

Alexandra Navratil

Dan Gunn / Berlin

In his 1967 soul classic, James Carr sings of “the dark end of the street” where two lovers are “hiding in shadows . . . living in darkness to hide our wrongs.” Carr’s narrator might very well have understood the themes explored in Alexandra Navratil’s exhibition “The Night Side” at Dan Gunn Gallery. “The Night Side” is concerned with both the visible and the hidden elements of a medium — specifically, film. The works on display reference the activities of a film factory located in Silbersee, Northern Germany, and operated by the company Agfa-Orwo. That film is a medium existing between light and darkness is, of course, literally true, but Navratil’s focus is on the elements of film that lie beyond the camera’s framing.

The centerpiece of “The Night Side” is the film from which the exhibition takes its title. In it, the hands of Gundula Brett, a longtime employee of Agfa-Orwo, trace the surfaces of the devices she used during her tenure at the company to produce the materials of a moribund medium. Watching the images, the opulence, even decadence of film becomes apparent to eyes conditioned by the mandates of digital aesthetics. As in Tacita Dean’s *Film* (2011), using the medium as an archive and narrative requiem for itself is a familiar, affecting premise, but the work in “The Night Side” that seems to hold a truly terrible power is the unassuming series of photograms on the wall of the gallery’s second room. In *Growing Older, Blacker, Deeper in Perpetual Night* (2016), Navratil presents the most nameless detritus of the film production process, the fragments of film punched out to produce sprockets, as something like a manifestation of time itself. These scraps — tiny, deeply entropic manifestations of forgotten human labor — are almost unbearable in their emotional weight. Each is the residue of an instant of human time, swept up and dispatched to the dark end of the mind. Walking out into a sunny day in Berlin felt almost impossible after seeing them.

by William Kherbek