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JAROSLAV BENEŠ: EX URBI

13 June – 15 October 2023

Prague City Gallery

House of Photography

Revoluční 5, Prague 1

Tue–Wed, Fri–Sun 10 am – 6 pm, Thu 10 am – 8 pm

Curator: Magdalena Juříková

Jaroslav Beneš is a photographer of urban reality. This may sound like a paradox because his photographs feature only an essence of familiar details that we encounter on our wanderings through the city and civilization.

In the past, his photographs often featured architecture representing metropolitan aesthetics, but without giving us the opportunity to identify these magnificent milestones of modern construction. The facades of glass palaces form a projection screen, on which Beneš plays out the plots of his photographs based on light and now also on color. He focuses on the regular grid of their shells, on the geometry of the reflections of the surrounding buildings, on the calligraphy that is created by refracting color accents from their environment on the glossy surface. His aim is to capture the ephemeral composition that emerges before his lens as he observes light transitions on glass, wet traces on rough plaster, faded laminate, asphalt or other industrial components of landscape reality. It is the raw reality produced by human society, but people are “expelled” from his images. Sometimes, Beneš goes back and tries to recapture these moments in a better way, but they are unrepeatable.

Originally exclusively black-and-white photography, which he pursued using classical equipment and with a passion for wood plate cameras, is now giving way to digital technology, and with it his photographs have started having color and, more recently, a surprising expression. His well-known series of photographs from the 1980s, devoted with a certain obsession to the hidden corners of the depopulated Prague Metro, are alienated and cold in comparison to his current images, perhaps as a metaphor for the dead time in which we involuntarily lived. Beneš has not lost his interest in the abstracted compositions with architectural details, but there is a new view of the urban organism and especially of that part of it that is infected by the graffiti virus. This provides his contemporary color photography with a dose of excitement and movement, which used to be muted and conveyed only by the play of light. In the era of color, Beneš seeks out situations where in his photograph several picture plans are layered on top of each other as in sandwich compositions. Up to this day he welcomes imperfections and accidents that bring



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unexpected artistic shifts to his photographs. In addition to his commissioned work, he is able to split his attention and digress to personal photographic preferences.

His photographs accumulate into series that come into being from isolated occasions and locations, as well as from repeated attempts and returns to the same places (Prague Metro, La Défense, Otto Rothmayer's Villa, etc.). During the recent pandemic of Covid-19, a series of images were created to reflect the depressing atmosphere of these months. Although the *CV 19* series, as Beneš called it, includes several rather gloomy shots, other photographs, with their bright colors and sometimes surprisingly romantic details, reveal his desire to escape dark thoughts and in many cases work with a completely new concept of the structure of the image. The trembling light and strong contrasts of color here and there unintentionally refer to the artistic practice of the 1960s or to Japonaiserie, i.e., the elements of style hitherto unseen in his work. Here he probably departs most from his roots, when he made do with a minimum of means. However, he still mostly holds onto the unlimited possibilities of abstract transcription of visual experiences, which he hunts as an urban pedestrian in various territories at home and abroad. Despite his predilection for mountain hiking, the urban environment both in its sublime splendor and the dust of its suburbs is consistently more appealing to his lens.

Magdalena Juříková

Jaroslav Beneš (born 1946 in Plzeň) studied at the Secondary School of Agriculture in Plasy. In the 1970s he was a member of the Foto Das group in Pilsen. In 1968 he became a stagehand at the Alfa Theater, where he eventually began to photograph professionally. In 1977 he moved to Prague and took a job as a night porter at the Museum of Decorative Arts. In 1983 he started to work as an archivist and photographer for the Prague Water Supply and Sewerage Company. In the 1980s, he worked in the photographic circles in Wrocław, Poland and at the Foto-Medium-Art Gallery. In 1991, he participated in the founding of the Caucus of Artistic Photography, which evolved into the Prague House of Photography. In 2000–2008 he was a member of the group Czech Clog, referring to the use of wooden large-format cameras. He currently collaborates with a group of photographers called 999 (Zawoja, Poland). He lives and works in Prague.



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Carator: Magdalena Juříková
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Entrance fee: CZK 150 full (adults) / CZK 60 discounted (students) / CZK 20 seniors

The year-round exhibition program of Prague City Gallery has been supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic.

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ACCOMPANYING PROGRAM

Guided tours with Jaroslav Beneš

Mon, 10 August 2023, 6 pm

Tue, 12 October 2023, 6 pm

A visit to Otto Rothmayer's Villa

Thu, 21 September, 5 pm

A visit to Otto Rothmayer's Villa with Jaroslav Beneš, who together with the artistic group Czech Clog (Karel Kuklík, Richard Homola, Tomáš Rasl and Tomáš Balej) took photographs of the villa in the surroundings before its reconstruction.



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