

FIELD OF IMAGES

In the belief that every destination defines a characteristic in the work of Paolo Gasparini (Gorizia, Italy, 1934), this exhibition sets out to present the long journey that constitutes the career of this photographer who, in the manner of a nomad, presents visual surveys of an absolutely paradoxical nature in that they connect the realities of two apparently opposed worlds – the “first world” and the “underdeveloped world” – while also emphasising the enormous gulf between them. Gasparini, the most South American of Europeans, succeeds in connecting us with the harsh circumstances that leave their mark on Latin America, and with the array of complex cultural relationships evident in the syncretism and visual patchwork of its popular culture, from Mexico to the southern tip of the Andes.

The more than sixty years of Paolo Gasparini’s photographic career bear witness to that “Latin America looking for a place in this century”, in the words of Néstor García Canclini. The development of this idea leads us to think of a wandering creator who defines his place of origin from abroad. Paolo Gasparini is more than a migrant from Italy to Latin America: he is a key figure for understanding that currents do not only flow in one direction and for dismantling the idea that there is a “first world” which influences a periphery. Gasparini has challenged the Eurocentric narrative by developing his vision and his career through the existence of “Latin Americanness”. Italian by birth but Venezuelan in essence (he emigrated to Caracas in 1954 at the age of twenty), he responds through his persona to the contemporary notion of the global. He does not represent a nation but rather the heterogeneity of various worlds.

The itinerary that runs through the exhibition – encompassing countries such as Mexico, Cuba, Brazil and, of course, Venezuela – is not treated over-rigidly, but it does allow us to embark on a journey that highlights specificities in countries which are close to each other but diverse and immersed in a breeding ground that, particularly in the 1970s, gave rise to various Latin Americanist projects replete with left-leaning political stances, in a manifest desire to stake out a position against foreign presences and dictatorships.

Gathering together Gasparini’s major projects in a single exhibition also makes it possible to blur boundaries and project identities beyond cultural and geographical dimensions. In these present times disrupted by a pandemic, when mobility and opportunities to travel have been suspended, we can reflect on the effects of decades of political migrations in the 20th and 21st centuries: migrations of Europeans to the Americas as a result of World War II; of Cubans to Spain and the United States; of Ecuadorians to Spain; and, more recently, the massive exodus of Venezuelans to Colombia. Generation after generation marked by voluntary and forced exiles inevitably make us reflect on the ambivalence of identity.

Field of Images is thus a map of places and times that presents a Gasparini who plays with his *senno di poi* (as he himself terms that capacity to re-evaluate or rethink the past) with the aim of trying to understand the present, capture the meaning of the permutable, ephemeral and ineffable, and take photographs or recycle images of it in a stubborn intent to represent that great mass of the condemned of this earth, with the pressing mission of denouncing oblivion.

ANDATA E RITORNO

1953-2016

"Everything you see in Europe seems fleeting in nature. People there don't look at the camera. They almost seem photographs of photographs. Here [in Latin America], people are present in reality."

Paolo Gasparini

In addition to being the title of his photobook published in 2016, *Andata e ritorno* [Departure and return] has become the concept that best summarises the work of Paolo Gasparini, not just because it refers to the geographical displacement that has existed throughout his career but also because it is connected to the idea of moving backwards and forwards in time. Time is a device that is employed as a political tool, and through the repetition of images it reflects the need to question evolution and development as central elements in a national project. When Gasparini returns to a previous image in a new work he aims to dislocate the present by generating contrasts in the visual discourses in order to allow for a reflection on the current moment in history.



SAINT GEORGE'S, GRENADA, CARIBBEAN

1960

"Bearing witness to the dignity of man, and his extraordinary journey in History, must be the main responsibility of the work of an honest photographer. The photographer must be ready to commit to reality in order to be able to represent it as well as possible, with all the richness of its details and tonalities, with all its formal values and the greatest amount of information possible."

Paul Strand

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FACES OF VENEZUELA AND BOBARE

1956-1960

"We travelled from Los Castillos de Guayana – in the east of Venezuela – and we ended up enjoying ourselves and admiring the white houses of Falcón State – in the west –. Then we went on to the market in Los Filúos – on the peninsula of La Guajira –, on the border with Colombia. Not forgetting, of course, crossing the Andes. On those journeys I did two reports: 'The salt mines of Margarita' and 'Bobare, the poorest, most abandoned and most poverty-stricken village in Lara State'. Both were published in the magazine *Cruz del Sur*. I photographed Bobare under the documentary influence of Strand."

Paolo Gasparini



CUBA, FROM UTOPIA TO DISILLUSION

1961-2017

"In Cuba I documented the celebration, the euphoria, the triumph and the hope. In the rest of Latin America I recorded the social contradictions." During his time in Cuba Gasparini produced series on the democratic project, the literacy campaign, the sugar harvest, as well as carnivals and crowds cheering the revolutionary cause: moments that "mixed in unison the mambo of Benny Moré with the *Communist Internationale*", as he recalls.

"The Cuban Revolution, at a certain point, signified utopia, the alternative, the possibility of creating the new man and it was photographed in that way. Today it has taken a direction that is not what we had imagined. And that creates in us a big disappointment, bitterness and lack of credibility."

Paolo Gasparini



L'HAVANA, THE CITY OF COLUMNS

1961-1963

"The old city, once known as intramuros [inside the walls], a city in shadow, designed to take advantage of the shadows, of shadow itself, when seen in contrast with everything that was springing up, growing, towards the west, from the start of this century, in which the superimposition of styles, stylistic innovations, good and bad, more bad than good, were creating that styleless style in Havana which fused over time in a process of symbiosis and gave rise to a distinctive type of Baroque. Gradually, emerging from the confused, the intermingled and the combination of different realities are the defining features of an overall look that distinguishes Havana from other cities on the continent."

Alejo Carpentier, *The City of Columns*



KARAKARAKAS

1954-2014

"*Karakarakas* brings together images taken in Caracas between 1954 and 2014. I organised the photographs employing *il senno di poi*, by which I mean hindsight. I associated images, linking them with different themes, places and dates, trying to organise a new discourse which, through the city's architecture and some aspects of its daily life, suggest a reinterpretation of Caracas in its past and future, representing social, political and cultural contradictions."

Paolo Gasparini



PARA VERTE MEJOR, AMÉRICA LATINA

1962-1972

"*Para verte mejor, América Latina* [The better to see you, Latin America], printed in Mexico in 1972, with a text by Edmundo Desnoes and rigorous design by Umberto Peña, hit the target with the message that we wanted to convey. It was a panorama, from Mexico to Patagonia, that embraced all the continent's iconography, from the Indo-American sun gods, the embalmed generals and the Tupamara star to the blonde swimmer advertising a new sun cream; a panorama of Our America, that of the sixties and seventies, that of 'the hour of the furnaces', to use José Martí's phrase."

Paolo Gasparini

The better to see you, Latin America, a key reference in the history of photography, is the result of Gasparini's travels between 1970 and 1972 as part of a commission from Unesco to photograph the architecture of the continent for the book *Survey of Latin American Architecture*, with an accompanying text by Damián Bayón.

The better to see you, Latin America, the b-side of that neutral history, in contrast records the poverty-stricken and abandoned urban scenes which characterise Gasparini's moral and ethical stance in his work in the manner of a denunciation. This committed social realism was also promoted by the *Coloquios* on Latin American photography; held in Mexico City and Cuba from 1978 onwards, they are considered the manifesto of the continent's photographers and Gasparini was an active participant in them.

8 RETROMUNDO

1974-1985

"I left Europe with a trunk full of American images. At a second stage, I went back to the First World loaded with images of Latin American reality. That's where *Retromundo* [Retroworld] came from, a photobook that does not confront realities but instead seeks to be evidence of what is going on in the two continents."

Paolo Gasparini

Retroworld was Gasparini's first project to present images without any geographical context in order to establish dialogues between apparently opposing worlds and in which we see powerful contrasts but also ambiguous binomials in which it is not clear which is the first world and which the third. The city is presented as a great framework for shifting accounts and illusions, the setting for the culture of desire and the portrayal of advertising.



THE FAKIR OF THE TORRE CAPRILES, PLAZA VENEZUELA, CARACAS

1970

"I look, in Caracas, from the perspective of the socially outcast. That is why I find it very difficult to understand the progressive, cosmopolitan vision that finds motorways can be perfectly reconciled with ranches, luminous posters with kinetic artworks [...]. It's true that I can put on blinkers and walk straight ahead until I can see only the vibrant gold and silver tower, or sit in the café of the Centro Capriles to observe the annoying, dried out and yellowing bed of the fakir which has been installed in the midst of the passers-by."

Marta Traba, *Mirar en Caracas*

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HERE, THIS SKY THAT WE SEE

1971-1992

The Andes, the place that unites this series, is shown in all the harshness of a rich, abundant terrain but above all one of exploitation and abandonment. Faces of peasants, indigenous mothers, country markets and mining sites reveal the precariousness of working conditions in rural areas (undergoing a process of insensitive urbanisation) in countries such as Bolivia, Colombia and Peru. "Here, this sky that we see" is a cry for social justice.

11 **BRASILIA, TWO IN ONE**

1972-1973 / 2003

“When I created diptychs and polyptychs it wasn’t because I was looking for special effects but rather because I always thought that two succeeding photographs might be able to express the continuity and development of the depicted event better. Or it might be that one responds to the other, completes it, while also more exactly defining the usually very un-decisive moment of what can be photographed.”

Paolo Gasparini



SÃO PAULO, THE DEATH OF THE AURA

1997 / 2013 / 2015

"At the end of so many journeys, I believe that some images still have 'bite'; the 'punctum', as Barthes put it. I believe that photographs can help us in the difficult task of 'knowing how to see', of thinking and resisting this world devoted to the grandiloquence of the cosmorama, to representations that propagate lies and increasingly reduce and pour scorn on life."

Paolo Gasparini

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MARACAIBO, LA GUAJIRA AND OIL

1970-2017

Gasparini has travelled extensively in the area around the city of Maracaibo. This is the location of the frontier with La Guajira (Colombia) where the dominant ethnic group is the *Wayuu*, one of the richest indigenous cultures in the region both materially and spiritually. The territory is characterised by complex economic aspects: smuggling and oil extraction. In his colour images Gasparini shows the abundance of merchandise in Maracaibo while the reality of the region's oil extraction industry, with its total apathy towards and neglect of its communities, is more emphatically criticised through the use of black and white.

14 MEXICO - EL SUPPLICANTE

1971-2015

"In the 1950s I went to cinemas and film libraries in pursuit of everything that I could see and absorb: from Robert Flaherty's fascinating documentaries - *Men of Aran* and *Nanook of the North* - to fragments of the unfinished *¡Qué viva México!*, by Eisenstein, and the full-length film *Redes*, photographed in Mexico by Paul Strand. Mexico offered me all its stories, peoples and landscapes even before I left behind Venice, Italy and Europe and emigrated to Venezuela in 1954 where my father and brothers were living. My head was already on fire with that rich iconography."

Paolo Gasparini

15 THE STREET

1969-1999

If one common denominator had to be singled out in Gasparini's work it would be the street; the noise and hustle and bustle are evident in his images, which also record cultural mindsets and iconographies so notably characteristic of consumer society as advertising hoardings and shop windows, which are ultimately mirages in the face of realities very different to those they portray. As García Lorca so aptly said when referring to New York, «this is not hell, this is the street.» In this selection, Río de Janeiro, Maracaibo, Bogotá, Los Angeles and Paris reveal how the voracious metropolis orphans its inhabitants but also how these concrete jungles which sometimes fall into ruins are filled with creative potential.

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THE ANGEL OF HISTORY

1963-2018

"In the photomurals I tried to recover the (personal and collective) memory to allow us to travel in photographic time, to move forwards and backwards, *corsi e ricorsi*, in history and our experience: so that the mutations of the images over time restore to us what has been forgotten. So as not to forget it. That is where my critical gaze, my aesthetic vision, is focused. What happens in both continents."

Paolo Gasparini

The photomurals are extremely large mosaics of photographs by Gasparini and others; iconic images of the history of Latin American photography which the artist published and through which he established dialogues in an experimental manner. He made use, for example, of Manuel Álvarez Bravo's *Striking Worker, Assassinated*, of the portraits of Emiliano Zapata and his corpse by José Agustín Casasola, of Tina Modotti's *Roses*, and also of the celebrated images by Freddy Alborta of Che Guevara's dead body. Paolo Gasparini represented Venezuela at the Venice Biennial of 1995 with three photomurals jointly entitled *La pasión sacrificada* [Sacrificed passion]. The most ambitious of his works of this type is *El ángel de la historia* [The angel of history], which represents a clear survey and summary of his work presented through multiple times.

17 FOTOLLAVERO MEXICANO

«A photobook is not a series of pages of photographs. A photobook is a book with a reason. It is a work which, with images, i.e., with photographs, text and design, elaborates and gives substantial form to a discourse.»

Paolo Gasparini

Gasparini's audiovisuals generally function as preliminary models for his publications and he uses them to explore the symbiosis between the visual and the linguistic discourse, allowing for new ideas on a particular theme. In *Fotollavero mexicano* [Mexican photokeyring] and before that in *El suplicante* [The supplicant] Juan Villoro's accompanying words "illuminate" Gasparini's different projects on Mexico arising from his travels between 1971 and the present.