



▲ **Lindoso Power Station: Machine Hall** from the series *The Time Machine* 2011 © Edgar Martins



▲ **Untitled**
from the series *Landscapes Beyond: The Burden of Proof (Part II)*, 2007
© Edgar Martins

▼ **Untitled (Atlanta Georgia)**
from the series *This is not a House*, 2009
© Edgar Martins



WAPPING PROJECT: EDGAR MARTINS

The Portuguese *wunderkind* enthalls the UK

TEXT GEORGINA TURNER | IMAGES EDGAR MARTINS

WE ARE SITTING comfortably at Wapping Project Bankside, Australian wine in hand. Carefully brandishing a bulky book – Edgar Martins’

and then displayed on that *The Time Machine* – Geoff Dyer skillfully pitched his droll introduction then, sensibly, handed the arena to Edgar Martins. For there’s articulate and there’s hyper-verbal: Edgar Martins comes galloping at us with both. A steady patter and consistent charm comfortably engages his audience. Add to this a vital demeanour and the fortunate physique of a scented dandy with the looks of a could-be actor, and you have a pretty good picture of Edgar Martins, Artist Photographer *extraordinaire*. Portuguese-born, a childhood in China, living in the UK since 1996, his eloquence is starred with around-the-world references, and tuned into the academic debates of someone who has attended London art schools.

I first came across Edgar Martins’ distinctive photographic images when I received a landscape of Iceland from his series *Landscape Beyond: The Burden of Proof*. An expanse of speckled, eroded, barren rocks in pastel grey are cut across by a fume river, rendered precious in puffy pink with blue tinges. That is my description of the image. Here is part of Martins’ own explanation of it: ‘...fragile landscapes stage cultural dramas. It is the



▲ **Edgar Martins** Courtesy Nuno Fox

setting for spatial and temporal dislocation. Space echoes with prophetic resonance. It carries a message of time: the vanishing now. [In this] *poised turbulence*... I set out to create a topographical inventory of mountains, rivers, roads, volcanoes, etc., inspired by early 18th century pictorial traditions and evocations of the sublime. But for all its historical evocation, this work is fraught with anxieties about ruin. [It] not only deals with the physical death of specific landscapes but also with the death of landscape as a pictorial theme.’ This is a lot for an image to take on.

More recently, photographs from *The Time Machine* present geometrically displayed work interiors within human-less voids. It’s salutary stuff, not nostalgic but sanitary. Edgar Martins lends a clinical

attachment to these industrial interiors; his intense light inspects the spit and polished spans of neutral colour. These interiors are in fact a topographic survey of hydro-electricity generating plants in 20 locations across Portugal, mostly built in the optimistic 1950’s and 1970’s when things were ever keen, ever more efficient. For Geoff Dyer, Martins has, with these works, invented a time category: ‘a retrospective future as it might have been conceived fifty years ago’.

Wapping hydraulic power station was the dramatic setting for Martins’ *This is Not a House* series, now touring. *The New York Times Magazine* commissioned Martins to address the collapse of the American housing market and duly published his images in Summer 2009. Then it transpired that Martins had digitally altered his pictures so as to play with certain political themes, such as the myth of America as a nation of settlers. Offence and outrage followed and the NYT scrapped the images from their website. On his Facebook page, Martins has a video that defends his case (posted 1st November 2011). It is worth watching to observe his verbal dexterity alone (the posting on 26th December, a eulogy to his friend Anton Hammerl, killed in Libya, is very moving).

Wapping also included some witty images from *A Metaphysical Survey of British Dwellings*. A windowless house that refuses light is islanded by a yellow

cordoned road signage, its dull brickwork polished to a smooth brown. These houses are not logical but they do indeed make metaphysical sense: in reflecting a claustrophobic non-existence, a serendipitous un-life, the placid threat of thudded silence.

With his concentrated lighting, enhanced colour, directive lines, contrasts and symmetries, Martins makes up a space like an actor prepares his face. The images are carefully stage-managed, with each nuance in place, nothing left to chance. In his series on airports at night, Martins paints with light: refined patterns of rigid and crack-soft textures infuse striking potency into his static images.

Most enjoyable, though, is the humour throughout Martins’ work, epitomised by the photographs in *The Accidental Theorist*. In these, a narrative element is introduced by a rare appearance of *homo sapiens*. This humour exploits time-spatial conundrums with bold, intense light-strokes and clean prettiness. The overall effect creates atmospheres that are strange, kind of tempting... and probably not good for you.

LINKS
www.edgarmartins.com

EXHIBITION
This is Not a House: a touring exhibition of photographs by Edgar Martins
9 May - 30 June 2012
Wapping Project Bankside, 65a Hopton Street, London SE1 9LR
www.thewappingprojectbankside.com for tour details