

INDUSTRIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

BOOK REVIEW

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The Photography of Charles Sheeler, American Modernist

Karen E. Haas, Gilles Mora and Theodore E. Stebens, Jr.,
Bullfinch Press, AOL Time Warner Book Group, 2002,
217 pages, 190 images, \$75.00



Ford Plant, River Rouge, Criss-Crossed Converters
by Charles Sheeler courtesy of the Detroit Institute of Arts

Industrial photography is mainly black-and-white imagery of factories, machinery, production and transport. Originally undertaken for purposes of documentation and commercial publicity, industrial photography has come to be considered a fine art, increasingly now that traditional “industry” and its architectures are vanishing from many areas.

Sheeler's celebrated photograph—Ford Plant, River Rouge, Criss-Crossed Converters (shown above) has become a hallmark of industrial photography. The image has been featured, moreover, on covers of anthologies as the quintessential American photograph. To my mind it's a masterful composition of dynamic geometry. The rule of thirds squared, if you will. A battery of smokestacks rises vertically behind cross-cutting covered bridges (conveyors) so agreeably ordered and intersecting that the image approaches a fantastic or other-world quality. Yet it was real. The image deservedly became world-famous.

But what of Sheeler's other works? These have hardly been published, despite his sterling reputation. The purpose of *The Photography of Charles Sheeler, American Modernist* is to comprehensively illustrate and explain his photography and other fine arts.

This is a mixed review. The book fulfills its objective exceptionally well, presenting elaborate personal history and an extensive, professionally assembled collection of Sheeler's photography and also paintings and even sculpture—the man was eclectic by any measure.

Unfortunately it is the photography of Sheeler that I find wanting overall. It is evident from the table of contents that Sheeler moved from art form to art form, hardly devoting substantial time to one medium or style. In 1916-17 he was enamored with photography of plain houses and barns, images that are curious but what I would call straightforward technical representations rather than compelling art. Not only is there little flair or style or careful composition that effect the feeling evoked by art, but much of Sheeler's photography at that time was utterly blunt, in a childlike manner. Walls are often unnaturally bright white, while large objects can be entirely dark without a semblance of texture.

For a time, Sheeler photographed nudes, and parts thereof, such as thighs and abdomens. Chalky imagery of flab is not my idea of fine art; others may disagree. On the other hand, this stage of Sheeler's work was short-lived, and give the man credit for continual experimentation. Sheeler also had periods when he painted portraits and later, architecture; and when he photographed paintings, and flowers, and African sculpture.

Around 1920, Sheeler took photographs from tall buildings in New York City. The results, again, are interesting, but no better than the casual imagery that I take from whatever windows I happen to have available at my favorite hotel in that city. Old, non-descript buildings, vertical shafts, ducts, water towers. . .not art, in my humble opinion, and easily captured by holding a camera up to almost any window in that time and place (granted in those days, camera operation was somewhat more complex). Moreover, Sheeler again gives little attention to shadow, to the extent that some images appear thoroughly smudged, which in my view is far overdone at best. I presume these photos are included in the book for the purpose of record.

The series that won Sheeler fame was his portfolio of the Ford plant at River Rouge, done within a year (1927). Many images from this effort, apart from his famous “Criss-Crossed Converters,” are extremely good. Cavernous production plants, machinery, and towers of all manner make for a classic collection of industrial photography. Yet this was but a single assignment, one that might be called heaven-sent, the likes of which would not be repeated by Sheeler.

In 1929, Sheeler became enamored with the cathedral at Chartres, France. He photographed it from many perspectives. The work is too dark, sometimes flat and often shadowy. Contrast appears toned down to the point of monotony. In comparison, artistic architectural and industrial photographers of the era such as Aleksander Rodchenko and (a bit later) Margaret Bourke-White produced works with far more clarity and sparkle, and which sometimes included people, the presence of whom can make a big difference.

In sum, Charles Sheeler was a photographic and artistic adventurer who went from theme to theme, medium to medium. I cannot say if he found his niche, but clearly he made a lasting contribution to industrial photography, and produced some excellent work.

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