a metaphoric hellish cast and underlying joy in his depiction of this wasteland of productivity. Often climbing among the structures, he looks out from elevated vantage points and fills his frames making complicated compositions full tension between bending forms and hard right angles. Highways split the frame and although human forms are not prevalent, their cars break the stillness and announce their presence. If it weren't for their inclusion, the smoke stacks and gigantic spinning wheels of the mining operations would seem to be performing under their own will.

The plates in Ruhrgebiet were created through the aforementioned Skia High definition printing and being this is 35 millimeter negatives and not large format, one could question the match of such a high quality process used for the presentation of a somewhat rough medium. In my mind, the match is necessary as the results show what is little respected from contemporary photographers of what that tiny format can achieve. His working with small format emphasizes the atmosphere of the subject as the sense of grain and grit, although very fine, is so pleasing to survey.

The plates in this large format book are almost 16 x 20 in size and the paper has the same feel as double-weight fiber printing paper. This choice suits the work wonderfully. With vellum interleaving paper between each print, it feels more like a portfolio of bound prints than a traditional photographic book. The ability to become

engulfed by the images set apart from the book's wide margins deepens the sense of richness and tone.

All plates are oriented to the vertical so manipulation of Ruhrgebiet is a bit cumbersome but with it lying flat there are few books which I have that seduce my attention on such a grand scale. One minor but important criticism is that this book, partly due to its scale, is a delicate object. The binding is sound but the slipcase due to its surprisingly weak design is too fragile to sustain the weight and size of the book. The contemporary approach of the title design to the cover and binding construction – albeit delicate – keeps this work from the ghetto of boring and uninspired presentation of which this work could have easily been subjected.

With its beauty comes a price – a very high price of 500 euros. The printing, although an achievement, may make a book like this impractical. It is certainly work that merits such a treatment but being that the process is 4 or 5 times as expensive to produce as a regular book will certainly limit its access to many wanting to see a copy. This is a collector's item of a very limited quantity, 400 copies, each is signed and numbered by the photographer.

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