Marchand and Meffre: Only Time Will Tell

Interview – January 2022

The French photographic duo **Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre** have been documenting the crumbling theatres and cinemas of France since the early 2000s. Using a large format camera they have photographed over 100 theatres, including in Paris alone, in their current state, some dilapidated, abandoned and empty, some now living second lives as bus garages or basketball arenas.

Here, Jonathan Tuckey interviews the pair about their work and interests and we present a series of their photographs including a selection from their book, **Movie Theatres**.

Photographs from the Movie Theatres series are now on show at the **Tristan Hoare Gallery** in London until March 11th 2022.

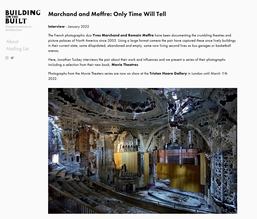

Fig. 1 Your work seems to not both horror and dystopian. What were the origins of your theatre project?

Eric & Tim We started our young explorers/photographers, visiting modern ruins nearby around Paris, and countries such as Belgium, Spain, Germany or USA but there was one place among all the others that fascinated us – Detroit. We originally discovered the city throughout the work of **Camilo Jose Vergara**, and Lionel Sichera's website **"The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit"**.

At that time in Detroit, back in 2000, you could find almost every type of archetypal American building in a state of ruin, from hotels, office buildings, schools, even police stations, factories, to the famous Michigan Train Station. Among all these buildings there were some old movie theaters left abandoned, and among these there was the United Artist Theater. It was one of the most impressive and iconic buildings in Detroit, with its 1929 Art Deco facade designed by **Cornelius Rist**. We decided to design that flagship theatre in a very ornate spanish gothic style which make their cinemas absolutely unique. Only 2 of them were built in such a style (one is still operating in LA after having been used for decades as a church, the one in Detroit was demolished in 1980 after being used as a parking lot for the neighbouring Ford factory). We felt that the Detroit Art Deco Theater left very unanswered questions, it gave you an idea of how proportionally things went for movie palaces, most of them showed very rare decorations, a few were technically wired and some very abandoned waiting for their fate.

That visit to the academy was a great experience, we had a great time, we met people from the very gothic decor made a very strong impression on us. As Europeans, and especially coming from the Paris suburbs, we were not accustomed with that architecture, we felt like we were in a movie, we felt like we were in a dream, we felt like we were in a nightmare, everything was so exotic, so disproportionate that we could a thousand times wish to shoot looking the geological time. Our first sample of series was starting to grow, we were back from Paris to Detroit we started digging on the **Cinema Treasures** website which is meant to be an open database of all cinemas that once existed. We found some. Then we contacted some in the area that were still operating. Most of always have been our main way to research these theatres, spending countless hours online. We found that there were plenty of theatres in the Paris area, and we started our journey. We had no idea how long it would take us, we had no idea that we were immediately engaged in a trip to the Pit series, along with a return to Detroit. In late 2004 we also made our first exploration together in Paris about Detroit. It really confirmed us that we could potentially take pictures and with exhibitions we could generate some interest and support our photo journey. We then bought a pair of large format cameras and in October of 2006 we were back to the US to start the theatres project.

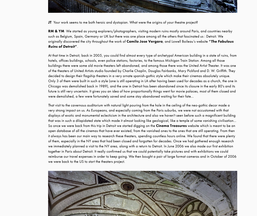

Fig. 2 The subject of many in your theatre project stands in stark contrast to your ferris of Detroit, and Budapest courtyards projects. Can you give us your thoughts on this?

Eric & Tim Indeed in Detroit we focus on reality about decadence. It was also more about exploration, the style of photography was much more immersive. But it seems to us the more difference was mainly coming from the buildings themselves which were mostly commercial buildings, nothing comparable to the Palais Garnier or the Opera Bastille, parking lot in Detroit the buildings we visited were mainly devoid of any people with very left aesthetic on maintenance of them.

When we started visiting theatres around NY in 2006, accompanied with former proprietarrion Orlando Lopez, we quickly realized that the theatres we were visiting were not in the same state of decay as those we had visited in Detroit, they were a basketball court, and that contrast between the baroque decor and the new use immediately struck us. In terms of visuality, the baroque ambiance constituted a form of over-framing of our everyday. Exposing our contemporary reality in its most basic and ordinary form, in contrast with the baroque ambiance, was a way to underline the absurdity of our contemporary life, strange ruins, which seemed visually our past hopes and our ancient dreams. It was visually amazing and very powerful symbolically. Over the years we gradually had to adapt our photographs to the new added elements, such as air conditioning units that were so physically visible that they diminish some of our framing. So it is really the decay of our society that we were at work, but this was not something we had anticipated at the very beginning, in 2000.

It has been so difficult what we the artistic aspects to our subject we could say that we are always been particularly sensitive to the aesthetics of the buildings, especially in our early years, we were very much focused on the architecture, we were looking for large decorations, for examples of ceilings, of ornamental or contemporary architecture which embody at the same time the idea of community and collective destiny. In addition to that, those buildings after who by their architectural style to concession of empire and we already is strong evocation of historical cycles. All of that really connects to that idea that we have of our society, of our society which is in a very strong decline, we feel that we are in a very, very, very,