

NEAR MINT

Alexandra Navratil: *Brittle Land*

The artist's book *Brittle Land* by Alexandra Navratil (*1978, CH) weaves themes from recent history and the history of industry and technology in the 20th century into a dense and complex fabric. Inspired by what was once Europe's largest factory for photographic film in Wolfen—which was founded in 1909 by AGFA and operated after 1945 in East Germany under the brand name ORWO (Original Wolfen) until the fall of the Wall in 1989/90—Navratil developed two video works, which are presented in her new book in the form of carefully selected stills.

Resurrections (2014) focuses on gelatin, which is made from the skin, tendons, and bones of cattle and pigs. As one of the most important components of analogue photography (and analogue cinema), this organic material points back to the beginnings of the medium in the 1830s. Silver and salt were integral to the origins of this invention, since they made it possible to capture and fix the fleeting images of the camera obscura, a device that had been known since the Middle Ages. However, the real success story of the photographic process began with the introduction of gelatin as a carrier for light-sensitive silver salts, the properties of which first enabled the production of dry plates and, later, film material. In contrast to the wet plates used up until this point, which had to be coated with light-sensitive emulsion shortly before exposure, dry plates could be transported and preserved and offered a consistent quality of production. These advantages furthered the dissemination of the photographic process and led to the first boom in amateur photography in the 1880s.

Resurrections shows found photographs and film segments of the Wolfen film factory and its suppliers. The images are arranged both next to and on top of each other, sometimes blending into each other. Reproduced in black and white throughout, they depict the gelatin production process, groups of laboratory workers, both single and mounds of animal bones, machine parts, as well as scientific images and X-rays produced for educational purposes. Images depicting masses of animal bones, which were gathered and sorted for the gelatin production

process, appear repeatedly, mentally recalling photographs from Nazi concentration camps of piles of bodies. This reference becomes all the more pronounced if one knows that AGFA (Actien-Gesellschaft für Anilin-Fabrication) was part of IG Farben. Formed in 1925, this conglomerate of the largest chemical companies of the time, including BASF and Bayer, operated the concentration camp Auschwitz III in Monowitz, where synthetic rubber was produced by forced laborers in the “Buna-Werk” facility. IG Farben also supplied the “Zyklon B” cyanide gas used in the gas chambers of concentration camps.

The relationships that Alexandra Navratil both illustrates and implicates in *Resurrections* are interlaced, ranging from the beginnings of organic chemistry, from August Kekulé, who was the first to publish the structural formula for the benzene ring in 1865 (supposedly inspired by a dream in which a snake bit its own tail), to Thomas Pynchon’s novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), in which he integrates Kekulé, his dream, and IG Farben into the storyline, and finally to the use of organic materials such as gelatin for highly artificial products and the cronyism between the photo industry and the remaining chemical industry. The artist makes sweeping connections that are forcefully compelling and are achieved in an impressive yet subtle manner forgoing the impetus to educate or admonish—thereby allowing viewers to become immersed in these themes.

For *Silbersee* (2015) Navratil used black-and-white 35 mm photographs taken by chemist Dr. Fred Walkow. He was employed in the Wolfen film factory and obsessed with photographing the artificial lake next to the facility, into which the poisonous waste water of the film production process was emptied. Although the silver used to make film was recovered before the byproducts of the production were disposed, the body of water was nevertheless popularly dubbed “silver lake” by people from the region. The landscape photographs, often taken from similar viewpoints, show trees, shrubbery, the surface of the water, fallow land, and smokestacks dotting the horizon. In the video work, the photographs fade into one another at a noticeably slow pace, so that individual images are only briefly recognizable as such and the printed stills in the book occasionally appear as double exposures. Superimposed on the images in white type are short sentences, which state what is happening with an unknown subject—be it a person, nature, or the lake itself—from its own point of view: “I am filtrated, I am aerated, I transform . . .” The dusky, sparse, fog-coated, and sometimes mystical images of a poisoned landscape recall the film *Stalker* (1979) by Andrei Tarkovsky, producing a claustrophobic apocalyptic mood and conveying a feeling of abandonment and danger. After the fall of the Wall, the industrial zone of Bitterfeld, which includes the location of the

Wolfen film factory, was considered one of the most contaminated areas in Europe.

With its elegant and clear design *Brittle Land* offers an expanded approach to the work of Alexandra Navratil—not least thanks to the two essays by Paul Feigelfeld and Keston Sutherland and a poem by Rachel O'Reilly. It also embodies a unique point of overlap, which enables a view to aspects of 20th-century history from the vantage point of materials and images. This perspective opens up lines of sight that extend into the present and hone our ability to discern complex and fascinating connections.

Matthias Gabi / Fotobibliothek

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www.orderromapublications.org/publications/brittle-land/101767&page

Note:

Today the Industrie- und Filmmuseum Wolfen (Industry and Film Museum Wolfen) is housed in the former film factory of AGFA/ORWO:
ifm-wolfen.de

Under the title NEAR MINT, the library of Fotomuseum and Fotostiftung Schweiz publishes short reviews on printed matters of all sorts—conspicuous or inconspicuous, new or old, fancy or rough.

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