

Mathieu Pernot

practices an atypical and alternative approach to photography. The discourse created by his projects incorporates elements from documentary photography and archival research (documents) that are given the same treatment as his own works, blending in with the latter and creating a new whole (monuments). The result of this process presents us with a vision of existence far removed from univocal or immutable interpretations. Pernot addresses his work with rigour, using the medium of photography to explore issues that are recurrently interwoven in his production: life on the “margins”; the stories of people on the periphery of society (Gypsies, displaced persons or migrants).

In addition to the themes that run through his series and make up this highly singular universe, Mathieu Pernot reflects on the role of photography as an artistic medium, on its use and function. This complexity of issues and images is transferred to the exhibition space in presentations in which his photographs coexist with archival material. This is a conscious and deliberate choice on the part of the artist, who creates multiple, ever-changing connections that punctuate his work through time and space.

The exhibition *Document/Monument* covers more than thirty years of work: a wide selection ranging from the early 1990s to the present day. The approach to the show diverges from the pattern of previous exhibitions, as it brings together bodies of work produced at different times and which in some cases had never been viewed before. Of particular note are the pictures taken in the boxing clubs of Marseille in 1994 and the most recent series, done a few months ago in Melilla, commissioned by Fundación MAPFRE. Also on display for the first time there are photographs of destroyed buildings in Beirut in 2000, after the Lebanese civil war, which in the present exhibition are located near images of controlled demolition works undertaken in French *banlieues*. The series “The Shouters” is exhibited alongside graphic material from the Paris prison of La Santé. This combination of timeframes, spaces and materials creates new relationships and dialogues between the images and generates different, novel interpretations.

One of the photographer’s key works, “The Gorgans”, which has accompanied Pernot from the beginning of his career until the present time, could not be left out. The Gorgan family, featured in different parts of the exhibition, is the main set of characters in several series. They have become the protagonists of Pernot’s artistic discourse, not only due to their magnetism and the embodied power of the individual family members, but also because their lives intersect with the history of the Gypsy community over the centuries.

Pernot’s books play a prominent role in his career, with almost twenty titles published to date. The present show also shines the light on the photographer’s significant work as an editor, a facet that has allowed him to engage in distinctly autonomous publishing projects that complement his exhibitions.

Mathieu Pernot, born in 1970 in Fréjus (France), lives and works in Paris. After training in science, he enrolled at the National School of Photography in Arles, where he graduated in 1996. Since exhibiting in 1997 at the Centre national de la photographie in Paris and at the Rencontres d’Arles, he has been featured in multiple exhibitions and publications and received numerous prizes.

Victoria del Val, curator

Photo Booths

1995-1997

At the time he began his studies at the École Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie in Arles, Pernot came into contact with the city's Roma community. This was the beginning of a relationship that has lasted until the present day. These images were taken in a photo booth at the Arles railway station, close to a Gypsy camp, whose population used the machine to procure their requisite ID pictures. Availing himself of the opportunity, the photographer turned the documentation chore into a game, placing the Gypsy children before this device that serves the Administration's needs. Pernot used the attitudes and gestures of the sitters as a way to subvert the conventions of automated ID photographs. Several children even appear with their eyes closed or covering their face with their hands, thus hiding their gaze and their identity.

These pictures make reference to the historical desire to control (and persecute) the Gypsy people throughout the centuries. In another of his series from the same period, "A Camp for Nomads", Pernot carried out research in the Saliers confinement camp, created in 1942 by the pro-Nazi Vichy Government in the Camargue region. In the course of his project, the photographer rescued the files and anthropometric records of the prisoners and sought out the survivors, taking portraits of them and recording the testimonies of an atrocious reality which had been silenced for decades.

The Gorgans

1995-2023

Mathieu Pernot met the Gorgan family in 1995, when he was studying at the École Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie in Arles. He then embarked on a project that has been ongoing for almost thirty years, evolving over time to become a large family album.

The world of the Gypsy people has been a recurring theme in photography since the beginnings of the art. At the turn of the 20th century, their caravans were photographed by Eugène Atget and August Sander; in the interwar period, their way of life was depicted by André Kertész and Germaine Krull; and in 1932 László Moholy-Nagy, a Bauhaus professor, shot *Gross-Stadt Zigeuner* [Big City Gypsies], a film about the Roma settlements on the outskirts of Berlin. After the Second World War, the examples are much more numerous (Robert Doisneau, Lucien Clergue, etc.), but the work of reference on the Roma community is Josef Koudelka's publication *Gypsies* (1975). Pernot is familiar with these efforts, but his approach is quite different and far removed from the traditional depictions of the Gypsy people. In "The Gorgans", the author's intention is not to represent a community, but the singular destiny of each member of a family. The first black and white pictures in the series are more distant from their subjects and have a documentary feel about them, but the photographer's relationship with the family has caused his vision to evolve, gradually incorporating multiple new points of view.

In this family chronicle everything is mixed together. In his presentation, Pernot does not distinguish between pictures that he took himself and snapshots provided by each of the family members, illustrating their daily lives and celebrations. This organic process helps to create a complex visual universe in which countless connections are made between different uses and styles of photography (ethnographical, documentary and vernacular).

Johnny

1970-2018

Johnny was born in 1964. A car fanatic, he never parted from his BMW, even when his driving licence was revoked. I often drove him and his family in my Ford Fiesta to the shelter where his daughter Ana lived for a time, or to the cemetery where some of his relatives are buried. In 2004, he spent a few months in remand prison in Avignon. His return home to his family was marked by a huge celebration. After that, his ailing health prevented him from venturing too far afield until his death in 2018.

Doston

2012-2023

Doston is the youngest of the family. He was born in 2007 and still lives in the caravan with Ninaï. His childhood was exactly like that of his elders, as was his energy, which I have been trying to capture for twenty years. He got married in July 2023.

Prescilla **1995-2023**

Prescilla is the eldest of the three sisters, and also the shyest: as a child, she often hid her face when I wanted to take her picture. She lives with Hervé, and after living in a flat for a few years, they decided to move back to a caravan. In the summer of 2016, when I photographed her, she was pregnant with her fourth child.

Rocky 1995-2012

Rocky was the eldest of the brothers. When we met, he was twelve years old. Two years later I went with him to the hospital in Avignon, where he was admitted for a short time. A few years after that, he married Claire Vidale, a *gadjie* (non-Gypsy) who grew up in Sète, in the south of France. They had five children, whom they raised on a council estate in the Trébon district of Arles. After her husband's death, Claire returned to Sète with her children.

Mickaël

1995-2017

Mickaël is married to Séverine Vidale, Claire's sister, and they live in a flat in the Trébon district of Arles. He is the most heavysset of the four brothers. I have always been fascinated by his resemblance to his father. I often imagine him as a reincarnation of Johnny. He is one of the "shouters" I photographed in Avignon prison trying to communicate with his father, who was in jail there.

Ninai 1995-2023

Ninai married Johnny in 1982, at the age of sixteen, and the following year had her first child, Rocky. Seven more followed, including Ana, who was born on 1 October 1996 in the hospital in Avignon. Her daily life is similar to that of the other women in her community: she reads people's palms, does the shopping and prepares meals. She currently has twenty-six grandchildren and still goes to the Nine Hills cemetery as often as she can, to gather her thoughts at Rocky's grave.

Giovanni

1995-2020

Giovanni lives with Cathy Reyes – a member of a Roma community who came from Spain – in a housing estate called Les Platanes de Barriol, built to rehouse families who used to live in shantytowns. They have five children, whose first names Giovanni has tattooed on his shoulder. When he was about ten years old, he often used to go and play at the goods station, which was right next to the plot of land where they had their caravan.

Ana

1996-2015

Ana is my goddaughter. I photographed her mainly as a toddler, asleep and taking her first steps. Since I have been living in Paris, she has come to visit me three times. Her personality is matched only by her physical strength. She now lives in a caravan on the family's plot of land with her two daughters.

Fire

2013

In this set of portraits, the members of the Gorgan family were photographed at dusk, illuminated by the light of a bonfire around which they were gathered with serious and absorbed gazes. As a counterpoint to these images, a video is played, showing a caravan being consumed by flames. Once again the viewer wonders what is going on; what the story behind these images is. It could be an accident, or even an attack or an act of vandalism against this group of people. Pernot, however, is evoking a funeral rite of this community in which, after the passing away of one of its members, the caravan of the deceased is burned along with all the person's belongings. But beyond the particular context in which these photographs were taken, Mathieu Pernot summons up an iconographic imaginary by making the fire's blaze the main element of the images. While the members of the family appear as illuminated figures somewhat reminiscent of tenebrist painting, the fire consuming the caravan seems to suggest the flames of burning ships after the death of their captain.

Boxers

1994

Mathieu Pernot took this series of photographs during his first year of training as a student at the École Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie in Arles. These previously unpublished images were captured in a combat-sports training room in Marseille. Pernot, formerly a high-performance judo practitioner, recognises something familiar in such places. All these shots were taken in rapid succession against the same neutral background, without refocusing the camera, the subjects being caught in the same frontal posture, with their fists raised and a defiant gaze. This process results in a seriality that presents us with a “typology” of the individual, rather than characters bearing specific names and surnames. Mathieu Pernot thus revisits the archetype of the boxer’s image and reframes the concept of struggle between the photographer and his model. Such a mode of portraiture highlights the significance of the recorded subject’s activity, as well as the group or collective to which that person belongs. It is inevitable not to associate this initiatory work by Pernot with the iconography of boxing, present not only in the vernacular and documentary practices of photography, but also a part of the universe of cinema.

Beirut

2000

Mathieu Pernot travelled to Lebanon in 2000, and his set of images of Beirut – where his father grew up – reveals the scars of a city that was torn by civil war from 1975 to 1990. These photographs tell the dramatic story of Lebanon's recent history through the shrapnel wounds on the façades and the buildings turned into rubble.

A year after the end of the war, in 1991, a group of photographers, including Robert Frank, Josef Koudelka, Gabriele Basilico, René Burri, Raymond Depardon and Fouad Elkoury, were invited to take part in a project to document central Beirut. At the time, the aim was to reflect “the state of things”, and what the city looked like after the long conflict. Despite what had happened, the project was driven by optimism and the hope of a promised reconstruction, which was carried out at the instigation of Rafik Hariri, Lebanese tycoon and politician.

However, the history of Beirut's destruction was not yet destined to end; in 2006 the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah escalated and the city was heavily bombed. This was compounded by the explosion in 2020 of a warehouse containing flammable material in the port, which caused severe damage and a large number of deaths.

For the author, the state of ruin in which the city finds itself at this moment in its history echoes the relationship between photography and reality: “The medium of photography expresses a loss, the presence of an absence. It shows what no longer exists after the picture has been taken. Photographs duplicate the melancholy of the ruin they represent.”

Implosions / Clouds

2000-2006

In the 2000s Mathieu Pernot photographed the spectacle of the demolition of buildings constructed in the 1960s in the outlying suburbs of large French cities (Mantes-la-Jolie, La Courneuve, Meaux, etc.). Obsolete buildings and blocks of flats were demolished by means of controlled explosions to make way for new urban planning policies and social development models.

This series and the postcards from “Brave New World” are the representation of the two sides of an urbanistic and social utopia: the *Grand ensemble* (an “ensemble” of large-scale high-rise housing estates) was an urbanistic concept born in France after the Second World War and developed throughout Europe, especially in the 1960s. The idea was to design in such a way that the chosen areas could accommodate a large number of inhabitants. These housing projects were characterised by a repetitive and impersonal style of architecture.

The pictures we see here, at once beautiful and violent, capture the instant when the buildings collapse and crumble. Pernot presents the images in large format, further accentuating the monumentality of what is depicted and giving it a sculptural character. One is inevitably drawn to these compositions, which combine the weight and geometric forms of the buildings with the lightness and curvilinear contours of the clouds of dust that envelop them. The implosions reflect a desire to reduce the history of these buildings to a *tabula rasa* and erase the memory of their inhabitants.

Brave New World

2005

Collection of sixty postcards published between the 1950s and 1980s showing French suburban cities considered at the time to be symbols of modernity and progress. Most of the photographs were originally taken in black and white and artificially coloured afterwards for printing. This process, together with the rigid geometry of horizontal and vertical lines and the almost total absence of the human figure, accentuates the unreal character of these places. The existence of their inhabitants only appears on the back of the postcards, where one can read the senders' messages, many of which are short (a few words, popular sayings, figures). Pernot has compiled the testimony of an urban utopia that represented the promise of a better world and was eventually destroyed.

The Shouters

2001-2004

In this work, Mathieu Pernot tackles the world of prisons and their inmates, which he'd already dealt with in other series, such as "Prisons", "Walks" or "Bad Weed". This time, however, the photographer looks at things from the outside. From the other side of the wall, in the no-man's land that divides the prison from the city, the characters in these photographs shout and adopt theatrical poses, as if they were actors in a contemporary tragedy. At first, the spectator wonders what is going on and where these people are. The depicted subjects are relatives of inmates in the prisons of Avignon, Marseille and Barcelona, communicating – or trying to communicate – with their jailed relations from outside the prison walls. Some of these faces are even familiar: we recognise members of the Gorgan family. They are aiming their gaze towards something we cannot see, lying off camera, outside the picture. Perhaps they've spotted a familiar face, or simply recognised a voice through the walls, lost in the city noise and the rumble of traffic. A sad and impotent dialogue is taking place, articulated through cries that strive to break down the walls between the speakers. For Pernot, what we see has the same importance as what escapes our sight, as what we must imagine.

La Santé

2015-2023

Throughout his career – particularly between 2001 and 2002 – Mathieu Pernot has devoted several projects to documenting prisons and their role in society, basing his work on Michel Foucault's writings on the concept of authority and control, with the structure of the panopticon as his paradigm.

In 2015, just before the demolition of La Santé prison began, Pernot drew up an inventory of the inscriptions scribbled by prisoners on their cell walls. He also collected images that had been pinned on the walls and doors by inmates, and gathered up the prison management's logbooks from the rubble of the building. At the beginning of 2023, he mounted part of these materials on the pages of the logbooks. These collages allow the notes written by the warders to coexist with the images chosen by the prisoners, thus exploring a form of tension in the relationship between incarcerated individuals and their controllers. The collages also make it possible to imagine the personality and rebuild the portrait of the individuals who chose the images, cut them out and hung them on the wall as decorations. The clippings retrieved from cell doors had been perforated in the middle to allow the warders to see through the peephole. Pictures of sports events, religious representations, racing cars, and luxury watches, as well as erotic images, are a form of escape and iconographic resistance to the deprivation of liberty.

The Ruin of His Home

2019-2021

Mathieu Pernot made a photographic journey to the Near East, across Lebanon, Iraq and Syria on an itinerary that stretched from Beirut to Mosul amidst the ruins of millenary civilisations and the tragedies of the region's recent history. His starting point was a picture album compiled in 1926 by his grandfather, who spent a large part of his life in Lebanon.

These images are from the last stage of the trip, when Pernot visited the city of Palmyra in November of 2021. At a time of great instability in the region, he had the opportunity to tour the archaeological site and its museum. With no tourists visiting, the place remained open and staff members were gathered inside waiting for visitors who did not arrive. The site lay in ruins following the occupation of the city by the Islamic State, making it look as if the war had just ended. The photographs show the bare walls bearing the imprint of archaeological exhibits that the staff had managed to remove just before the disaster, alongside the smashed remains of works that hadn't been rescued in time. In a place that symbolises the coexistence of different civilisations, these pictures confront us with the frenzy of iconoclasm and the projected destruction of images in all their forms. A tragic fate that also befell the museum's director, Khaled Asaad, who was assassinated by the fundamentalists in 2015, thus becoming a kind of martyr to Syrian heritage and archaeology.

Melilla

2022

At the end of 2022, Mathieu Pernot travelled to Melilla, a Spanish enclave in Morocco, and photographed the forest and the surrounding landscape on the border separating the two countries. Nature coexists with the barbed wire, fences and watchtowers that appear in the background and bear witness to the extreme surveillance set up in this area, which is off-limits to migrants.

This series is part of a broader initiative associated with Pernot's project *L'Atlas en mouvement* [The Atlas in Motion], in which the author reflects upon the depiction of issues having to do with migration and exile, in the form of a poetic encyclopaedia that evolves in collaboration with migrants. In one of the chapters of the work, the representation of landscape and nature is evoked and located in places that are emblematic of our times because of their migratory tensions. One of the series that stands out is entitled "The Jungle" (2009), which takes its name from a forest near Calais where migrants camp temporarily until they manage to get through to England. Another consists of pictures taken in 2020 on the Greek island of Lesbos, where the photographer documented the refugee camp of Moria, located in an olive grove that was later destroyed by fire.

In all these projects, Pernot reveals to us the precarious existence of his subjects and what remains of their belongings, abandoned or lost in silent testimony to a hapless reality. Similarly, in these images of Melilla, the story of what happens at the fence is presented indirectly, by depicting the area's perverted, supervised natural surroundings and what is left behind – in the form of a tragic collage of colours – by those who pass through the place.