

Translations

Deyan Sudjic

Don Cameron's photographic explorations of some of the darker traces of Europe's recent past are carefully emptied of the historic context that could give them a specific meaning but they are full of suggestive atmospheric effects that make us want to speculate about how these extraordinary objects came to be made. He shows us his images of the Atlantic Wall alongside his documentation of the remains of the remarkable sequence of monuments constructed between 1960 and 1980 in the now vanished country of Yugoslavia. There is nothing to suggest that one was in fact built with the use of slave labour as part of Nazi Germany's confrontation with the Western allies during World War Two, and that the other commemorates the ultimately successful struggle of the peoples of Yugoslavia to evict the Germans in that same war. Cameron exhibits them alongside a third sequence of photographs that show a series of churches, built perhaps in the spirit of cultural pessimism that was an outcome of that war, and as a prelude to the building of the Yugoslav monuments. Cameron suppresses the full details of their location in his titles. They are identified only by place names.

It is an approach that gives all of them another more universal, and timeless meaning, which Cameron has now drawn on to design an uncannily atmospheric series of objects that test the boundaries between art, design and sculpture, much like the work which is the subject of his photographs.

Cameron has spent almost 20 years exploring these enigmatic objects. They have very different histories but he presents them in the same format. They are all careful monochrome compositions that required a considerable amount of time and effort to achieve since most are in places that are difficult to reach. He has mounted his images in purpose-designed patinated brass frames that give them something more like the character of an object than that of a work on paper.

It's not hard to see why these monuments would attract Cameron's interest. He is an artist whose work defies easy categorisation and so do they. He studied design in London, had a career as a very successful video director in the music industry, and then returned to Australia where he began to work on an architectural scale to create interiors. Cameron's three series of images are connected by the way in which their subject matter blurs different categories. The wartime bunkers are essentially pieces of design, given a monumental presence by their sheer size, mass and their natural settings on the edge of the ocean. The massive concrete of the fortifications that made up the Atlantic Wall was the product of careful calculation about the sheer tonnage needed to resist high explosive shells. Their form is the result of an attempt to protect their occupants from blast damage. It is not entirely true to say that they are without aesthetic ambition. The speed with which the Atlantic Wall was breached in June 1944 suggests that it presented less of an obstacle than its fearsome appearance suggests. Its role was as much about propaganda, as it was a practical weapon of war. It was meant to look intimidating, other-worldly and invulnerable, a kind of super human machine. Once these structures had been realized, their form, whatever the original reasons for their existence, came to exert a powerful gravitational pull on the architectural and design imagination which can be traced through the strikingly original work of the French architect Claude Parent all the way to the Yugoslav memorials.

The concrete churches and the Yugoslav monuments are either works of architecture made by sculptors, or else sculptures realized on an architectural scale. The monuments of ex-Yugoslavia were the product of a nation-building effort, as Tito struggled to unite the country. They mark the sites of battle fields, massacres and prison camps, and were created by a wide range of distinguished architects and artists.

What makes them so striking is their abstraction; they have none of the representational elements associated with conventional war memorials, especially those of the Soviet bloc, that were subjected to an officially imposed Socialist Realist style.

Cameron's third collection of images looks at the sculptural architecture of the 1960s, that our fashion conscious era has misleadingly chosen to lump together under the single term of Brutalism. In fact Cameron's images include the expressionism of Gottfried Bohm's huge pilgrimage church in Neviges, near Cologne in Germany designed in 1964, the Church of the Holy Trinity on the outskirts of Vienna designed by the Cubist Austrian sculptor, Fritz Wotruba, completed after his death in 1976 and the church of St Bernadette of Banlay in Nevers designed by Claude Parent with the critic, Paul Virilio in 1963 in a manner that explicitly refers to the ruins of the Atlantic Wall. Virilio had photographed the wall himself, and went on to publish a book on the subject, *Bunker Archaeology* in which he evocatively described the fortifications as "concrete altars built facing the void of the ocean". It was the basis for Parent's *Fonction Oblique* architectural philosophy.

Over the years the meanings of the Atlantic Wall, the concrete churches, and the Yugoslav monuments have all changed. The wall was discovered by a generation of architects in the 1960s who saw in it a kind of authenticity in what they interpreted to be its unselfconscious formal quality. Brutalism has turned into a subject that fascinates Instagram users, and the Yugoslav monuments photographed by Cameron have come to reflect violently contested histories more than national unity. Petrova Gora, designed by the Croatian sculptor Vojin Bakic 1980 in Croatia commemorated the ethnic Serbs from the area killed in fighting with the Ustase fascists, and as such has been subject not just to neglect, but also to deliberate damage. Another monument designed by Bakic in Kamenska was blown up in 1992 by a unit of the Croatian army that regarded it as a monument to their Serb enemies.

Sanski Most designed in 1970 by Petar Krstic an artist who worked in Sarajevo, is a rippling cloud of aluminium panels stretched over a steel frame. It was defaced by Bosnian Serbs, who removed the names of the Muslim victims it commemorated, but left intact those of the Serbs who died fighting alongside them. Others are in better shape: Kozara designed by the Macedonian sculptor Dusan Dzamonja is in the Bosnian Serb enclave of Republika Srpska, and is protected because it commemorates the 10 000 partisans killed in fighting Croatian Ustashe.

Now Cameron has taken another step and used his photographs as the point of departure to design a furniture collection. The idea that different forms of visual creativity can carry the same sensibility is not new. A Mondrian canvas, and a Rietveld chair are clearly related, without the one attempting to be a representation of the other. Cameron's furniture collection includes a desk, a coffee table and a stool made in solid timber, a daybed or modular sofa and a series of floor lamps fabricated from steel. He calls the series "Translations", and each of them makes an overt reference to one of the subjects of his photographs. They should not be understood as attempts to make a furniture sized model of a piece of architecture, rather they reflect the atmosphere that Cameron has captured in his photographs in a way that suggests his work as a film maker. Suitably framed and filmed, a single object can stand for a complex range of emotional resonances. Importantly, Cameron's long experience collecting the work of some of the most distinguished furniture designers of the 1950s and 1960s ensures that his furniture, made by a network of highly skilled Sydney workshops, is not overwhelmed by the weight of content that it is expected to carry.

While he cites the distressed concrete of a ruined observation post in Alderney as the visual source for his desk with a drawer, this is a piece of accomplished and refined furniture making. His monolithic stool refers to the massive structure of Parent and Virilio's church in Nevers in Burgundy in its weight, but it is put together from carefully worked black American walnut rather than concrete that shows in its rough board marked surface the timber moulds in which it was cast. He looks to the sweeping roofs of a house by Parent for the source material for a coffee table, and uses the stacked forms of the Wotruba church in Vienna as the basis for the extruded rectangular forms of his floor lamps which are made from patinated sheet steel. The modular sofa has a steel structure, to support its sheet steel surfaces, in the manner of the Yugoslav memorials. Cameron is not a maker himself, but in his close relationship with skilled wood and metal workers and upholsterers as a designer, he becomes a participant, as well as an observer. The individual components for the desk, the stool and the coffee table are cut and shaped using a milling machine, programmed with a digital translation of Cameron's own freehand sketches. They are then finished by hand, in one of Sydney's few workshops to combine traditional woodworking skills with automated machine tools, operated with computer numerical control. The lights and the seating units have metal frames that are cut from sheets of stainless steel, and welded together, a process that is rather less exact. The sofa made of a set of individual components in the manner of the Italian seating systems of the 1960s has leather cushions, upholstered with a mix of feathers and foam to soften the outlines of their rectangular form.

Cameron has worked to translate the atmosphere his images have captured from one medium into another, he looks for ways to achieve the effects of surface patina and form that he found in his photographs, from one category to another. A building is translated into a photograph, which in turn becomes an object. Design, architecture and sculpture merge imperceptibly one into another.

This is territory that has been well discussed ever since the 1980s when designers such as Ron Arad, Tom Dixon and Marc Newson at the start of their careers began making furniture editions from necessity when they failed to find industrial manufacturers ready to work with them. It has been variously described as design art or functional art. These are nuanced distinctions that have their origins in the tradition of the decorative arts, which since they carry the burden of utility were always represented as somehow 'minor' arts, as opposed to art, which by its nature is 'useless', and has no utility. It is a hierarchy outlined in the American economist Thorstein Veblen's book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in which he discussed the idea of conspicuous consumption. High status objects are those that have the least utility. The Mondrian canvas is useless, and therefore is placed in a different category from the Rietveld chair which is no less intense an expression of a similar sensibility, because it is useable. It is a distinction that has begun to fade, in part because of the growing fascination of a generation of collectors for the work of the designers of the 20th century, and because of the energy of a new generation of designers.

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