

FINANCIAL TIMES

Collecting

Ends that marked a beginning

By Francis Hodgson

Irving Penn's 'Cigarettes' left a legacy that still burns brightly



Finale: Platinum palladium prints by Irving Penn. From left: Cigarettes No. 8 and No. 37 (1972-1974)

Irving Penn was far too grand to pick up cigarette butts. In 1972, at a time of relative downturn in the glossy magazine market which had been Penn's mainstay, he sent an assistant into the street to collect some butts for him. With those little bits of insignificant waste Penn proceeded to make one of the great photographic series. John Szarkowski, the influential curator of the Museum of Modern Art, saw the pictures and had some of them on show in his museum within three weeks: Penn's first MoMA exhibition (*Cigarettes*, 1975).

That single exhibition overcame the strong prejudice against “commercial” photographers being welcomed in the museum. Penn’s next works became his first exhibition at the Metropolitan (*Street Materials*, 1977) where they were – significantly – not shown in the department of Prints & Photographs. Instead they were the first photographs ever shown by Henry Geldzahler in his Department of Twentieth Century Art. These pieces, in other words, represent the blood royal of contemporary art photography.

Now, surpassing even that early MoMA show, the entire series is assembled for the first time.

Twenty-three images, of which three are printed again in giant versions made of four sheets joined: 26 images altogether. Most unusually for photography, in which scholarship lags a long way behind other arts, this exhibition comes with an accurate catalogue *raisonné*. It is a show that is up to the highest museum standards, despite being arranged by a private gallery. It represents a major opportunity for collectors (prices range from \$40,000 to \$150,000 for single-panel pieces) but also a fine outing for anyone who wants to see a rare grouping of a famous series.

The *Cigarettes* were the first pictures Penn conceived specifically to be made as platinum prints. He had made platinums before, as variant afterthoughts of prints which had had a previous

existence as silver prints (the more usual medium). The *Cigarettes* were commissioned neither by a magazine nor by a commercial client. Typically, Penn used this greater freedom to impose more control. There are very few series in photography as meticulous as this one.

Photography has a long history of uncovering *objets trouvés* that goes back at least to Surrealism. Insignificance has never survived the photographic process: once it’s in a picture, it means something. Penn revelled in that when he made the *Cigarettes*. His own work had long shown a tendency toward detritus: a few crumbs and litter to leaven the stylish perfection of his food shots, in particular. Here the detritus has become the centre of interest. It is a Claes Oldenburg transformation or an *Alice in Wonderland* one. It is as though Penn hugely enlarged one little aspect of photography even while enlarging the objects of his scrutiny.

These are enlargements of tiny things which allow us to see that which we could not at a normal scale. We look at them forensically, wondering what that grit is and how that dandelion seed got there. We are in a fascinating world of water stains and the several different ways a cigarette can be extinguished. We are invited to know the qualities of paper used by the various brands (striped like mattress ticking, slightly mottled, burns more roughly ...). Some of the butts are seen raised like butterflies on a pinboard, so the light folds down and around them.

It is impossible not to go beyond this detailed seeing to seek for allusion in pictures of such utter simplicity. Are we looking at model family groups? Little miniature trees (which is after all what these things originally were)? Do they represent fallen columns of some lost civilisation? Perhaps they do – even more now than when they were made, for smoking is now almost wholly reviled. Penn was no socialist, but it is certainly possible to see a critique of Big Industry.

All the complicated harvesting and machining, the advertising and the delivery logistics, millions of dollars of expertise and material and man-hours lead only to these bulging little scraps of leaf and calcined paper. Cigarettes had been glamorous. Not here they aren't.

They are beautiful, though. There are surfaces like aerial views of landscapes and like skin. There are the lovely gradations of platinum, finding ever tinier nuances between one grey and the next. The backgrounds, sometimes paler, sometimes heavier, seem to vary like the weather. There are the scars and wounds in the split paper, the folds and creases. Stray whiskers sprout at odd angles, the burn lines at the edge of unburnt paper are sometimes pin-sharp. That sharpness itself is a miracle – the focus in these pictures is merciless: big camera, studio conditions, unerring photographer.

In the whole series there are only three of single cigarettes, and they are not the most interesting. The others are clustered, grouped. I have heard them described as body bags back from Vietnam. It was the right time (they were exhibited as the war was ending) but I don't see them like that. They're more sculptural than that, less overt. They're also more Pop Art: the cigarette ends are manufactured objects repurposed as much as a Campbell's soup can. Penn's delight in the typography of his cigarettes is palpable: halfway between art history and the history of advertising, the brand names are like the barely decipherable inscriptions one finds on old ruins everywhere. Marlboro, Lucky Strike, Chesterfield, Salem – these are big words in American manufacturing, but they are also big words in American art. The white Lucky Strike packet was designed by Raymond Loewy, the prince of industrial design.

The pictures were not always wholly well received. Both AD Coleman, photo critic of the Village Voice, and Janet Malcolm, photo critic of the New Yorker, had reservations in their reviews of the MoMA show in 1975. Malcolm, in particular, saw them as satirical pictures (“see how arty I can be”, she imagines them saying on Penn’s behalf) and accused them of “false vernacularism”. There is something in this: Penn was interested in style first and always, and it may be excessive to read too much in to these pictures. They may be just what they are: virtuoso platinum prints on lovely paper. But they invite contemplation in the most magnificent way, and it’s very hard to leave them there.

Unlike many photographs, it is possible to view these things for hours a time. They sit squarely at that place where fact meets allusion. Which is the very place where you’ll find the best art.

‘Irving Penn, Cigarettes’, Hamilton’s Gallery, London, June 21 to August 17